

The Place of Folklore in African Dramatic Literature: A Study of *Akpakaland* and *Ozidi*

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Abstract

Folklore has projected the ideal life situations of folks and the cyclic continuity that links the past with the present to capture the attention of the world as it regards African dramatic literature. The Africans especially the African dramatists or critics need to explore the heritable traits of African traditions which are transferable to the modern stage with a view of inculcating value systems and educating the people. These heritable traits could manifest in the choice of words, and language in consonance with the people's traits, the technique or the structure of presentation, storytelling, character, characterization, and thematic preoccupation, to mention but a few. It is against this backdrop that this study sets out to interrogate the integration of communal experience using a stylized system of presentation called folk-drama. The study looked at the transformation of folklore into modern dramatic literature and its impacts using Ukala's *Akpakaland* and JP Clark's *Ozidi*. The study discovered that the robust nature of African folktale performances yields easily to the transferable demands of modern and postmodern dramatic stages with a great transfer of value systems. The study concludes that this transformation will stamp African values system, worldview, culture, and belief in the sand of time and contribute immensely in nation building, and sustenance.

Keywords: Folklore, Dramatic Literature, *Akpakaland*, *Ozidi*

Introduction

Folklore was first coined in 1846 by William John Thomas, an Englishman. He coined it as a replacement for old antiquities and he pushes it as a study of a “subset of the population: the rural, mostly illiterate peasantry” (Sims, et al: 23). Since then, it has been subjected to various scholarly dialectics and roles as regards the building and the development cultures, heritage, and its sustenance. At this point, the word 'folklore' becomes so cultural that you cannot talk about it without pegging your discussion on a particular culture or race and its artifacts usually through storytelling. This process starts with a hunger for preservation and thus, the necessary demand for transformation from oral narration to a dramatic presentation on stage in terms of themes, languages, music, character, characterizations, elaborate costumes, make-ups, scenery, etc.

Folklore is the lore (stories, customs beliefs) of a group of people that is transformed from generation to generation usually by mouth, unearths the occupational, religious, language, belief system, ritual, and culture of the folks and gives them strength to exist side by side with other folks. By implication, the word folklore covers traditional beliefs, stories, and customs. In a social definition of folklore, “... folklore supports a wider view of the material considered to be folklore artifacts. These include things people make with words (verbal lore) things they make with their hands (material lore), and things they make with their actions (customary lore)” (Wilson, 85). Ukala calls it, “any traditional oral narratives which are purely fictional or are based on factual history, which has however, been so embellished and distorted that it cannot be fruitfully subjected to any empirical proof or verification” (12). Nandra and Bukenya see folklore as: “those utterances, whether spoken, re-cited or song, whose composition and performance exhibited to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristic of accurate observation, vivid imagination and

ingenious expression” (1).

According to Olumide:

Folktale (folklore) as an oral tradition form is a story by word of mouth. Invariably, the African storyteller is a repository of knowledge, history, and experiences, whose position is fortified by his or her multiple mandates as a historian, entertainer, poet, musician, and educator who is duty-bound to transfer knowledge from one generation to another (23).

These stories usually involve supernatural beings or forces, which have explanations or reasons, and justifications for what they do. This in other words includes but is not limited to cultural and sub-cultural heroes, legends, and myths, which form part of the existence of the folks. According to Roger Abraham, “Without transmission, these items are not folklore, they are just individual quirky tales and objects” transformed into modern dramatic literature (35). The myths, legends, and heroes deal with metaphysical issues of life, a sociological relationship with the unseen worlds, and pedagogical lessons. My times imbibe moral lessons with universal degrees in a communal experience.

The Folkloric Reading of *Akpakaland*

Akpakaland was written by Sam Ukala as a way of transforming the Ika cultural folktale environment into modern dramatic literature with a major emphasis on the active participation of the audience needed during the storytelling session in Ika land. The play starts in the state house, “with the narrator leading the audience in the opening song for an Ika folktale performance” (10). Through the song, the narrator creates an enabling environment for the performance by capturing the attention of the audience. Having captured and gotten the audience's approval to perform, the narrator proceeds with the introductory ritual, as Ukala explains:

The storyteller seeks the blessing or the permission of the audience to perform, in Ika folktale performance practice for example, the storyteller metaphorically throws white chalk on the chest of the audience to obtain its blessing. He hails the audience, “eyem unu nzu” (I give you white chalk!) and it replies, “I gwo o rere”! (if you concoct, may it be efficacious)”. Having given its blessing, the audience obligates itself to collaborate or co-perform with the storyteller (3).

