

THE INDIGENOUS BACKGROUND OF WRITTEN AFRICAN DRAMA: THE EXAMPLES OF WOLE SOYINKA AND ESIABA IROBI

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Abstract

The introduction of writing in Africa has significantly affected the African cultural and oral art forms, as these indigenous art forms stand heavy chance of extinction if not properly domesticated in the modern (written) literature that has become a serious threat to their survival. The literature of every society first exists in its oral form before being expressed in the written form. This is because of the primacy of speech in all cultures. This paper therefore explored how modern African literary writers, particularly, the dramatists under study have appropriated African oral forms such as music, song, drumming, as well as ritual festivals, by deploying them to sociopolitical effects. This study adopts a content analysis approach as well as the qualitative research methodology for the analysis of the chosen playwrights' dramaturgies. Part of the findings of this study is that even while these African oral forms are appreciated in terms of their cultural essence, their significance especially in the modern time is better placed in terms of their sociopolitical relevance. As Soyinka and Irobi have demonstrated, ritual festival has found its political space in the nation's sociopolitical cleansing and regeneration. This paper also highlights the role of music during the ritual enactment that brings about political cleansing and social recuperation. Soyinka and Irobi maintain in their dramaturgies that the written African drama is indebted to African mythology that provides material and inspiration for the modern African dramatist.

Keywords: African drama, indigenous, metaphysics, acculturation

Introduction

African art forms such as music, song, drumming, proverb and ritual festivals which are genetically oral oriented have remained significant explorable materials in the written African literatures that continue to emanate from the continent. African writers have continually attempted to express the culture of their people which is shown in the desire to create in their works, traditional African symbols. The fact that African culture which turned out to be the backbone of written African literature was not written in the past until after colonization, does not mean that African people had no form of culture, civilization or literature. Distinctive African forms of literature flourished in pre-colonial Africa. Such forms included ritual, masquerade and festival. "Traditional African societies were particularly rich in dramatic performances. Some of these have indeed survived to date. Varying in complexity and intent, they are essentially distinctive of the multiple ceremonies and rituals that flourished in Africa" (Diala 65). In the 1960s and 70s when modern African literature was in its formative stage, a basic preoccupation of the critics and scholars of that emergent literature had understandably been to highlight its background among other things, in which the culture is to be effectively portrayed. Indigenous or cultural elements have therefore continued to be explored by modern African dramatists as a way of propagating the African heritage.

In as much as many scholars are totally aware that modern African literature is European-mediated, specifically based on its medium, it is necessary also that we take into cognizance the fact that literature had existed in Africa even from time immemorial. This implies that even prior to the advent of the Europeans, as a continent, Africa had existed in the fullness and richness of its culture. African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans. Their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth, value and beauty. They had poetry and above all they had dignity (Chinua Achebe 161). Much of written African drama derives from an indigenous cultural heritage of the continent. Leon Osu notes that "Modern African writers have always fallen back on their

different people's traditional, religious and cultural myth as a reliable source of inspiration for literary expression..." (151).

African festivals and ritual performances are undoubtedly part and parcel of the material written African drama draws upon. Ossie Enekwe observes that "because of its importance in Africa, ritual is an integral part of African theatre" (154). Referring generally to the Yoruba world view and practice, Obi Maduakor intones that:

Soyinka holds the traditional view that drama originated from these ritualized activities and, as such, cannot be separated in its communal import from ritual. The first ritual actors are the primordial deities, Ogun, Obatala, Sango, whom Soyinka calls "the ritual archetypes", and the first drama was a ritual enactment. (275)

Hence, ritual festival is drama in itself because drama is an imitation of actions or series of actions and performances. These actions form the African cultural heritage in their style of presentation, purpose and value as well as evidence of enlightenment and entertainment. Thus, Ola Rotimi asserts: "Ritual and display that reveal in their style of presentation, in their purpose, and value, evidence of imitation, enlightenment and entertainment can be said to be drama" (77).

