TRANSCENDING THE TRAJECTORY OF CYCLICAL IMPASSE: IN SEARCH OF A NEW BEGINNING IN ESIABA IROBI'S *NWOKEDI*

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Abstract

Arguably, Nigeria's transition from the military regime to the democratic rule in 1999 only marginally altered its political context dramatically. Nevertheless, corruption and mismanagement of her economic potential portentously remain her abiding nightmare. Far from undermining and obscuring the debilitating effect of this negative trend, contemporary Nigerian novelists, poets and playwrights have cultivated and sustained in their literary works, an articulation of a plausible political panacea that demands a complete overhaul of the menace of corruption in the country. This concern arises from the need by the writers, to prevent the masses from reacting against a monumental corruption,that could become a catalyst for political implosion.

The desirability of Nigeria's radical political change is posited by Irobi's dramatic fermentation of the Igbo mythopoesis and modern theatre appurtenances. This is an experimentation underlined in *Nwokedi*, a play which legitimizes the inauguration of a violent cleansing of the Nigeria's rotten political system, through a traditional ritualistic process. This could be taken as a positive model for the appropriation of the African tradition as an alternative political approach, for initiating a radical social change in postcolonial Africa. This paper intends to highlight how Irobi's play has engaged the Igbo ritual festival, *Ekpe* as a weapon, for the campaign for a new beginning, which will rid Nigeria of its pervasive corruption and decadence.

Key words:

Trajectory of cyclical impasse, search, transcending, violent cleansing, new beginning, Esiaba Irobi, *Nwokedi*.

Introduction

Although, Esiaba Irobi is neither a political scientist nor a historian, but a third generation Nigerian playwright whose fascination with the forces making for social change has been obsessively engaged in his dramaturgy, to search for the much needed clue to the recurrent Nigeria's political depredation. His play, *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

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Nwokedi over the modern theatre is a retrospective reflection of the cultural nuances of his Ngwa-Igbo cultural background, ‘‘ 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, usually the village idiot or the stranded and unwary stranger...’’(Diala,2005:93).

Irobi’s debt to his Ngwa-Igbo background is underscored in the *Nwokedi*’s dedication to ‘‘ all the members of the Umuakwu Progressive Union/who not only initiated me into the metaphysics/and ecstasies of the *EKPE* festival,/but have also stubbornly sustained a dying Igbo tradition’’ (*Nwokedi,* iii). Irobi’s introspection into his Ngwa-Igbo festival tradition and interpreted into a dramaturgy of modern drama has been argued by Kwame Gyekye, ‘‘the concept of modernity may give the impression that modernity represents a break with tradition and is thus irreconcilable with it; such an impression would clearly be false. For one thing, every society in the modern world has many traditional elements inherited and accepted from previous, that is ‘‘premodern’’, generations; for another, if in modern times we can talk sensibly about ‘‘our tradition of so-and-so’’, then traditions are not irreconcilable with modernity. Thus, the modernity of tradition would be an intelligible concept, just as the tradition of modernity-in as much as that modern culture itself has become a tradition’’(Gyekye,1997: 271). Irobi manipulates the ritualistic proclivity of the *Ekpe* cleansing festival to proffer a solution to the Nigeria’s fundamental problem-corruption. The plot of the play is grounded in the tone of despondency with the failure of Nigerian political class to effect a turn-around of its political fortune.

The necessity of ritual in African festival has been explicated by Oyin Ogunba ‘‘ 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’’

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(Ogunba, 2002:25-26). Cleansing festival in most African traditional communities is usually suffused with religious rituals, myth, symbols and metaphysical procession which are accompanied by the incantatory verbal formulae.

Irobi's *Nwokedi* portrays a Nigerian society marred in a sinking corruption, totally conditioned to despair, in which the future of its youths is already forfeit and their birthright bartered among the gluttonous politicians like Nwokedi Snr and Arikpo. Nigeria is typified in the play as a country that devours its young before they get matured, and the few that get nurtured into adulthood are permanently consigned to a life of despair, despondency and irrelevancy. This is a sharp contrast to the notion of home which the French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1958), enthuses in his *The Poetics of Space*. According to Bachelard, home represents an anchor that props both men and women, without which their lives become fragmented. However, the home one encounters in *Nwokedi* through Irobi's dramatic lens, is a prostate, politically beleaguered Nigeria that could not offer any hope for its teeming youths.

Appropriating the Traditional Elements for Societal Transformation

If the tone of *Nwokedi*'s experimental dramaturgy betrayed the assurance of salvaging Nigeria from the embarrassing political doldrums, Irobi's motive in the play is viscerally driven by the patriotic zeal which beckons the revaluation of the Nigeria's past and repositioning it to conquer its destructive social depravity. Just like Wole Soyinka searches for African forms to combine with the traditions of dialogue drama in *The Strong Breed*, 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, 2005: 87).