This introductory ritual is seen in *Akpakaland*;

Narrator: I give you white chalk!

Audience: if you concoct, may it be efficacious! (10).

The narrator goes ahead to introduce the story, “There was, there was Akpaka. The president of Akpakaland” (10).at this point, the narrator makes way for the characters to come alive on the stage and perform the tale.

Fulama enters and announces to the president that his favorite wives have a tail. When asked to leave, she insisted that something be done about it. For her insistence, Akpaka, the president offered to investigate privately but was turned down by jealous Fulama. He then declares a public unclad of the wives so the community will know who has the tail since he was not allowed to investigate it privately. As the wives are dismissed from the palace, Unata, the wife with the tail finds his way to a native doctor to avoid the public disgraced. Unata through Enwe, the native doctor was able to remove the tail and return it to the sender through a “diabolized plantain” (27).

The narrator continues involving the audience as it is in the original folktale performance of the Ika people. At this point, the audience admonishes Yeiye, and Seotu for pretending to be friends with Unata while at the back of their minds, they are not:

Members of The Audience: foolish people! So, you now support Fulama

Narrator: (re-appearing). What do you expect? When there's a dispute between the influential rich and the wretched poor, who supports the poor?

Member of the Audience: (dismally) No one! (33).

This audience's interjection proves their familiarity with the story. By asking questions, they justify and avoid being kept in unnecessary suspense.

Fulama finally ate the plantain and consequently, became the one with the tail. The narrator re-appears to re-enact a mock scene of the transfer of the tail. At this point, the narrator turns into the artistic director and directs the play-within-the-play. Hears him: “You are Unata. You stand by this imaginary door and eavesdrop as Fulama and Lome battle with tail. Now Fulama and Lome get set as I count 1,2,3,” (41).

On D-day, the entire Akpakaland, from every area of life gathered, and one by one the wives of President, Akpaka began, starting with Iyebi, from the province of the poor. Each wife appears and sings in full view of the audience and then removes her clothes to prove that she is not the wife with a tail. When it gets to the turn of Fulama after other wives have denuded themselves, she refuses and is supported by her mother. Her reason is that of class and position of Fulama's family:

Iya Fulama: (*Tears her way to the center of the gathering*)

If the president chooses to serve the floor with the daughters of peasants and pretty contractors, he cannot do that with my daughter. Is human memory so short? Have you all forgotten who her father was? Danmali, the great. A field marshal... have you no fear? (50-51).

The leaders compromised but the commoners, the masses did not, so they revolted against the decision and against the powers that be. They chant songs and charge the atmosphere for action. As soon as the atmosphere is tense, a young man swoops on Fulama and takes her to where she was killed. And the chants continued. Then the narrator comes to obey the closing formalities of the Ika storytelling session:

Narrator: from there I went, from there I returned to!

Audience: welcome ooo!

Narrator: (with a bow) E eee (88).

The Place of Folklore in African Dramatic Literature: An Akpakaland Example

We have just seen how the play is folklorically structured on the platform of Traditional African performance demand. Having the audience intrude or interrupt the performance, multiple settings, call-and-response-technique, the storyteller's dual personality, the language embellished with traditional ornaments, the music, songs, and chants, etc. these traditional leitmotifs posit the preponderances of essentializing and unifying bond between the folks and their story generated and sustained through kinesthetic and material transformation of worldviews.

The Storyteller and the Audience as the Transformers of Culture

Generally, African folktales are told by people called the storytellers but the uniqueness of the roles of the storyteller is that he transforms into a dramatic character that the progress of the drama lays in his hands. In dramatic literature, the narrator is exploited as a character and as a director who stimulates the response and reactions of the audience to some significant event as the play unfolds. For instance, in *Akpakaland*, he introduces the play and seeks the permission of the audience to co-perform with him through his, “ilu n'ilu nwokoro” (10). As soon as this opening

ritual is completed, he goes on to introduce the story and characters, “there was Akpaka, the president of Akpakaland... there were his wives: Fulma, Yeiye, Seotu, Unata, and Iyebi” (10). Immediately after this is done, he leaves the stage to come back to tie and untie some loose ends.

