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# Theorizing the Place of Evil within Sam Ukala's Radical Theatre: A Study of Three Plays

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**Abstract**

The radical dimension of Sam Ukala's plays appears to have been captured by a good number of critics, whether this radicality is located in his experimentation with a new theatre soused in the folktale tradition, or conceptualised as the drive for a new society. There is, however, a major gap in all these articulations, and that is the absence of a detailed theorization of the place of evil within Ukala's radical theatre. Consequently, what we intend to prove here is that Sam Ukala's plays are not only representations of evil but also representations of the possibility of exorcising evil, that is, the possibility of conquering evil. We argue that it is through this portrayal of the ability of the human agent (typified sometimes as the suffering masses) to overcome evil that Sam Ukala's plays can be said to be radical or have what Ogu-Raphael has identified as a 'revolutionary tendency' (164). The perspectives of evil in this essay will be drawn mainly from the works of such thinkers as Paul Ricoeur, St Augustine, and Friedrich Nietzsche, yet not excluding occasional insights from thinkers like Immanuel Kant, Richard B. Sewall, and so on. Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland*, *Break a Boil* and *Odour of Justice* are the plays to be examined in this essay.

## Introduction: The Criticisms of Sam Ukala's Plays and the 'Evil' Alternative

Critical perceptions of Sam Ukala's plays seem to have tilted mainly towards two directions: there is the inclination towards 'folkism', with the investigation of his plays as exemplars of the folkist dramatic theory that Ezechi Onyerionwu considers 'Sam Ukala's most remarkable and enduring contribution to literary/dramatic scholarship' (99). For instance, we find this critical thread running across '"Folkism" and the Search for a Relevant Nigerian Literary Theatre: Sam Ukala's*The Placenta of Death* and

*Akpakaland*as Paradigms' by IfeanyiUgwu and Ikechukwu Aloysius Orjinta, Bonny Ibhawoh's 'Literature as History: Oral Historical Traditions in Sam Ukala's*The Slave Wife'*, Chibueze Prince Orie's 'Destiny and the Man: Sam Ukala's Folkist Mythological Ritualism in *The Slave Wife*', Austin E. Anigala's 'The Story-teller in Sam Ukala's Dramaturgy', and so on. There is also the essentially Marxist sociological direction, in its various conceptualisations as 'social reformation' (Epochi-Olise 145), 'revolutionary tendency', 'socio-political revolution', 'social revolution' (Ogu-Raphael 164-166), and so on. In addition to these two major directions that the criticisms of Ukala's plays have taken, there have been other interesting readings which reveal the literary richness of Ukala's plays, their ability to generate a variety of interpretations. There has not been, in spite of this multiplicity of readings, a detailed study of the immanence of evil within Ukala's radical theatre or within what he calls 'politics of aesthetic' (396). The closest to the project of this essay is Alex Asigbo's 'Skeleton in their Cupboards: Moral and Ethical Issues in Selected Plays of Sam Ukala', which merely brushes against one of the peripheral margins of our discourse on evil here. In fact, the senses of evil in this essay are much more sophisticated than what we encounter in Asigbo's work as 'moral and ethical questions' in the plays of Sam Ukala (233). In some essays still, we may find occasional, accidental descriptions of the phenomena we shall characterise in this essay as evil, but the problem is that these phenomena are not conceptualised as such, a lacuna that will be filled up in this study.

Although evil is a philosophical, mythical and theological issue, the reflection here would be essentially philosophical and mythical, touching also on the generic use that has been made of evil as a philosophical way of understanding human suffering in tragedy. Of course some people may wonder why we have elected to discuss a theological cum philosophical issue in reference to dramatic texts. The answer to this is found in Paul Corey's *Evil in Modem Theatre: Eschatology, Expediency, and the Tragic Vision.* Corey's words need no modification:

> Evil, before it is a theoretical category or a theological problem, is an experience. Due to the nature of live performance, theatre can bring the experience of evil vividly to life, for what we see on stage are living human beings creating the illusion of suffering and malice. However, when mounting or watching a live performance, it is not the experience of evil itself we endure; it is, rather, a representation of it. (14-15)

