



ADVANCES IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES, LITERATURES AND CULTURES

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Essays in memory of Nnabuenyi Ugonna

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Foreword

The Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos has been in the forefront of academic excellence in Nigèria. It has promoted a number of intellectually stimulating activities, including the publication of scholarly works. This book, which is in memory of the Late Professor Nnabuenyi Ugonna, one of the pioneers in the study of African languages, literatures and cultures in Nigeria, is one of our modest contributions to academic discourse.

The selection of articles is as thorough as the articles themselves are incisive. The authors have made attempts to incorporate current trends in their essays. The articles, which are relevant to African studies, have also covered the great variety of research interests of the Late Professor.

I congratulate the editors for producing this book and for keeping alive the memory of one of our most cherished professors. I recommend *Advances in African Languages, Literatures and Cultures* to all lovers of African studies.

Professor C. S. Momoh,
Dean, Faculty of Arts,
University of Lagos.

Chapter 16

Towards the Modernisation of Igbo Theatre

IWU IKWUBUZO

Introduction

The existence of authentic Igbo traditional drama need not be over-emphasised, for its validity alongside other black African dramas has long been affirmed by many scholars who perceived African drama as full-fledged drama.

Talking about the existence, origin and development of Igbo traditional drama, Ugonna (1979:4) posits that Igbo drama, like ancient Egyptian, Greek, Japanese and Chinese drama, has been of great antiquity. Like drama in general, it owes its rise to two aspects of human life, the religious and the mimetic . . .

The Igbo have a rich repository of traditional drama which is staged on different ceremonial occasions in the life of the people. To quote again from Ugonna (1979:5):

During rituals associated with the rites of passage - births, initiations, marriages - dramatic displays are staged. Also during festivals in honour of various Igbo deities: Ala, Ogwugwu, Urasi, Agwunsi, Idemmiri, Ahiajoku, etc, various forms of dance drama are staged.

Towards the Modernisation of Igbo Theatre

From this brief exposition of the sources of Igbo dramatic tradition, no further proof is needed to convince the exponents of the contrary view that Igbo traditional drama truly exists.

Igbo traditional drama is unique both in content and in form. Defining what Igbo traditional drama is and the form it takes, Ugonna (1979:1) says:

It is a drama transmitted by means of spoken word, a play the script of which is not written down but is orally conveyed.

It is not the modern Igbo drama whose script is written and its performance based on a western type of stage that observes what is theoretically called the fourth-wall convention.

Early Setbacks of Igbo Traditional Drama

The problem we seem to have does not bother on whether or not Igbo traditional drama exists but on the low level of appreciation accorded this dramatic heritage. Over the years, people have not fully appreciated and utilised it.

The general apathy shown to it today, seems to us, an age-long attitude. Its history dates back to the colonial era during which period our tradition, custom and, indeed, our culture suffered a great deal of dereliction. Our indigenous theatre was not left out. It, too, suffered untold relegation. The cause is not far-fetched. Mention must be made of the devastating influence of western education and foreign religion. The religious theatre whose aim was to pave way for the process of christianisation was introduced. The black people, particularly, the Igbo embraced it, assimilated it and consequently became alienated from their own traditional theatre repertory.

That explains according to Traore (1972:30), "why the civilised, bred on the drip-feeding system of colonial education . . . , still turn their backs on the

activity which had as its main aim the strengthening of the community's vitality. This elite finds outlet for its vanity in club, fraternities, and Young Catholic Society where courtlines play were acted."

That was the bane of African societies in general and Igbo in particular. Traore (1972:30) again, while quoting C. Beant, observes that "... the educated Africans, non-Christians included, came to despise their ancestral customs and to consider them savage sport of which they were a bit ashamed."

During this period, *mmonwu* (Igbo masquerades) for instance, was simply seen by the propagators of Christian religion as devil incarnate and this view was soon imbued by the practitioners of this new faith. The tendency then was to always associate *mmonwu* with paganism and sin and its enactment was, therefore, jettisoned.

It is highly unimaginable the extent of damage done to our culture by our erstwhile rulers.

The State of Igbo Traditional Drama Today

Today, we are at the dawn of new era - an era of independence, self-actualisation, national consciousness, and recognition of our cultural identity. The past few years in our history have witnessed a new wave of culture revival in the continent of Africa and this had been demonstrated during the FESTAC 77 in Nigeria and the recently held Nigerian Festival of Arts and Culture.