The Process of Acculturation in Modern African Drama

Modern African drama centers heavily on the concept of 'critical hybridization' which entails having two cultural tendencies in a work of art. In Soyinka and Irobi's dramaturgies, this concept comes to fore. This hybridization is essentially the manifestation of peculiar African indigenous background, its elements as worthy dramatic material, on the one hand and expressing its message in a Western language, on the other hand. This however implies that the African environment provides the material with which African literature flourishes while the European continent provides the medium of expression. Adrian Roscoe notes that, "Although Soyinka's work reveals a definite blending of African and Western elements the basic material out of which the plays are fashioned is overwhelmingly indigenous" (244). Indigenous in the sense that modern African dramatists employ certain traditional elements or oral art forms like music, dance, performance, ritual, festival, masquerade, for the purpose of aesthetics and the utilitarianism of literature. Ritual in African festival and the necessity for its dramatic refraction has received adequate credence. As Oyin Ogunba remarks, "the physical presence of supernatural beings at festivals of all categories is regarded as laden with purification possibilities and people do take advantage of them for their own benefit." Ogunba further acknowledges that festivals afford the African communal folks the opportunity to cleanse themselves of "all the accumulated spiritual filth of the old year in order to enter the New Year a chastened, reborn person" (Ogunba 25-26).

Soyinka, for instance, subscribes to the classical concept of theatrical enactment while maintaining his Yoruba background. Roscoe avers that "It must be emphasized at the same time that his work is essentially African in material and inspiration. Soyinka is a Yoruba who acknowledges his roots and clings to them" (219). Very similarly, Irobi vehemently clings to his Igbo tradition in his dramaturgy. The *Ekpe* festival provides great material and inspiration in Irobi's *Nwokedi*. For these dramatists and more, the African cultural background is the major explorable content and it is from this that their artistic strength sprouts.

With deep sense of their cultural backgrounds, Soyinka and Irobi experiment the foreign language as a vehicle that projects the cultural values of their immediate environments. It is this experimentation that gives rise to the hybridization that ensures a significant propagation and appropriation of the rich African cultural background. Hence, in the process of this literary hybrid-culture, the traditional African elements such as the oral art forms are not lost to the written art form, rather, they significantly receive immortality through the written and foreign medium. Soyinka and Irobi have remained as close to their background as possible in exploring the beautiful African oral heritage in their dramaturgies. Noting this connection and commitment, Solomon Iyasere avers that "The modern African writer is to his

indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind” (107). As Emmanuel Obiechina rightly points out,

To begin with a theoretical question, what happens to the development of literature when a relatively new cultural system based on the written word is superimposed upon an ancient Oral traditional culture? The first discovery is that the oral culture does not immediately disappear by the mere fact of its being in contact with writing, nor does the literature of the oral society disappear because of the introduction of written literature. Rather, a synthesis takes place in which characteristics of the oral culture survive and are absorbed, assimilated, extended, and even reorganized within a new cultural experience. Also, vital aspects of the oral literature are absorbed into an emerging written literature of greatly invigorated forms infused with vernacular energy through metaphors, images and symbols, more complex plots, and diversified structures of meaning. (197)

Modern African dramatists therefore explore their rich cultural background in their dramatic engagement.

Soyinka and the Yoruba Metaphysics

Ritual and festival have been identified as part of the African indigenous background which modern African dramatists replicate and appropriate in their written drama. Soyinka portrays in his dramaturgy, the Yoruba mythology and cosmology in the richness of its cultural values. Soyinka’s awareness of the great relevance of the Yoruba god, Ogun, is accentuated in his dramaturgical presentation of the rite of passage of his Yoruba sociocultural worldview. This passage rite shows the continuity of life and existence in the Yoruba cosmic order as portrayed in *Death and the King’s Horseman*

Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* also portrays the Yoruba cosmology in all its richness. The passage rite in Soyinka’s Yoruba kingdom is the ritual that must be performed in honour and accompaniment of the dead king to the ancestral world by his horseman, Elesin Oba. For Soyinka and the Yoruba worldview, death is an end to life; it is only a continuum of the living. Soyinka explains that in the Yoruba concept of transition:

The past is the ancestors, the present belongs to the living and the future to the unborn. The deities stand in the same situation to the living as do the ancestors and the unborn obeying the same laws, suffering the same agonies and uncertainties, employing the same masonic intelligence of rituals for the perilous plunge into the fourth area of experience, the immeasurable gulf of transition. (*Myth* 148)

This shows that in the Yoruba cosmic order life contains within it the manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn. Emmanuel Uzoji remarkably appraises this conception thus:

Soyinka sees the African world as an integral cosmos with a unique fluidity that makes unbroken continuity possible. It is a state of perpetual transmutation, which he refers to as a state of transition ... There is continuity in movement, a perpetual transition, cyclical in nature, eternal, yet not dichotomous as in European view of the cosmos. (52-53)