Thus by taking up the question of evil in Sam Ukala's plays, our interest is not necessarily on what has become famous as 'the problem of evil' in philosophical and theological discourses; this is not a theodicy or an attempt, in the Miltonic parlance, to justify the ways of God to men. The work argues rather that Sam Ukala's plays disseminate a revolutionary consciousness insofar as they portray evil as conquerable. It is then apparent the way in which this philosophical reflection on Sam Ukala's plays enters the realm of the sociological; it is perhaps also apparent what is meant by 'the place of evil within Sam Ukala's radical theatre' as it has been used in this work. In other words, we intend to integrate a mythologizing and philosophizing of evil into a sociological reflection on three of Sam Ukala's plays – *Akpakaland*, *Break a Boil* and *Odour of Justice.*

A critical project of this kind should pose the question, 'what is evil?' The answer to this question is not easy to formulate but it is still an important question, important because it challenges one to define the conceptual boundaries or scope of reference of one's term, given what Petruschka Schaafsma calls 'the ambiguous character of evil' (13). Perhaps even, the question here should not be 'what is evil?' but 'what is evil within the context of this essay' or 'in what ways should evil be apprehended in this reflection?' The question of what evil is will not be thoroughly answered in this introductory part of the essay; the examination of evil in this first part is merely aimed at giving the reader a working definition of evil. The contexts in which evil has been used in this essay will be better apprehended in the discussions '*Akpakaland*: From the Augustinian Privation, through the Nietzschean 'Imaginary Revenge' to a Final Overthrow of Evil', '*Break a Boil* and "the Magical Conception of Evil as Pollution"' and 'The "Sense of Ancient Evil" in *Odour of Just*ice'.

Paul Ricoeur adopts a brilliant approach to making sense of evil in its various colorations. Through his critical meditation, we are able to understand evil through very incisive symbolic expressions, through mythical thoughts. In his '"Original Sin": A Study of Meaning', Ricoeur distinguishes between the conception of the origin or ontology of evil within Gnosticism and the Augustinian view on the matter. Ricoeur writes that, 'evil for Gnosticism is an almost physical reality that infects man from outside. Evil is external. It is body, thing, and world' (272). This perception is in opposition to the one encountered in Saint Augustine in which evil is denied material existence but rather conceived as having 'no being, no nature, because it comes from us, because it is the work of freedom' (272). Thus for Augustine, evil comes about through the consequence of our freedom; there is nothing evil about

the world; man originates evil through the exercising of his freedom. However, there is a powerful wording of the Gnostic argument against this Augustinian position further down in Ricoeur's work, and this argument would later influence an aspect of Ricoeur's mythical formulation of the nature of evil in the cited work of his and other writings on the subject of evil. He writes:

> The cosmos, one might say, is satanized and hence provides the human experience of evil with the support of an absolute exteriority, an absolute inhumanity, an absolute materiality. Evil is the very worldliness of the world. Far from proceeding from human freedom toward the vanity of the world, evil proceeds from the powers of the world toward man. (273)

Furthermore, through his reading of Augustine, Ricoeur establishes the existence of two visions of evil. The first is the one we can easily abstract from Augustine's opposition against the Gnostic argument, which Ricoeur calls *the ethical vision of evil.* In this vision, man is the actor and 'integrally responsible' (274). He contrasts this with a tragic vision of evil in which man is a victim of a 'God who himself suffers even though he is not cruel' (274). Of course, Augustine pushes the first vision farthest in his writings, according to Ricoeur. These distinctions are important for us in this essay because they enable us to apprehend the evil in *Break a Boil* as distinct from the one in *Odour of Justice*, insofar as Gidi wrestles against the evil which he inaugurated himself unlike Obiamaka who is 'the prey of an evil which takes hold of him' (Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols I' 289) or an 'evil already there' ('The Hermeneutics of Symbols I' 291).