Since after the sad colonial experiences, there has been a fairly considerable improvement in the people's attitude to our indigenous theatre. In the sixties, particularly with the 1960 independence and its attendant new wave of national consciousness, one which permeated aspects of Nigerian cultural life, frantic moves were made "to evolve an authentically Nigerian theatre to express a new national consciousness" (cf. Ogunbiyi, 1981:28). The 1960 Masks "by Wole Soyinka was a practical example of this move. In the Eastern part of the country, this same year, there was another amateur theatre group, John Ekwere and his *Ogui Players* which was revived and later called Eastern Nigeria

Theatre Group". At the University of Ibadan, there were serious dramatic activities by different drama groups constituted by both students and teachers.

Works on traditional Igbo drama were also not neglected. There was an attempt to provide a meeting point between the university trained artists and the traditional artists. This was demonstrated by Meki Nzewi who among others at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, after the civil war, carried out extensive research works on traditional theatre by working in collaboration with traditional artist in the field.

The dance-drama which he staged were attempts to incorporate, in as less rigid a way as possible, traditional materials into more structured situation for urban audience. (Cf. Ogunbiyi 1981:36). His *The Lost Finger* was subtitled "Folk Mythological Opera-drama" while his *The Third Coming* was subtitled "A Revue-dance-music".

At the University of Lagos, during the same period, Nnabuenyi Ugonna carried out a similar research on *Mmonwu* of the Central Igbo. All this was in attempt to develop and project the image of our traditional drama.

The post civil-war period also witnessed the emergence of prolific works on modern Igbo drama by different crop of playwrights. Some of them include: Maduekwe's *Otu Mkpisiaka*, Chukwuezi's *Udo Ka Mma*, *Aku Fechara* . . . , *Akwa Nwa*; Onyekwonwu's *Nwata Rie Awọ*, *Eriri Mara Ngwugwu*, *Okunzu Daa Ibube*, *Ojaadili* by Odunke Artists, among others. But these works of drama are those fashioned after the Western dramatic canon.

Apart from the works mentioned above, other research works have been carried out with theories on different aspects of Igbo traditional drama, each coming out with theories on how to improve, develop and modernise our traditional drama. But all those theories have remained only conjectural. Igbo traditional drama which is typified by *mmonwu* is still wallowing in atavism, still utilising the paraphernalia of the past. Its enactment has hitherto been localised and is yet to apply, for its display, the sophisticated facilities that are characteristic of the modern age theatre.

The Need to Modernise Igbo Traditional Drama

We must continue, with more vigour, the struggle for liberation from the

of Western culture on us, and the campaign for cultural revival. We must revolutionalise our indigenous theatre, upgrade it to a modern standard - a standard where it can compete favourably with, if not outwit, those of other dramas that have basis on Western dramatic tradition, and finally project it to the outside world. This will not only make it attractive spectacle but also a revenue-accruing source for the government.

Mmonwu which typifies the Igbo dramatic tradition will be the focal point of this modernising exercise. It needs to be developed and modernised, for without this, it may "stagnate and then degenerate into mere mask play . . . and may become more and more cultish and less and less theatrical, and in the end may die a natural death through lack of general support and patronage" (cf. Ugonna, 1984:196-7).

Some scholars of Igbo language and culture, prominent among whom is Ugonna, have stressed the need to modernise our *mmonwu* theatre so that it could not only be attractive but also satisfy the taste of the modern theatre-goers.

In his suggestion towards the realisation of this modernisation, Ugonna (1984:197) recommended:

... its obom and ekwuru complex would be expanded and modernised to form a type of integrated structure akin to a modern auditorium into which spectators would be admitted after they might have purchased entry tickets. Such an integrated mmonwu theatre would be designed in such a way that seating facilities are provided and the concept of ekwuru as the muzzle of the land of the dead could be maintained. A section, a kind of inner stage, could be either separated from the rest of the theatre either by a wall or a curtain and could be regarded as a kind of holy of holies into which only the masked figures and those who know them intimately may enter. From that section of the theatre, the mmonwu characters after appropriate stage direction would rise to perform on the stage.

This is a well-articulated and viable suggestion which, we hope, if translated into action (for it is only conjectural at the moment) would help us realise our

noble aspiration, namely, building a paradigmatic traditional theatre in Nigeria.