The *Ekpe* festival as harnessed in *Nwokedi*, is radically reshaped and revised to incorporate the use of human sacrifice rather than goat, for the

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annual village cleansing ceremony. Reminiscent of Soyinka's use of a stranger, Emman as the carrier of the evils of Jaguna's village in *The Strong Breed*, Irobi uses Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo as human sacrifices in *Nwokedi* to underline 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. The inherent purifying signification of *Ekpe* embedded in *Nwokedi* has been explained in the words of Gbemisola Adeoti, ''Irobi's framework of purifying the democratic space in *Nwokedi* 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 cutlasses are theatrical evocation of Ekpe's milieu of atonement and purification. The transitional moment between the Old and New Year offered by December 31 is quite apt, considering the regenerative mission of the festival that provides the spatio-temporal context of the play. The two Senators (**SIN***ators)* become the ''carrier'' through which the polity's defilement is symbolically purged'' (Adeoti,2003: 93).

Irobi's appropriation of *Ekpe* festival for the radical cleansing of Nigeria can be evaluated in the words of Micheal Etherton, who opines that ''the development of theatre as literature is conscious and deliberate, and is the result of the clear goal of raising the standard of drama, that is, of making it capable of conveying insights and perceptions which we associate with all great literature. Initially, two methods can be discerned for creating literary dramatic work. The first is a transposition of an enduring-and therefore successful-play-text from another culture, another literary tradition, into the specifics of the African milieu... The other method is to re-create on the stage the creation myths of African cultures, including their moralities, allegories, and folk stories, and to render arcane and dying rituals in a renovated popular story form acted out on stage'' (Etherton,1979:61). Desire for change in *Nwokedi* is not primarily entrenched in the title of the play, but rather in the appropriation of the radical traditional elements inherent in the signification of *Ekpe* festival, which Irobi turns into a dramatic discourse to advocate for a radical social change in contemporary Nigeria.

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Contestation of Power Between the Older and Younger Nigerian Politicians in *Nwokedi*

Nwokedi is an ambitious play which presents a Nigerian society that is undermined by the effect of corruption foisted upon it, by the older generation Nigerian politicians. Nigeria is portrayed as a country in disarray where power is contested between the older generation politicians and the younger, radical politicians, who are already disenchanted with the former's illogical hypocritical cant. This contestation is underlined in Mrs. Nwokedi's mimicry of Nwokedi's words:

Mrs. Nwokedi: (*with passion*)

*My generation, we are the only possible alternatives. We are the last human frontiers to the marauding monsters and bleating beasts devouring our lives daily. We are tomorrow. In our hands are the bastons of our destiny. In our arms are the banners of a rumpled future. Between our fingers burn the tapers and the flames of a new life. In our eyes gleam the light of dawn. We are tomorrow and tomorrow is us...(*11-12)

The younger generation referred to in the speech, is symbolised by Nwokedi and other members of the *Ekumeku* club, who are forced by the Nigerian political circumstance to stand apart from the political despondency, in order to initiate a code of moral values which will allow them to cleanse Nigeria of its despicable rot. Unarguably, the play has been inspired by the Nigeria's political failure, in which corruption and prebendalism hold sway.

Within the context of the contestation of hegemony between the younger generation and older generation, is the relevance of 'political power', which Irobi significantly employs in *Nwokedi*'s dramaturgy to construct the binary counterpoints of: poverty/prosperity, opportunity/disadvantage concepts, as they play-out in contemporary Nigeria. The play opens with violence and closes with violence, and in between is a palpable tension orchestrated by the desecration of tradition and societal values by the Nigerian corrupt politicians. Horror of violence remarkably underscores the opening of the play, in the dialogue between Mrs. Nwokedi and Senator Arikpo:

Mrs. Nwokedi: (*frozen*) *In-law! What happened*?

Arikpo: *Everything*.

Mrs. Nwokedi: *What do you mean by everything*?

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Arikpo: (*sinking into a chair*) *In-law, everything has happened to me.*

[*Mrs. Nwokedi gazes at him, dazed and cofused. Then, recovering from the shock, she rushes into the inner room and returns with a bowl of water, iodine, some cotton wool and bandages. As she cleans the wounds.] ...*

Mrs. Nwokedi: *Then, what happened*?...

Arikpo: *My own people, (bitterly) They have burnt my car and burnt my life. They have butchered me like a sacrificial animal. They have torn my flesh limb from limb. What you are looking at is a pillar of ashes.*

The conflict in the passage can be streamlined at the dramatic level, into the tension between the younger and older generations in the play. In assessing this generational tension, we need to understand the philosophy behind this tension, especially, as it concerns political mercantilism in the contemporary Nigeria. Irobi in *Nwokedi* debunks the older generation politicians' claim to wisdom, and supports a generational power shift which favours the younger generation Nigerian politicians. The older generation politicians are portrayed as vicious, selfish and diabolical. While Arikpo is depicted as a diabolical politician who used his wife and children for rituals in his quest to acquire political power, his perfidious characteristic dramatizes the bizarre craze for power in the play. Nwokedi Snr. is portrayed as deceitful and corrupt.