We have already hinted at Ricoeur's formulation of evil in terms of symbols or what he calls primary symbols. Evil in Ricoeur is understood through symbolic expressions. In fact, he argues that 'the only access to the experience of evil itself is through symbolic expressions. Such expressions emerge from some literal meaning (such as stain or pollution, deviation or wandering in space, and weight or burden, bondage, slavery, fall)' 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols II' 315). These primary symbols shall be used to apprehend the instances of evil in the three texts under study. For instance, these images of evil, particularly the hermeneutics of evil as pollution, will purvey the critical lenses with which Sam Ukala's*Break a Boil* would be interrogated.

There is another way to understand evil: evil as privation, as lack, or absence. It is however not any lack or privation but the lack or privation of what is considered the good, the ideal. This reading of evil is Augustinian; it finds expression in his 'Enchiridion'. Augustine argues:

> What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good? In animal bodies, for instance, sickness and wounds are nothing but the privation of health. When a cure is effected, the evils which were present (i.e., the sickness and the wounds) do not retreat and go elsewhere. Rather, they simply do not exist anymore. For such evil is not a substance; the wound or the disease is a defect of the bodily substance which, as a substance, is good. Evil, then, is an accident, i.e., a privation of that good which is called health. Thus, whatever defects there are in a soul are privations of a natural good. When a cure takes place, they are not transferred elsewhere but, since they are no longer present in the state of health, they no longer exist at all. ('Enchiridion' 342-343)

In the above, we see the denying of ontological materiality to evil that we have already encountered in Ricoeur's reading of Augustine; but of course Augustine's theology is part of his exoneration of God from culpability as regards the origin of evil; thus for him, God did not create evil. Evil does not exist. What we call evil is the absence of good, the privation of good, and the origin of this is that 'primal lapse of the rational creature, that is, his first privation of the good' (354). Augustine is referring to the rebellion of the angels and the disobedience of mankind's first parents – Adam and Eve. 'In train of this [primal lapse]', Augustine argues, 'there crept in, even without his willing it, ignorance of the right things to do and also an appetite for noxious things' (354). What Augustine characterises as humanity's 'appetite for noxious things' resembles what Immanuel Kant calls 'radical evil', which refers to the human 'propensity to genuine evil' or inclination towards evil (53).

At any rate, the interest in Augustine in this work is not in terms of the strength of his theological exoneration of God. His work merely gives us insights into the nature of evil and it is these insights that will be selectively appropriated in illuminating evil in the selected works of Sam Ukala. For instance, we shall strip the term 'good' of the divine connotations that it appears to carry in the works of Augustine, like when he posits that 'the true good of every created thing is always to cleave fast to thee, lest, in turning away from thee, it lose the light it had received in being turned by thee, and

so relapse into a life like that of the dark abyss' ('Confessions' 300). This dislocation of 'good' from the divine allows us to determine 'the good' within the context of the plays; 'the good' becomes an empty space that can be filled out by whatever is encountered in any of the plays as a significant desideratum, as the important thing lacking in society. Thus what is lacking is 'the good'; its lack is 'the evil'.

## ***Akpakaland*: from the Augustinian Privation, through the Nietzschean 'Imaginary Revenge' to a Final Overthrow of Evil**

To discuss the structure of the polity in *Akpakaland* is synonymous with describing evil. It is to come face to face with the privations created by few powerful people to make sure the larger poor members of society are kept eternally manacled. Instead of freedom as should be seen in a truly democratic setting, there is the privation of that good; instead of equality, inequality is at the heart of human relations in the play; instead of justice, there is the perversion of it, often to suit the whims and caprices of the privileged class. In short, there is the privation of the good in Akpakaland; hence, there is evil.

The society of *Akpakaland* is a stratified one, in which there are different laws for different classes of people. There are two provinces into which the citizens of Akpakaland are classified: the province of the rich and the province of the poor. Akpaka, the dictator of Akpakaland, marries from these provinces to give a semblance of equity in the distribution of national resources. The word 'semblance' is very cardinal here in describing the reason behind Akpaka's marrying from both provinces. It resembles what is regarded as 'false consciousness' in Marxist criticism or, to use David Hawkes's term, 'a systematically false consciousness' (7). It is a way of giving injustice a false façade of rightness, of dressing inequality in the garb of equity; it is a way in fact of papering over the deep-seated marginalisation of the poor in Akpakaland. The society in *Akpakaland* is dystopic; its structure is far from what can be called 'the good', at least from our own reckoning of what constitutes an ideal society. Thus, the structure of society in *Akpalaland* is evil, since, in the Augustinian sense, it is the privation of the good.