At a corresponding moment in Irobi’s *Nwokedi*, the dramatist domesticates this cyclic life in the metaphysics and mythopoetics of his Igbo background,

... the seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant. The plant is the tree, the tree is the branches. Its branches are its leaves. Its leaves bear the flowers. The flowers blossom into fruits. The fruits ripen and fall. They fall and rot into seeds. The seeds grow into seedlings. And the seedlings into trees – this is the spiral of our life. This is the cycle of our life. (*Nwokedi* 92)

Following Elesin’s failure in carrying out the sacrificial suicide, Onookome Okome reveals that “Elesin Oba fails in this important social assignment, creating a personal and communal disjuncture in the

political and social well-being of his society” (15). What Soyinka does here is to demonstrate the communality of the African society where there is collectivism in both the people’s social progress and disaster. Elesin warns Mr. Pilkings, “The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever ... you did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it ... And not merely my life but the lives of many” (*Death* 62). In his contention, Okome sees the people and society as a group that is doomed, arguing that Elesin’s son, Olunde cannot take the place of the father, hence, Olunde’s suicide is not only a waste, but also an abominable act in the sight of the folk. Olunde’s act Okome reaffirms, “results in nothing and he gains nothing too, including the society, instead, the collective psyche goes further down the moral drain” (16). Praise-Singer’s lamentation reassures thus:

Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice. You sat with folded arms while evil strangers tilted the world from its course and crashed it beyond the edge of emptiness – you muttered, there is little that one man can do, you left us floundering in a blind future. Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers, Elesin. (*Death* 75)

Human sacrifice has always been the focal of Soyinka’s ritual enactment and this significantly correlates with Irobi’s ritual dramas. Dubem Okafor writes of ritual imperativeness in African plays thus:

All communities have a way of cleansing their society of evil, of preserving man-god harmony and generally blood is involved. Whether this is a sign of the sanguinary propensities of the gods or something else is not important: the fact is that sacrifice— involving animal or human blood— seeks to reinstate the god-man covenant, to effect a renewal of the socio-cosmic order. (19)

Irobi and the Mythopoetics of the Ekpe Festival

Irobi also appropriates African cultural values in his dramatic works. In his artistic engagement, the dramatist explores effectively the rich indigenous background of his Igbo cultural background. In *Nwokedi*, Irobi dramatizes the Ekpe festival which is common in his hometown. In a typical traditional Igbo community, the people make their god and also choose someone to mediate between them and the gods. In a moment of ritual performance, this god-incarnate assumes the dutiful position of the gods as Ufo bearer proclaims: “Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi: you are a spirit. We made you a spirit. But at this hour, as you cross that spill of blood, you will become a god. And like a god you will walk the earth ... And whenever the god is summoned, the spirit appears in the wake of the god” (*Nwokedi* 91). It is for this reason that Diala observes that the insight *Nwokedi* offers is that the “medium who mediates between the people and communal deity is himself the god-incarnate” (93). Diala’s submission is instructive: “Irobi actually points to the heart of a central belief in Igbo traditional religious faith: the idea that communal deities are human creations instituted to perform certain functions for society” (93). The Ekpe ritual is used by Nwokedi and his Ekumeku age grade to purge the land and propitiate the gods of the many political and socio-cultural sacrileges. Irobi’s attempt at dismantling corruption in *Nwokedi* is rooted in a dramatic gambit which manipulates the elements of Igbo mythopoesis and the *Ekpe* festival subversively. Irobi’s appropriation of Igbo mythopoesis in *Nwokedi* “makes the theatrical basis of his truly challenging corpus the dramaturgy of demonstrable Igbo ritual performances. In his iconoclastic recuperation of Igbo myths and expansion of ritual to facilitate secular projects in a contemporary postcolonial society, Irobi constantly sets in relief a specifically Igbo theatre/tragedy as well as foregrounds his audacious innovativeness” (Diala 87). The inherent purifying signification of *Ekpe* embedded in *Nwokedi* is explained as “Irobi’s framework of purifying the democratic space which correlates with the rejuvenative goals of *Ekpe*. The tumultuous procession and choric chants of the villagers, the cutting of the throat of a white cock and the smearing of the blood on outlasses are theatrical evocation of Ekpe’s milieu of atonement and purification. (Adeoti 93)

Originally, a ram is used for this ritual cleansing of the land, but Nwokedi warns Arikpo that the political cleansing that looms in the nation needs the spillage of human blood required in place of the ram for social regeneration:

... Yes, Senator Arikpo, any moment from now your cruel blood will purge this land you desecrated with your political witchcraft ... It is the sacrifice the future demands... My generation gave you the future to hold in trust for us ... After that you rumbled it... that is why this matchet must spill your blood today. (*Nwokedi* 72-73)

Toni Duruaku observes that “Nwokedi sees beyond the mere symbolic gesture of ram sacrifice and prefers a man, better still a politician who represents the horrid ruling class” (90). Irobi’s *Nwokedi* is a social, political and cultural statement. According to Osu, Irobi’s *Nwokedi* dwells on the Ekpe purification rite, through which the playwright expresses his concept of societal revolutionary change and tragedy. Irobi’s aim in the play is clearly patriotic, hence, his hope is to discover a path to ideal nationhood. Irobi identifies greed, egoism, diabolism and corruption as the bane of the society, and through the Ekpe purification rite, seeks to purge the society of this moral putrefaction. But for Nwokedi, the sacrifice of the corrupt and guilty is justifiable for blighting the future of the youth.

It is instructive to point out that Soyinka and Irobi adopt somewhat different styles and techniques in the realization of their artistic visions even as they portray similar indigenous background and heritage in their plays. For instance, Soyinka’s hero in *Death and the King’s Horseman* is the sacrificial object who must take his own life for the general well-being of the society while Irobi in *Nwokedi* creates a hero who is the executioner of the evil doers for the purpose of socio-political and cultural regeneration. Diala’s observation becomes succinct here, “While Soyinka is interested in the legend of the sacrificial victim as the savior, Irobi is fascinated by the myth of the savior as the executioner of the guilty ... Soyinka’s protagonists are sacrificial victims... Irobi’s protagonist wields a sharp knife” (95).

The Social Function of Ritual Festival in Written African Drama

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi juxtaposes the festival of an annual cleansing for agricultural increase with the social and political purging which the Nigerian nation crucially needs. Irobi substitutes the original object of ritual invocation, a ram, with human head in the ethnic cleansing that ushers that sociopolitical recuperation the nation long desires. The Ekpe festival as harnessed in *Nwokedi*, is radically reshaped and revised to incorporate the use of human sacrifice rather than goat, for the annual village cleansing ... irobi uses Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo as human sacrifices in *Nwokedi* to underscore a conviction, that Nigeria’s rebirth requires a bloodbath, in which its corrupt present and past leaders will have to be exterminated to pave way for a fresh beginning (Akingbe 267-268). Succinctly, Adeoti points out that “Irobi’s framework of purifying the democratic space in *Nwokedi* correlates with the rejuvenative goals of *Ekpe* (93). Finding Irobi’s *Ekpe* dramaturgy sufficient in his Igbo cosmological space, Diala remarks that,

the paradigm for the *Ekpe* festival in *Nwokedi* is the communal expiation of guilt, and sacrifice held annually in many African societies, especially at transitional moments (for example the eve of the new year) to placate the gods and renew the lease of life. In the past, as indicated by the play, among the Ngwa-Igbo, the setting of the play, as among many other African people, the preferred sacrifice was a human... (93)

Hence, ritual performances are the African people’s means of expressing their relationships with their Maker by worshipping at the shrines of various deities. The performances involve praying... In doing this, the ritual performers thank God for keeping them alive, enabling them achieve many successes like begetting children, having good health, recording bumper harvests (Okodo 132). Sociopolitical resuscitation of the Nigerian nation in Irobi’s view could hang on the broad shoulders of the ritual activist. Irobi’s sociocultural background largely underlines his choice of dedication in *Nwokedi*, “... all members of the Umuakwu Progressive Union who not only initiated me into the metaphysics and theatrical ecstasies of the *EKPE* festival, but have also stubbornly sustained a dying Igbo tradition; this annual ritual of the Ngwa people; a renewal of their agricultural season; a cosmic prayer for plenty; a cry for change” (iii). *Nwokedi* is grounded in the annual ritual cleansing festival commonly practiced by the agrarian communities of the Ngwa-Igbo, of the South Eastern Nigeria, to mark a transition from the old year to a new year. Perhaps Irobi’s privileging of the *Ekpe* festival in *Nwokedi* over the modern theatre is a retrospective reflection of the cultural nuances of his Ngwa-Igbo cultural background (Akingbe 265-266). Ritual sacrifice which involves the spilling of animal, and sometimes human, blood