The younger politicians like Nwokedi, Ozoemena and other members of the Ekumeku may never have contributed to the economic growth of the nation, and they may also be political neophytes; but they remain the last bastion of hope for Nigeria's liberation. Since search for the desperate transformation remain largely elusive and is beset with insincerity on the part of the spent, older generation politicians. Even though, both the older and younger politicians are products of similar Nigerian political trajectory, their goals are strategically quite different. Each marks out a different approach to governance: maintaining and sustaining the status quo of corruption, versus regenerating and recuperating societal values from deprivation. And where the older generation politicians typically employ deceit to circumvent electoral process, the younger generation politicians tend to approach politicking through logic and sensibility. Although

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interaction between the two political groups is facilitated by the *Ekpe* cleansing festival, making politics the main focus of the play. For Irobi, 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.

The contestation for power between the two belligerent groups reaches its climax when the duo of Nwokedi Snr and Arikpo are used as the sacrificial animals for the *Ekpe* cleansing festival. The synthesis between what is depicted in communal procession and drama is most obvious in the final stage of the festival, where culture interpolated with politics is foregrounded in the ritualistic chants of songs:

> Chorus: *It is so*! [*Immediately, singing ''**Otaike anyi abia**,'' the three Ekumeku rush in with Arikpo, gagged and bound. They set him down in the centre where the goat had been and place a log under his head... Immediately Nwokedi Snr. rushes in screaming frenetically Nwokedi! Nwokedi! Nwokedi! He falls on Arikpo intent on untying the rope behind his back. Crouched in the position, his neck does not see the descent of the matchet! Black out! Some villagers dart orward to see the headless body of Nwokedi Snr. Immediately the knife descends again on Arikpo. Black out! The Ekumeku surges forward, hoists Nwokedi up singing- ''**Nwokedi onye ohuru ogbuo**''...]*
>
> Ufo-Bearer: (*lugubriously*) *A man never sees the lightning that strikes him down. The eye never sees what flies into it. The axe man has felled the tree we climbed to touch the sun.*
>
> Chorus: *Is this then what has happened to us*?
>
> Ufo- Bearer: *Hands stronger than a single hand have broken the stronger hand.*
>
> Fiery-blooded panthers, *desperate in pounce and paw have torn to pieces, the carcass of the tiger.*
>
> Chorus: *Is this then what has happened to us*?

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Ufo-Bearer: *An evil year has died with its ugly burden. An evil year has crawled past hunch-backed with grief and anguish. The hungry earth is gorged with blood.*
Chorus: *And blood is the rain that falls upon the land.*

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. For instance, the more often *Ekumeku* is chanted during the ritual, the more daring Nwokedi's action gains amplification. The grammar of purgation in the play is sacrosanctly located in the enactment of the rhetoric of violence in order to authenticate its validity. Irobi's penetrating observations on the ritualistic declamation of *Ekpe* helps to sufficiently facilitate the aesthetic distance, required for accentuating the complex web of *Nwokedi*. The Ekpe ritualistic procession has been deployed in the play to signal the anticipated revolutionary cleansing of contemporary Nigeria by its youths. Nevertheless, import of the political cleansing enacted through the *Ekpe* festival can only be realised through a rational comprehension which focuses on the ideas embedded in its action, rather than the histrionic decapitation of the duo political fugitives of Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo.

Conclusion

The paper has evaluated how Esiaba Irobi's play, *Nwokedi* has explicitly explored the values inherent in the *Ekpe* annual cleansing festival of the Ngwa-Igbo of South East Nigeria, to advocate for the overhauling of the depraved Nigerian political system, and to advocate for a social rebirth. Rather than limiting the explication of Nigeria's deplorable political environment through theatre, Irobi's characterization of Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. as prebendal, vicious and diabolical, is designed to reveal the despicability of the contemporary Nigerian political class, which reflects the precariousness of Nigeria's political ambience that create them.

While the older generation Nigerian politicians like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr. are depicted as corrupt, deceitful and derelict, the younger generation politicians like Nwokedi, Ozoemena and other members of the Ekumeku youth club are portrayed as chaste, determined and daring. The political dimension of the play is accentuated in the decapitation of both

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Nwokedi Snr. and Arikpo by Nwokedi during the *Ekpe* ritual procession. This action in *Nwokedi* symbolises the futuristic liberation of Nigeria by its youths, through a revolutionary process that will hold its corrupt past and present leaders accountable for their evil deeds.

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