The narrator re-appears again as the voice of the playwright urging the people to examine and re-evaluate their position in society. **Narrator:** “by cultivating self-esteem and refusing to be bribed with crumbs from the oppressors' table. By being dedicated to the course of self-liberation and self-humanization. By looking among the poor for true and selfish leader...” (30).

The playwright folklorically and artistically assigned a dual role to him as the narrator and the director because the sustenance of the value system inherent in the story or dramatic text lies in him. The narrator acquires a s-eye view of the dramatic movement in both space and time; the drama bestows on the narrator the freedom to judge the characters or to act alongside the performers who may be trapped in a level of plot and communication with other characters. At this juncture, the narrator takes a separate role of its own.

On the other hand, the Members of the Audience are not passive but active and contribute to the progress of the story through their actions and responses. Frida Mbunda enumerates the functions and the position of the audience in folktale performances as follows:

The audience of oral literature is often unrestricted. Some of the members of the audience are familiar with the contents and often just listen to the creative variations that may result from impersonations. Others offer to give moral support to the performers while others are the leaders of the community and have functions to perform during performances. The attitude expected of the

audience is not one restricted by contemplative behavior as is the case with the audience of written literature but one of dramatic expulsion of feelings (127).

The non-restrictions of behavior and 'dramatic expulsion of feelings' is dramatically transformed from the oral to the stage by creating a specific character called 'members of the audience'. This creation divides the audience into immediate and remote audiences. The immediate audience is regarded as those active and responsive audiences who are willing to co-perform or are joint performers while the remote audience is those passive observers without a meaningful contribution to the success of the play.

The Language as an Element of Cultural Transformation in *Akpakaland*

Akwanya in *Discourse Analysis and Dramatic Literature*, sees language as “the chief means of revealing thought...” (182). In the play under study, the language does not only reveal thoughts but also employs a heightened tone and then garnished with traditional African innuendoes, projecting Ika cultural background:

Idemudia: “...don't hesitate further, my daughter, it is our costume that one drinks the cup of wine out of which libation was poured on one's behalf.” She continues with the explanation “Your mother's blessing is in here. If you drink it, then she will absorb it” (36).

Aside from the meaning of the dialogues, the linguistic maturity of the speaker, which delineates his age, the linguistic foregrounding is exceptional:

The child that starves her mother of sleep will, all night, slumber in wakefulness...

A man sits in his own house

And crushes his scrotum in the process

...The rope

I thought as much
A rope of her threshold
She crossed it... (21).

The African patterned congruity and parallel syntactic formation are observed. The language suddenly changes from a mere conversation to a semi-metaphysical tone as the narrator depicts:

The plantain had begun to roast, half-ripe plantain, bathed in herbs from the land of the dead, had begun to roast. The poor must fight for themselves. the moon was full and golden. It was sweeping clean the earth. Time for swelling of spirit (37-38).

The speakers' use of the full moon depicts the traditional belief system of some Africans that when the moon is fully ripe, it becomes a sign and an enthusiastic moment for the presence of the supernatural. Fulams's, “I don't like the full moon” (30) becomes, on the contrary, the premonition of the danger that is to befall her. The plot which semantically and syntactically started as a mere gossip of a woman with a tail suddenly drifts into an advocacy for the women and the final revolution by the masses through the artistic use of suspense, imagery, characterization, etc..

The Folkloric Reading of *Ozidi*

As the play begins, we see the narrator dramatically pretending to be at a loss but artistically trying to capture the attention of the audience. He allows them to settle down. And then ask for seven virgins who will assist in carrying a ritual procession to the water spirits at the river bank. As soon as the narrator finishes with the selection of the cast, the orchestra and the chorus of actors emerge on stage, singing and dancing around the village square, thus, setting the pace for the performance. The narrator directs and leads the procession. He once in a while acts out the powers and positions of the priests. As the chief priest, he prays

and invokes the water spirits to accept their offerings thus:

People of the sea, people of the sea, two times, three times I call upon you. Members of our community, in all their numbers and from all quarters, sinking here their quarrels and washing themselves of all colors and taint tonight, bring to you in all belly sweetness seven huge pots of food, each properly brought to you by a girl still untouched by man... here is biscuits, here is sugar, here is wine, all that is sweet to you. And now that you have taken of our food and drinks, please give us good wives, give us good children, and give us good money... (4).

