

FOLK THEATRE AND THE ETHNOLANGUAGE DISCONTINUUM: CULTURAL
IMPLICATIONS.

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ABSTRACT

The controversy over how appropriately the Nigerian dramatist can convey his cultural experience and narrative to his audience through the conduit of an imported language burdened with its alien set of conventions, syntax and structure has engaged many Nigerian anthropological and literary scholars for some time now. How a particular society perceives a character presented by the narrator depends largely on how a parallel line connecting that character to the peculiar qualities, personalities or situation in that society can be well drawn by the folk dramatist. Language and communication are essential features of drama and in the retelling of these folk stories, performers indirectly become language teachers to their audience, and assist them to re-learn it. The functional theory of folk theatre which makes it a source of vital information about the culture of the Nigeria society, and trainer of enhanced language skills, has been ignored. Presently, folktales are fast disappearing from the life of the average Nigerian family as people face new modes and foreign languages of entertainment. People have lost the enduring lessons of our folktale tradition. Government has disregarded the need to pass on indigenous language inherited from the ancestors to their offspring. Indigenous language needs to evolve to take on the challenge of foreign languages. The article examines the measures to be adopted to breach this language divide and salvage this situation.

Before you, mother Idoto
Naked I stand
Before your watery presence, a prodigal
Leaning on an oil bean
Lost on your legend (Donatus Nwoga 801)

INTRODUCTION

In every society where drama exists, there have been antecedents in the form of rituals, songs, festivals or folklores. The folklore which serves as a basis for the folk theatre is usually transmitted orally from generation to generation but can be diffused through culture and converted to written literature. Folk theatre plots evolve from folklores altered by the narrator in the course of enactment. Dramas, Nigerian dramas inclusive, have certain elements in common. All of them are concerned with telling a story in simple or complicated, obscure or explicit manner arranged in a plot reflecting elements of characterization, language, songs, dance, setting, episodes, and events fashioned in an arranged sequence to impact maximally in the strongest possible way on an audience. The concept of aesthetic distance is broken in folk theatre performances which rather aspire for as much intimate proximity as possible with the audience. Austin Anigala describes the storyteller in traditional African performance as “a raconteur or narrator who tells stories artistically created or by those drawn from the reservoir of folktales within a given community” (Sam Ukala, 129).

The above poem by Christopher Okigbo captioned, ‘Mother Idoto’, parallels the evocative imagery African folk theatre can elicit in the minds of its ‘initiated’ audience. Folkism, as a critical literary tool imports a tendency to base plays on African history and culture and compose them to suit the aesthetic laws of folk theatre. It is primarily fashioned to project moral issues. Nigeria has a rich heritage of folktales which are usually recounted by the elderly to children in the forecourt at night

The controversy over how appropriately the Nigerian dramatist can convey this cultural experience and narrative to his local audience through the conduit of an imported language burdened with its alien set of conventions, syntax and structure is an issue that has concerned many Nigerian anthropological, linguistic and literary scholars. It is important to identify ways to improve the use of language in dramatic narratives especially folk theatre which is ethnic in nature. Training of dramatists and performers in indigenous language use is essential as the importance of cultural awareness can not be overstressed in constructing a community’s identity. Native language is a prerequisite for individual identity and authenticity. What is required is the adaption of these ethnic languages to modern linguistic forms that will make them more attractive to creative artists.

Indeed many Nigeria playwrights have made efforts towards the dislocation of language or at least the introduction of novelty in its application with an aim towards revealing the underlying surface meanings and motivations of folk theatre characters. According to John McGrath, language

is a set of symbols used in a common and uniform way by a number of people who are thus able to manipulate these symbols for the purpose of communication. How a particular society will perceive a character or role presented by the folk dramatist is determined largely by how a parallel line connecting that character to the peculiar qualities, personalities or situation in that society can be well drawn by the interpreters of the dramatic piece for, in this case the Nigerian audience.