Ugonna's recommendation is remarkable for one thing: while he has suggested a sophisticated structure of *mmonwu* theatre, he has aptly recognised the unique nature of *mmonwu* drama and the need to reflect this in the design thereby removing the fear of possible adulteration with such imposition of modern sophistications. This brilliant idea is expressed in such thoughts as "the concept of *ekwuru* as the muzzle of the land of the dead could be maintained" in designing the modern *mmonwu* theatre. Ugonna's line of reasoning is corroborated by Osasie Enekwe (1987:143-4) when he observed that

the mask theatre will degenerate when it is abraded of its mystic and supernatural aura . . . , a mask without supernatural aura generates little dramatic interest.

These two scholars have touched on some of the concepts that make Igbo traditional drama markedly different from the straight drama of Western orientation.

Steps that would be taken to Modernise Igbo Traditional Drama

We would, in a move to modernise the traditional theatre, first of all adopt

Ugonna's recommendation which has been quoted above, and make fund available for immediate construction of the theatre which will be named **MMONWU THEATRE**. The theatre will be located in the capital cities of Enugu, Anambra, Imo and Abia states including Abuja.

At the local government levels, the existing community squares (amaukwu, amaocha or iro) will be expanded and provided with permanent structures and all the modern facilities they need to operate. We shall here suggest a design that is a bit different from Ugonna's. In the theatre, seating as well as standing arrangement will be made. The circular nature of the obom which heightens audience-participation will be maintained but the modification will be to arrange it in such a way that some spectators will sit while others stand behind them. A special entrance post will be provided through which the mmonwu characters would appear on the stage and disappear at the end of their performance. This entrance will resemble that through which the players enter and leave the football pitch at the National Stadium, Surulere, Lagos. The entrance will be on the floor on one side of the ogbo (stage) with in-built steps which terminate into a room outside the obom (theatre). The room is to be demarcated from the spectators by a high wall so that the spectators in the obom cannot discern what goes on inside the room. The essence of this floor-entrance is to depict the myth that mmonwu emerges from the ground through onuagbisi (ant's hole). The room which is located outside but links the obom through the floor-entrance shall serve as the ekwuru (mmonwu house). Then around the obom at their different locations in the states, shops, stalls, kiosks, restaurants, etc, will be built and different items like drinks, and related items sold in them. It will serve the interest of the theatre consumers who might need any of those items. It will also make the theatre very lively and attractive to the members of the public at any time of the day. When such comfort is provided, the rural dwellers will not only see it as a source of theatrical entertainment but also a recreational spot where they can go and spend their leisure after the day's toil.

The construction of this modernised mmonwu theatre cannot alone satisfy the aesthetic need of the spectators as it does not give the full picture of mmonwu drama. Another dimension of the spectacle is the mmonwu characters themselves. The spectators' appreciation of the drama is also heightened by the aesthetic satisfaction the characters can give. To be more aesthetically satisfying therefore, highly refined mmonwu costumes will be designed to replace the local stuff which is vulnerable to wear and tear. The characters will be highly beautified before they appear for any performance.

The continuity of any dramatic tradition depends, to a great deal, on the kind of foundation on which it is established. If it is founded on a very sound footing, its survival is not only guaranteed for the present but also for the future.

J.R. Brown (1968:97) seems to be thinking along this line when he was talking about the prospect of future theatre in England. He stressed that its continuity and sustenance would depend on the embarkation of certain measures some of which include:

A few acting schools and university department of drama should be equipped and financed to offer a year's work to their graduates in theatre run for the purpose and for service of the public. . . . the study of acting, production, design equipment and administration needs a specialised research institute, with its own journal and series of publication. Its practical work would need a small simple theatre, with a permanent company freed from the task of serving the general public. Funds would also be needed to initiate theatrical production in different social environment.

These steps, which we consider very thoughtful, can serve our purpose if applied in our own particular situation. We need to build a strong and virile traditional theatre that will satisfy both the present and the future theatrical need of the people of Nigeria. The cultural centre in each of the state's Ministry of Culture will be upgraded to the status of a research institute where elaborate research works on Igbo traditional dramatic art will be carried out. Results of their findings will be periodically published. The research works will aim at discovering new organisation and production techniques to make the theatre boom. To supplement the effort of the institute will be the states universities centres for cultural studies. Here, too, each centre will be equipped and financed to enable it carry out further research activities, and also serve as training ground for both the graduates of indigenous theatre art - and their active participation in the training will be a pre-requisite or compulsory course for the award of certificate(s) - and graduates of other

be interested. Those people "who know the mmonwu" and have wealth of experience in the art will be employed to offer the necessary practical training to the younger generation. They will in turn learn new technique that will help them to improve upon what they already know.