to appease the gods of the land when certain serious sacrileges are perceived to have been committed or during important annual festivals, are characteristic of African religion. Such is the case in *Nwokedi* where the occasion of the *Ekpe* festival, a festival of the Ngwa Igbo people of Nigeria, which marks the end of one farming year and the beginning of a new one, is also used by Nwokedi and his Ekumeku age grade to purge the land of the many political and social sacrileges the corrupt old politicians, like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr, are perceived to have committed against the people (Osu 153). For Irobi therefore, solution to the Nigerian political quagmire lies in the injection of a new vision and focus that can only be provided by the younger generation politicians. Consequently, the image of the youths as symbolised by the younger generation politicians of Ekumeku club, signifies assurance that all is not lost and Nigeria can still be salvaged to its rightful leadership position in the comity of nations (Akingbe 271).

Significance of Music to the Written African Drama

For the dramatists (Soyinka and Irobi), music is a significant element in the formation of ritual enactment in their dramaturgies. While Soyinka illustrates that music could transform the tragic hero into crucial action of his sacrificial death, Irobi demonstrates that music incites the protagonist and his Ekumeku group into that irrepressible action that ensures sociopolitical redemption. Soyinka's protagonist is the object of sacrifice for this redemption, while Irobi's protagonist is the hand that executes the sacrificial object for any social regeneration. Soyinka believes therefore that the Yoruba practice music in a way that differs from the methods of the British colonizers. He states, "[t]he European concept of music does not fully illuminate the relationship of music to ritual and drama among the Yoruba" (*Myth* 147). In Yoruba tragedy, and of course for Soyinka, music provides supplementary forms of communicating the essence of the drama in a manner that elevates Yoruba principles (Karimi 57).

Soyinka has noted that during the "charged climactic moments of the tragic rites," music emerges as the "sole art form which can contain tragic reality" (*Myth* 146-7). The true "embodiment of the tragic spirit" for Soyinka, therefore, resides in music and allows the dramatist develop the threnodic notes of his play (*Myth* 147). The melodies that accompany the sacrificial customs of the Yoruba are particularly exclusive to members of the dramatist's society and mark important moments in the ritual. Despite his western education, Olunde, whom many have argued to be Soyinka's proper tragic hero, has not severed ties with his Yoruba cultural background. He never allowed his 'civilisation' to serve as deterrent to his ritual embodiment as he still finds relevance in music through drumming. Olunde hears farther than Jane Pilkings as the drumming that should accompany Elesin Oba's inter-terrestrial voyage echoes in the background. He is still very much aware of the relevance of music for any ritual sacrifice which he is willing to make in the father's stead.

OLUNDE: Listen! Come outside. You can't hear anything against that music.

JANE: What is it?

OLUNDE: The drums. Can you hear the change? Listen.

(The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off. After a silence, a new beat begins, slow and resonant.)

There. It's all over.

JANE: You mean he's ...

OLUNDE: Yes Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous; I know he is dead.

JANE (screams): How can you be so callous! So unfeeling! You announce your father's own death like a surgeon looking down on some stranger... (*Death* 55)

What Jane fails to realize however is that Olunde's existence and cosmic essence within his Yoruba background is significantly beyond mere sentiment, empathy or self-sympathy. The Elesin's relevance is in their willingness to immolate and immortalize their mortal beings to ensure peace at the realms of existence, and such ritual sacrifice which is enshrined in Elesin's transition of the realms, is to be carried in musical accompaniment. Soyinka points out that "the confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition"

(*Death Author's Note*). Throughout *Death and the King's Horseman*, Soyinka employs music for its ritual and cultural imperativeness. The dramatist concludes his Author's Note by warning that "*Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition." For Soyinka, "Music fills the spaces in the realms of the living, dead and the unborn to become the sound of transitional memory. In addition, the elegiac melodies of the Yoruba bridge the metaphorical abyss and the "stage of transition" (*Myth* 149). It suffices therefore that from the outset of the play, Soyinka introduces music and dance for the purpose of Elesin's apotheosis and spiritual transmutation thus, "ELESIN OBA enters along a passage before the market, pursued by his drummers and praise-singers. He is a man of enormous vitality. Speaks, dances and sings with that infectious enjoyment of life which accompanies all his actions" (*Death* 9). Ideally, Soyinka concludes the play in the same manner in which it began, with music, this time a dirge. The ecstatic music; drumming and dance that fluttered at the beginning of the play now turn to some ominous dirges that filter at incessant moments with irregular crescendo towards the end of play.