The use of the dramatic medium as a means of documentation and propagation of ideologies with an aim towards controlling the conscience of man in the society has been noted by several Nigerian scholars notably Femi Osofisan, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka etc. Each particular society creates its own peculiar heroes and morals. The major challenge for the folk theater and indigenous language used in its staging has been the massive onslaught of the western theatre which has popularized, western slangs, dressing, provocative sexual themes and pervasive characters to the disadvantage of our local theatre which faces audience distaste of its indigenous elements. Akin Euba recognizing the imminent denigration of our indigenous arts and culture laments that “the arts and general culture of Europe are powerfully beamed to Africa and there are inadequate channels whereby Africans could beam back and with equal force their own interpretation of African arts and culture” (8). As Sam Ukala states in his University of Hull, UK, 1994 lecture: “the African Folktale is not Prose; It exists only in performance before a live audience. It therefore entails dramatic phraseology, pleasant to speak and to hear... (171)

Alvin Kernan, reflecting on the essential nature of theatre states that: “though we tend to think of the theatre as being necessary and common, a part of culture, as an architecture style or a religion, we must seek in the historical circumstances of the people involved, some unique factor that led them to express themselves fully and greatly in drama (3). Language is an essential tool of the folk theatre performer’s art and how skillfully he manipulates this verbal means of communication is what will determine the success of his performance. In recent times, the ethnic language or oral tradition of these folk dramas has been largely abandoned and the English language adopted as a replacement. This faux pas is largely occasioned by the intention to market the play beyond its local setting to a wider audience. This largely undocumented severance has robbed these dramas which rightfully serve as culturing agents for progenies of a heritage minded society.

THE THEATRE OF FOLKTALES

In every society where drama exists, there have been antecedents. These antecedents can be in the form of rituals, songs festivals or folklores. These vibrant theatre forms invariably lend to the establishment of a unique cultural identity of the host society they exist in. A folktale according to the Encarta Encyclopaedia “is a term for the verbal, spiritual and material aspects of any culture transmitted orally by observation, or imitation”. The word ‘folklore’, was coined in 1846 by the Englishman, William John Thomas, to replace the term ‘popular antiquities’. The opening of an African folktale performance is expected to arouse the audience and introduce the subject matter and characters of the story. Sam Ukala defines folkism “as the tendency to base literary plays in the history, culture and concerns of the folk (people in general) and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale (285). According to him:

the African folktale may be defined as any traditional narrative which is purely fictional or based on factual history which has however been so embellished and distorted that it cannot be faithfully subjected to any empirical proof of verification. By this definition, the epic, legend, myth, novella, marchen, saga, sage, animal tale, table anecdote, and the hero tale are folktales (171).

People sharing a particular culture may have in common an occupation, language, ethnicity or geographical location. This body of material is preserved and passed on from generation to generation with constant variations made to the folklore due to influence of memory, immediate need, or intention of narrator and degree of narrator’s tale is then conveyed to the audience in a language which might be indigenous or western, or modified to suit the taste of the specific audience,

There is a fascinating relationship between a society’s indigenous language and its ethnic identity. The cultural language of a society plays a prominent part in both revealing a person’s ethnicity and helping to form it. Virtually all the popular drama performances on the private and national media are presented in foreign languages, notably English. This malaise is marked by scriptwriters and producers obvious thorough non-mastery of native languages or the lazy excuse that ‘the larger audience would not understand the performance’ in such a local linguistic mode. This ailment is most evident in the South eastern part of the country as the South western part still retains their love and appreciation of the Yoruba dialect and artistic value. The formal study of folklores began about 300 years ago. One of the earliest books which focused on the subject was *Treatise on Superstitions* written in 1679 by the French satirist, Jean Baptiste Thiers. However, in the early

nineteenth century, great interest in folktales was created in the publication of household tales by the German philologists, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Their works stimulated writers of other nations to publish and retell similar materials of their own peoples.