After the rituals, the virgins were relieved of their duties and they went back to the audience. Then the old women emerge and sweep away malign influences, spirits whose no sacrifice will gladden their hearts. She sweeps and concocts the spirits, "they have ears but their drums beat back words of prayer...let them go off now...in great speed... for do not speak to please them" (5). When she finishes her sales, the narrator chases her away for men to have an important discussion to make in the arena. And immediately the council of Orua is formed among the dancers and the actors including the storyteller. Quickly, palm wine was served and distributed. Hardly had it finished when the meeting started. There is a pressing need for a king.

The council concludes that it is the turn of Ozidi to produce the next king which was found on the rotary system. Ozidi rejects the kingship for the sole reason that the thron is an enigma of death. And that all his family members are dead except him and his elder brother who is a drunkard. Despite Ozidi's protest, the council insists that the Ozidi family should produce the next king for the Orua Kingdom. Ironically the elder brother, Temugedege, "dribbling with drinks" (10) and accepts the kingship. The crowd carried him on the high shoulder and danced around but Ozidi

never joined them because he knew the implication of the brother's action. The new king demanded homage and his brother Ozidi protested. As a result of Ozidi's protest, they made a cunning arrangement and lure Ozidi into a supposed hunt and murdered him there, serving his head to the brother as homage. Meanwhile, Ozidi's wife, Orea has a child in her womb which she spirited to her mother, Odadama, a powerful old witch.

The storyteller comes to prepare the ground for the revenge. He announces the birth of Ozidi in the town of Ododama. He also depicts the uncanny attitudes and natural phenomena of the day Ozidi was born. The child was named after the dead father, Ozidi. Thus, Ozidi be got Ozidi. Ozidi grows up with an unusual physical strength and so domineering amongst his mates. And the mother becomes worried but the grandmother, Orea never cares because she is aware of the power that lies in the hands of the society, mindful of the cause of their exile.

When Ozidi returned from exile, those who murdered his father, Ofe, The Short, Azezabife, the Skeleton Man, Oguaran, The Giant, Agbodidi, and The Nude, greet him with fear. By act four, Ozidi has avenged his father's death as Orea says to her son, "Your father is fully avenged/ and after the second burial, sleeps well in company / of his compeers" (90). But Ozidi's rigorous preparation for his mission has marked him in ways he cannot easily throw away. Violence gives birth to violence. Weary with killings, Ozidi must nevertheless murder Tebesonoma's sister and the child for whom she has waited so long. Then Orea sees the need for purification of the house polluted bloodshed. The play ends as the players dance and sing around with the storyteller in a long processional dance.

The Place of Folklore in Dramatic Literature: *Ozidi* example

In the place of folklore in dramatic literature, the verbal evocation

of oral lore and the various elements of the theatre are transformed into the modern stage. To perform this lore is to theatricalize through movement, costumes, make-ups, scenery, and props in consonance with traditional African theatre demand. According to Uwa,

The artist/performer, we are told employs various gestures of both body and verbal communication, aided by the compelling and catalytic influence of music and rhythm as a binding force, harmonizing with the rhythmic beat of nature that balances all forces (38).

From the foregoing, it is clear that folklore in dramatic literature has experienced multi-media experience, the structure of the folktales is no longer limited to narration but with presentation in theatrical forms. This theatrical form usurers in the use of language characterized by the clarity of diction, and all kinds of lyricism of forms and concrete images derived from the immediate community.