Workshops will be organised on regular basis for traditional theatre practitioners from different areas of Igboland and parts of Nigeria. Here, they will exchange ideas and suggest new avenues that will be exploited to improve the theatre. This workshop will be open to teachers and students from both higher institutions and secondary schools and of course, any member of the public that might be interested. Again, any recommendation made in such a workshop will be translated into action as far as it can improve the theatre situation.

At each cultural centre, a management will be set up to shoulder the responsibility for organising and sending out of touring companies to other states of the country. The touring company will be constituted by the mmonwu actors, the okuigba (male chorus), the mmariogo (female chorus) and their handlers. This task requires the availability of adequate transport facilities. Each Ministry of Culture shall make money available for the purchase of some vehicles.

Special video-tape recording will be made of mmonwu dramatic displays. In it dancing, chanting, acrobatic displaying, story-telling, spell-binding, etc, will be featured. It will be made to be highly entertaining and thrilling. The cassettes will be advertised on television and sold to the members of the public both within and outside the country. Our television houses will be encouraged to replace some of their late night foreign movies with well-recorded traditional drama. This step will help to reduce the people's preference for foreign drama, and arouse in them the desire to consume our traditional drama.

All secondary schools in the states shall be made to incorporate mmonwu display in their co-curricula activities. Inter-school drama competitions will be encouraged among the schools and any school that emerges a winner will receive the commissioner's prize.

Theatre is not complete without the audience - the people who go to watch the drama. Therefore, if we modernise our traditional drama on the one hand, we must modernise the people on the other hand. Unless this is done, we may

we must modernise the people on the other hand. Unless this is done, we may discover that we have just dissipated our efforts and resources trying to modernise our theatre. There can still be found today among our people the same attitude that militated against the growth of our indigenous theatre during the colonial period.

It is disturbing to note the growing tendency of our people to appreciate what is not ours. That which is foreign is revered, given prominence and ranked higher than ours. Some people have totally surrendered to Western seductions. It can be found the category of people who have been brainwashed through indoctrination of imported religions; who, in their colonial mentality, have continued to associate every cultural practice with 'ignorance' and idol worship. They do everything within their reach to sponsor and project foreign culture at the expense of theirs.

Such people need re-orientation. To reiterate Nwoko's (1981:475) advice, the new African must be saved from his (foreigner's) cultural ordeal while realising that art has become Africa's pride in the world today so we should not allow it to stagnate and lose its potency. We must fight relentlessly to shatter all negative attitudes that threaten the fabrics of our culture. Anything that threatens our culture threatens our very existence and therefore, must be uprooted.

To this end, a sort of cultural awareness campaign would be embarked upon to re-awaken the people's cultural consciousness. This campaign will be carried to every nook and cranny of the states. It will always be accompanied by mmonwu drama to thrill the people and draw their attention.

Conclusion

We have in this paper briefly examined the state of Igbo traditional drama with the view to finding ways and means of modernising it. We started by identifying its origin and sources. We looked at the theatre situation in the pre-independence days, discussing in particular, the near death blow it suffered from both the hands of those Africans (the Igbo inclusive) who surrendered themselves to Western religious and educational seductions, and their foreign

mentors. We also examined the state of our traditional theatre in the post-independence era and observed that even though some substantial research works, aimed at developing it, had been carried out by some scholars of Igbo literature, such research works had come out with only clarion calls and postulated theories towards modernising our traditional drama but no concrete attempt has been made to translate them into action. Hence, the display of our traditional drama is still rapt in traditionalism today.

Then, finally, we came to the major concern of this paper, namely, the steps we would take to modernise traditional Igbo drama. We have discussed the various steps to be taken the most important of which is the immediate construction of Mmonwu Theatre in the states capital cities, their local government levels and Abuja. It is pertinent to add here that the use of the theatre would not be restricted to mmonwu alone. All other forms of traditional drama, according to the people's need would be staged in them. Indeed, "such a theatre", as Ogunbiyi (1981:43) has aptly suggested, "must build on the history of our peoples songs, their drama, dances, drumming, masquerades, puppetry, etc, used in resistance against several forms of oppressions in the past, political, traditional and economic". We also stressed the need to modernise the people's attitude towards our traditional drama to ensure greater appreciation of it.

We hope that when these steps are fully implemented, we would be matching towards a booming traditional theatre era not only in Igboland but in Nigeria as a whole.

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