In Nigeria, literature writers in the prose genre have popularized the folk art in works of life like *The Palm Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola, *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana, to name but a few. In the theatre, such works by Odunke Artist who wrote the Igbo play, *Ojaadili*, *Akpakaland* written by Sam Ukala, and *The Dragon's Funeral* by Emeka Nwabueze have embellished the lure and permanence of folk theatre in the annals of our nation's history. These works by Nigerian writers have been written in English or indigenous language with a sole aim of conveying a desired message to the audience. In Igbo folk telling for example, language can be conveyed through non oral means to reduce the risk of a message intended for the audience being too complex and the listener inadvertently misunderstanding the message. Since the narrator is face to face with the audience he takes the opportunity to utilize the intimate and immediacy attribute of the folk theatre, get a feedback from the audience and clarify what the audience does not understand.

The folk theatre is a form of art that utilizes the oral medium to capture the culture, emotions, and aspirations of the Nigerian community. It emphasizes a narrative dramatization and manifests in different ways which include, but are not limited to, moonlight folktales, festival songs, masquerade performances, proverbs, sect incantations etc. The folk theatre performance demands a considerable dexterity, imagination, training, artistic grasp of audience, practice and public relations management. As Allwell Ohukaogu and Onyerionwu state in their book *21st century Nigerian Literature*:

The Nigerian society has always been a storytelling one. In all the ethnic groups that make up the Nigerian nation, and among all her peoples, in spite of how culturally varied, tales of different volumes, shapes, subject matter, audience orientation and performative patterns have occupied a special position in the traditional literature of the Nigerian people. (71)

A folk tale is in this sense a traditional narrative popularly regarded as historically factual but actually a mixture of fact and fiction.

From an African perspective, what a modern novelist, short story writer or playwright does today is not too different from what bards and court clowns of traditional African societies did in the past, and this is why Nigerian Playwrights like Sam Ukala, Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, J.P. Clark

etc. have written plays that are sometimes a retelling of folk stories which many Nigerians are already aware of, for example Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife*. Folklore materials may be classified into four areas;

- (i) Ideas and Beliefs, which might reflect magic, sorcery or divination artistry.
- (ii) Traditions, which might include festivals, rituals etc.
- (iii) Folk sayings, proverbs, riddles etc. and,
- (iv) Narratives which contain music and ballads.

From the review of the folk theatre repertoire it can be adduced that the subject matter of folklore is usually a hero with historic personage. Folk theatre dramas are usually culled from folklores which are altered by the narrator in the course of enactment. The folklore which serves as a basis for the folk theatre is usually transmitted orally from generation to generation but can be diffused through culture and converted to written literature.

In a folk theatre performance, the staging is usually informal, utilizing a theatre in the round arena with scanty scenery, lighting or elaborate costuming, except in some cases involving miming of animals in which instance the narrator might utilize selective realism in the use of props, and acting style. As Isidore Okpewho states:

By now it should be clear that in a typical African oral narrative performance, the audience is a force to be reckoned with and that to a large extent he is a lucky performer who can count on the empathy and co-operation of an audience of this kind. Without this prop to the narrator's efforts, the performance is quite likely to be a rather dull affair not only for the audience but more especially for the narrator himself. (69)

The above statement therefore stipulates that the narrator must be a crowd psychologist and connoisseur of the audience's tastes which he can manipulate and engineer to his own designs. As Meki Nzewi opines that: "the audience has already been identified as active participants at their own level in the design and plotting of the scenario, its dramatic locations and dramatic interaction. A few instances of their structural relevance to both the development of the drama and the extempore elaboration of the artistic spectrum of the sequences will be illuminating (448).