Irobi also appropriates the influence of music in *Nwokedi* from the very outset. Music and drumming induce trepidation in Arikpo, and undoubtedly the audience. The synthesis of *Ekpe* ritualistic procession and drama is grounded in the nuances of meaning embedded in the action, ritual, chorus and dance invoked by the festival (Akingbe 272). For instance, the more often Ekumeku is chanted during the ritual, the more daring Nwokedi's action gains amplification. Due largely to the elegiac chanting and feet stamping by the Ekumeku, Arikpo could hardly conceal his fear and anxiety;

[*The procession is now at the gate. The singing and dancing, accompanied with feet-stamping shakes the earth. Arikpo begins to shrivel into himself. Unable to withstand the rush of the passion outside, he moves into the inner room... They dance round him making cannibalistic grimaces at his face. He manages to maintain a sedate dignity that seeps away every other moment. Obidike swishes into another song ...*]

Obidike: Eji m obara achu aja.

Chorus: Mbarimba eji m obara achu aja, mbarimba.

Obidike: Eji m obara eri ji.

Chorus: Mbarimba eji m obara eri ji, mbarimba.

Obidike: Eji m obara ańu mmai.

Chorus: Mbarimba eji m obara ańu mmai, mbarimba.

Obidike: Eji m obara aghu ahu.

Chorus: Mbarimba eji m obara aghu ahu, mbarimba. (*Nwokedi* 17-19)

Translation

Obidike: I make sacrifice with blood.

Chorus: *Mbarimba*, I make sacrifice with blood, *mbarimba*

Obidike: I eat yam with blood.

Chorus: *Mbarimba*, I eat yam with blood, *mbarimba*.

Obidike: I drink blood like wine.

Chorus: *Mbarimba*, I drink blood like wine, *mbarimba*.

Obidike: I bathe with blood.

Chorus: *Mbarimba*, I bathe with blood, *mbarimba*. (Translation, mine)

In the above extract, Irobi manifests greatly the use of oral tradition as part of the indigenous background of modern African drama. Music and drumming are deployed in African festival drama for the crucial accompaniment of ritual performance. Remarkably, the dramatist's use of song sets in relief his African root. Irobi manipulates this oral rendition in a manner that accomplishes its aesthetic and religious functions, as well as the utilitarian effect of literature. Iyimoga contends that "folk performances particularly the traditional art forms are often dominated by large-scale musical accompaniments and dance" (44). Irobi's fluent use of the vernacular effectively places the typical Igbo background of his plays and his strong attachment to that cultural heritage. "Irobi's fascination with drum language and masking, and the state of possession which they induce is consistent with his abiding interest in the idiom of religious ritual" (Diala 106). Irobi's appropriation of his Igbo folklore is his appreciation of his undoubtedly rich Igbo cultural background. Hence, the strong attachment to his indigenous background manifests in Irobi's dramatic zeal.

Conclusion

From the foregoing therefore, it remains irrefutable that written African drama explores the indigenous African sensibilities which the playwrights among other literary artists are preoccupied with. Traditional African drama often associated with ritual and sociopolitical events emphasises mime, drumming, dance, music, costumes, ritual, masks and masquerading. Its influence on contemporary African drama is particularly significant. Hence, in their attempt to propagate and inculcate the indigenous African background in the written African drama, Soyinka and Irobi have constantly appropriated the cultural values of their various African societies in such a fascinating manner. They have constantly engaged drama as a tool for mythological recuperation of the rich African indigenous background and value system. African oral art forms such as music, drumming, song, proverbs, etc. have received significant domestication in the emergent written African literature that has continued to flourish. But beyond this however, the dramatists have demonstrated that ritual and many rich African festivals equally assume significant place in nation building for prospective, progressive, and regenerative society where the modern crop of sociopolitical leaders, largely represented by Olunde in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Nwokedi Jnr. and his Ekumeku group in Irobi's *Nwokedi*, could through their ritual enactments restore political stability and progress within the nation. This also emphasises the fact that these African oral and indigenous art forms do not exist only on the praxis of "art for art sake", but also thrive on the impact they have on the sociopolitical development of the African landscape. African cultural values like ritual and orature are therefore explored as valuable materials in the plays of most African dramatists. Strikingly significant though is their use of a Western language as their medium of expression. Soyinka and Irobi are perhaps the most famous and renowned African dramatists in this area of enquiry as they express themselves in foreign language while exploring African cultural values in their dramaturgies. Written African drama remains deeply indebted therefore to African cultural values for its source and the material it continues to provide.

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