One of the evils in Akpakaland is the privation of freedom. The citizens, particularly the poor, feel a great sense of being constrained. Speaking the truth as Aseki does lands one in prison. Akpaka does not hide his dictatorial powers when he tells Perede, '…Fulama does not make decrees for Akpakaland. I do' (54). Opinions that negate his will or question the

inequalities in the structure of society are not tolerated. Although Aseki is a minister in his government, Aseki is incarcerated for voicing the following disturbing truths: 'the president's wives are human beings in their own right...when one carves the head of the gorilla, one rubs one's own head. For, isn't the gorilla's head much like a man's?' The imprisonment of Aseki is an attempt to muffle any dissenting voice; it is an expression of the privation of the right to expressing one's discontents in a civilised society.

There is yet another evil which the imprisonment of Aseki throws up for reflection; it is the evil of inequality. Even if people from the province of the poor are elevated through marriage or ministerial appointment, they are not treated equally with the people from the province of the rich. From time to time, they seem to be given subtle or sometimes harsh reminders of their origin. For instance, Akpaka tells Aseki, 'we all know where you come from' (46). Some other times, they are shown their place by certain symbolic acts. These acts may be dismissed as not bearing any significance by an insentient observer. But when looked at closely, they reveal the underlying ideologies that inspired them. Take for instance the order in which Akpaka says his wives must appear as they come forward to strip for Akpakaland to see who amongst them has a tail: 'we shall proceed in this order: Iyebi, Unata, Seotu, Yeiye and, finally, Fulama' (45). Iyebi makes the following comment in reaction to this order:

> Why Iyebi? Ehn? Why Iyebi and Unata, the two wives from the province of the poor? Why must we begin instead of those who have been practising striptease for almost a week now? (Mimics.) Iyebi! Unata! Why not Fulama? She brought about this matter. Now you shield her under your wing and order Iyebi to show her bottom first. I'm not showing. If you were to share treasures, you would not give Iyebi first. Let Fulama go and show. (Squints and hisses.) (45)

Does Iyebi have a case here? Is she uncovering an underlying ideology? Or is she merely making a mountain out of a molehill? At the beginning of the play, when the Narrator was introducing the wives of the president for recognition, do we remember the order in which they appeared? Exactly the opposite of this order! Of course it was for recognition, and not for a thing as demeaning as stripping before the whole of Akpakaland. And we also remember that the wives from the province of the rich occupied the right

part of the stage while Unata and Iyebi went left. Even as wives of the presidents, they are not equal by virtue of their unequal pre-marital statuses.