The folk theatrician doesn't see art as life or the duplication of life but believes that in art it is not the outward appearance but the idea that should be revealed by a right utilization of natural forms. The Romantic nature of the folk theatre prescribes that it must be anti realist in its approach as Edwin Duerr explains thus:

A strictly historical production of one of the so called historical plays by Schiller or Shakespeare does not by any means interpret it because neither Schiller nor Shakespeare intended to reproduce mere history but took a historical subject as a means to express their own ideas on life and history. They gave their own interpretations of historical characters which they often placed in un-historical circumstances (368)

The popularity of the children theatre series: NTA's *Story Land*, anchored by Jimi Solanke and *Tales by Moonlight* anchored by Mrs Ezeora presents an enduring legacy which the influence the folk theatre has exerted in the cultural appreciation of the Nigerian society yet the above mentioned shows were mostly composed in English language with indigenous language only appearing during the chorus sequences. It is pertinent to observe that these indigenous languages appear during choral recitation segments when they are used to echo the moral of the story and reinforce the message. As Onukaogu observes: "Nigerian oral societies had prose forms with enough artistic balance and imaginative depth which helped develop the written forms of today. While the modern short story can be linked to the folktale, the fable or the fairy tale, the novel can be linked to the epic" (73).

Drama being the most presentational of literary genres, utilizes its performance nature to reach the audience. Because every member of the audience is part of the culture which produced the art and the artist, he/she is aware of the direction the artist is going and can adjudge whether the artist has got it right or wrong. This is what gives the folk theatre its immediate audience feedback feature.

THE LANGUAGE DISCONTINUUM:

Language is a principal means used by human beings to communicate with each other. Language is primarily spoken but can be transferred to other media such as writing. It can manifest in folktales in visual forms different from the aural sort in its symbolizations. Language has always been an essential feature of drama as Robert Edmund Jones recalls in this account of the birth of acting:

Ook and Pow and Glub and little Zowie and all the rest are sitting close together around the fire... They have killed a lion today. Suddenly the leader jumps to his feet. 'I killed the lion! I did it! I followed him! He sprang at me! I struck him with my spear! You Ook, you stand up and be the lion. Ook gets up. He hangs the lion's skin over his shoulders, he drops on his hands and knees and growls. He isn't the real lion! We know

that. And yet in some mysterious way, Ook is the lion. Ook is an actor. He will always be different from the rest of us... for he can summon spirits. (46-48)

Language can be used to discuss a wide range of topics. It varies from geographical location to ethnic delineation, and the language acquisition varies from society to society, family to family, by genetic or social division. The language development process analyses the advent of verbal communication in the animal kingdom or the life of a child. As Richard Schechner states:

The phenomena called either/all 'drama; 'theatre; performance occur among all the world's peoples and date back as far as historians, and anthropologists can go.

Evidence indicates that dancing, singing, wearing masks and/or costumes, impersonating other humans, animals or supernatural, acting out stories... are co-existent with the human condition (68)

The proper language that will describe the experience of the African in his culture has been a source of concern for African literary scholars for some time now. To this end, playwrights and performers have used the English language in a manner that conveys meaning without distorting the uniqueness of our cultural situation, or the intelligibility of language. Such adaptations have made use of informal English language, or pidgin, interspersed with indigenous language and symbolic acting to enhance audience understanding. There has been a preponderance of imaginative and creative expressions in a language that is discernibly Nigerian culture flavored.

In the retelling of these folk stories, folk theatre performers have indirectly become language teachers to their audience, helping them relearn their language through choral chants, as well as becoming custodians of the peoples heritage in their possession of these indigenous language that are fast becoming extinct. Language being a form of ritualized behaviour extends across the entire range of human action. The folk theatre art through the use of language may then be considered a specific coordinator of play and ritual. As Isidore Okpewho says, "in my translations of heroic narratives I have myself collected...I have not hesitated to feel that there is a poetic aura, indeed a touch of elevation surrounding the tales which are clearly marked by a certain sense of remove from contemporary reality" (114).

CONCLUSION

EKWEDIKE: Akuko a oburukwa m gbapuru gi afo a! (twice)

(This story if I ever mis-tell you)

WOMEN: (chorusing) Nda!

EKWEDIKE: Ndikwa m n'bo(twice)

(May I fall into the pit)

WOMEN: Nda! (twice)

EKWEDIKE: M'obughi m gbapuru gi afo a (twice)

(But if I don't mis-tell you!)