The Language as an Element of Cultural Transformation in *Ozidi*

The songs in the play are accompanied by orchestration and hand-clapping by the members of the audience. In the play, the pool of players, including the orchestra and chorus of actors came from the audience to accompany the procession of the virgins. They sang “Beni yo-yo, beni yo-yo as they moved to the imagined river. As soon as the priest finishes in the river, the song filters in as stage directions read:

Now the orchestra and chorus break into song, the fast jogging air of Beni Owou mu ne yo. The group forms again in the same other as before... at the same time, the chorus of actors and dancers fall apart, flanking their leader who is cheered on by the master- drummer. The song leader immediately raises the group's praise song... (4-5).

These songs or sacrifices signify the invitation of new growth and an optimistically anticipated birth of a new year. And thus, becomes a celebratory song and a communicative element. Moreover, during the fight between Ozidi and his father's murderers, the song changes to a praise-singing song by striking up personal tones to each fighter each time there is an attempt to defeat the opponent. The playwright artistically transforms the song to serve as an interlude, an entertainment that ushers in another action(s).

The breakthrough of Clark's transformation of language to the stage is the retention and the mark of the identity of Ijaw people, clothed in Ijaw traditional speaking mannerism of half English mixed with pidgin English as we see in the script thus:

An' he no leaf any property at all? I dey ask sake of all them big big people way dey say dem dey service public no day forget to pull plenty plenty insi' e dem own pocket. Dem style like small girl way day give pikin food: dem give baby small dem chop the rest (65).

The language is also seen as being poetical both in the manner of speaking and the interlocutory forms. This is necessitated as a result of the intrinsic features of the saga adapted to the stage. This dramatic poetry is possessive in the dramatic quality of the narration, the ritual elements, and the atmosphere of the supernatural. The repetitive and recitative nature of the saga transformed to the stage suggests the seriousness and the needed emphasis on some of the words. Thus, adding melody and beauty to the tone and voice of the actors. The soliloquy of the foolish king with a chewing stick in his mouth is laughable but ironic. The language becomes a vehicle for the transfer of wisdom and social values.

The Storyteller as a Transformer of Culture

The technique of transforming the narrator to the modern stage or into dramatic literature In *Ozidi*, just like the sage, he obeys the entire liturgical manner in which the story was told and all the ritual observances to gain divine guidance and inspiration in the process of telling the tale. This assertion was made obvious during the procession where he directs and offers libation and appropriation for the community in the river, serving as their mouthpiece.

Furthermore, as an actor, he plays the major roles of Ozidi Senior and Ozidi Junior. If not for other characters, the play would have been called a mono-drama as a result of the multiple roles that are assigned to the storyteller on stage. Thus, it becomes a community participatory act in the closing style of the Ijaw folktale performance session by dancing in a long processional dance form in which everyone is involved.

The significance of the Songs and the Incantations

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Conclusion

Ellwood maintains that “culture includes man's entire material civilization, tools, weapons, clothing, shelters, machines and even system of industry” (cited in Sorrel,2015:9) this definition expands culture as the people's way of daily activities, their value system, their likes and dislikes, their habits of life, and the root of their civilization. This is a kind of standard mark of identification of the people. Thus, folklore becomes one's mark or medium of transformation and transposition of the identity of the people from generation to generation.

Since there is a social factor and contextual dimension of every artistic phenomenal use of language, there must be a factor that propels the kind of results achieved. Thus, the contextual dimension of the artistic work transformed to the stage exhibits a direct relationship with the original just as we have seen in the folktales and the embedded message of value and virtues to the people. The influences the folktales have on the stage sustain the stage implied social and cultural behavioral change and awareness. The infusion of various traditional elements into a performative whole is explored as a strategic way of repositioning and enriching African culture, and cosmology, and directed towards community progress and effective means of cultural sustenance.

Thus, folklore in dramatic literature using these plays posits folk plays as a participatory learning medium and so, awakens cognitive skills and human development. According to Blatner folk-plays: ...integrating the realms of language, emotions, imaginations, and profound feelings of the body in action and doing rather than just passively watching and hearing...fostering healthier communication and improving their critical thinking (4). It focuses on cultural transmutation and as a tool for preserving value systems, worldviews, and arts which are one of the greatest assets of a people. It becomes a means of re-asserting communal selfhood, and ideology through experiential roles and community interrogations, thus, stamping African arts in the sand of time. These will usher in a new and healthy partnership among African arts, Theatre, and Technology in a futuristic perspective.

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