WOMEN: Nda (twice)

EKWEDIKE: M fekwa m n'bo(twice)

(May I cross over the pit)

WOMEN: Nda! (twice)

EKWEDIKE: Akuko lee! (Story time is here)

WOMEN: (chorusing) Akuko obodo lee (The story of our own)

Agu lee, ejije a wu nke nta (The drama is light)

O jiri ekete kuru mmiri (If I fetch water with a basket)

Ndikwam n'bo (May I fal into the pit)

Nda,Nda!! (chorus)

(The Dragon's Funeral, 8-9)

The folk theatre performance usually opens with a chant by the narrator which is replied by the audience as recorded in the above plays of Sam Ukala's Akpakaland and Emeka Nwabueze's Dragon's funeral. The closing of the narrative is signaled by the narrator's affirmation of morals in the tale and response of the audience to the introductory chant or audience's applause. The artist in teaching or singing about moral vices in his performance contributes his own quota to the development of his society.

The theatre as Gordon Craig views it "should not be a place to exhibit scenery, it should be a place in which the entire beauty of life can unfold in the inner beauty and meaning of life (Kenneth MacGowan, 437). The folk theatre has quite extensive romantic features in its poetic language, exotic imagery of setting and unconcern for proper detailing of character. As John Gassner rightly notes,

"the first idea of modern theatre and the one that is still dominant and most productive although also conducive to some anarchy, is the idea of freedom. Under the influence of romanticism, the theatre became an open rather than a closed, strictly convention-

alized art. Romanticism introduced the principles of flexibility, adaptation of form to content, and intellectual and artistic independence” (7).

Any country serious about its development must develop its literature and cultural traditions. This national style must go hand in hand with receptiveness to the lessons of foreign literature so as to broaden its vision and overcome existing shortcomings. That folk or indigenous theatre in Nigeria has experienced massive problems from western theatre which has led it alarmingly close to the edge of the precipice of decline is a fact noted by dramatists like Ahmed Yerima who says in an interview he granted Ezechi Onyerionwu which was published in Sunday Vanguard of January 4, 2009 “the decline in the theatre going tendency in Nigeria is certainly one of the challenges we are facing ... I think the challenge of the home movie, the relative safety of watching the movie at home and then the lack of security all over the country in terms of leaving home at certain periods of the day and getting back home safely, have all contributed to the challenge” (47-49).

The folk theatre has, inadvertently, contributed to its own demise in contemporary times by its inability to evolve native language to reach its original target audience, and address through its themes pressing topical issues like corruption, H.I.V, human trafficking etc. It indulges in fantasy narratives of fables and unrealistic heroic personages. A cross section of the Nigeria public doesn't seem to take this type of theatre because of its prescriptive moral tone. The functional theory of folk theatre which makes it a school for the young, a source of vital information about the culture of the Nigeria society, and trainer of enhanced language skills, has been largely ignored in preference of the highly sophisticated western theatre and fashionable foreign language.

As Nigeria works on the reform agenda to make life worth while, its people must build the agenda and inculcate a sense of cultural renaissance that will draw from the wisdom and synergy of folktales to produce well wounded citizens. The participatory democracy of folk theatre provides a shining example to government how best it can work with its citizens/audience to create an imaginative performance. As Emeka Otagburagu rightly says, “no folktale is without a lesson. Today folktales are fast disappearing from the life of the average Nigerian family as people face the new mode of entertainment... People have lost the enduring lessons in our folktale tradition”(5). The time to arrest this ugly trend is now, so that our native language will not be lost to the foreign winds of change. Folk theatre is a very unique way to improve communication which is integral in any communal setting. Cultural and linguistic competency is essential for the advancement of any nation. Our society is gradually pushing aside the need to pass on our native language and this is a dangerous

trend that must be checked. It is worthwhile to review the comment of W.H. Low: “the wisdom of the Roman republic in their veneration for customs was perhaps the cause of their long continuance and of the virtues of which they set the world so many examples (401)

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