It must be noted that Iyebi plays an important role in the play. In spite of being dubbed ‘spitting cobra’ by Akpaka because of her fiery temper and stubbornness, she is a very sentient character who in fact can be likened to a model of the revolutionary spirit that should engulf the masses of Akpakaland. In fact, throughout the play, nobody defies Akpaka as much as Iyebi. Even Fulama, despite her formidable parentage, gives in or dissolves into a whining child when threatened with force. Only Aseki nears Iyebi’s status as a purveyor of a certain consciousness, a consciousness which deflates the balloons of ‘false consciousness’ and thus a necessary precursor to revolution. When Akpaka orders the guards to denude Iyebi, we are told that she ‘poises for a fight’ (45). The sight of that would of course appear laughable, yet Iyebi represents the need to not submit oneself to evil without resistance, whether or not evil eventually triumphs. Actually, from the protest that greeted Akpaka’s order that Iyebi be denuded, it is likely that Iyebi’s resistance would have inspired some sort of revolt; it would have fast-forwarded the play to the revolt that eventually takes place at the end. Sometimes, it takes the symbolic resistance or act of one man, as was for instance the case with ‘the Arab Spring’, to spark off a major revolution in society. That probably would have happened in Akpakaland had Akpaka taken the bait of going on with denuding Iyebi. Umal, his prime minister, wades in with the admonition: ‘…we must, all the time, aim at what is proper. Guards to denude the president’s wife? Guards are the dregs of society. Let army officers do it’ (45). Although Aseki does not think anything is proper in the whole show of the president’s wives stripping in public, Umal chose his words carefully. He did not say ‘do what is proper’ but ‘aim at what is proper’, and the two are different. What Umal is talking about is what has been mentioned earlier as ‘semblance’ or ‘false consciousness’. Perhaps, if the army officers had been asked to denude Iyebi instead of the guards, the people would have felt a sense of rightness in the matter, that Iyebi had been treated with dignity befitting her status as the president’s wife; it would have elicited, to use the words of Louis Althusser, ‘such reactions as “That's obvious! That's right! That's true!”’ (172). That is what false consciousness does; it makes the suffering masses to unwittingly and freely endorse their own subservience and oppression. It makes them give assent to what Nietzsche calls their ‘many HIDDEN sufferings’ (*Beyond* 75). If Iyebi eventually agrees to strip, it is because of the secret divulged to her by Unata, and she thus sees her stripping as a weapon to defeat Fulama who they perceive as evil, in terms of a source of affliction (Sewall).

The statement recently made concerning the perception of Fulama as evil by Unata and Iyebi launches us into Friedrich Nietzsche's works, *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, the perception of what is 'good', 'bad' or 'evil' is determined by one's belonging to either of the two categories of morality – 'master morality' and 'slave morality'. On the one hand, the *master morality* is self-endorsing, and apprehends the masters or the noble or powerful class, its nobility and such other values that distinguish it from the slave or poor class, as 'good'. What it conceives as 'bad' is the slave or poor class, or suffering the fate of the slave. 'Good' and 'bad' are thus peculiar to the moral repertoire of the ruling or noble class. On the other hand, the *slave morality* is negating of 'everything that is "outside", "other" and "non-self"' (*Genealogy* 20). Nietzsche uses the term *ressentiment* to characterize this negation of the 'outside', this reaction of the slaves or the poor to their plight in relation to the noble class. Nietzsche writes:

> The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying 'yes' to itself, slave morality says 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self': and *this* no is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance – this *essential* orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself – is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, - its action is basically a reaction. (*Genealogy* 20)

What Nietzsche calls the 'reversal of the evaluating glance' or what is encountered in Phillip Cole's *The Myth of Evil* as 'a radical transvaluation of values' (68) is actually the 'imaginary revenge' of the slaves or the dominated class. The *slave morality* is the morality of 'good' and 'evil,' unlike the good/bad morality of the nobility. Who is the evil man of *slave morality*? Nietzsche answers: 'precisely the 'good' person of the other morality, the noble, powerful, dominating one, but re-touched, re-interpreted and

reviewed through the poisonous eyes of *ressentiment'* (*Genealogy* 22). Claudia Card, in her reading of Nietzsche, captures the position from which we perceive evil in Ukala's *Akpakaland*. For Card, one of the insights which Nietzsche's work gives is 'that judgment of evil comes, basically, from a victim's perspective' (cited in Cole 73). Following Card, evil for us in this text is based on the perception of the victims of oppression in the play – Iyebi, Unata, Aseki, Idemudia and the masses.
Furthermore, Nietzsche raises certain other important points concerning slave morality and master morality in his *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche argues that 'the belief and prejudice in favour of ancestors and unfavourable to newcomers…[is] typical in the morality of the powerful' (*Beyond* 257) and one of its underlying principles is 'that one may act towards beings of a lower rank, towards all that is foreign, just as seems good to one, or "as the heart desires,"' (*Beyond* 258). It would appear that this is the morality, the master morality, from which Umal draws when he pleads for the commuting of Fulama's sentence to three months house arrest 'in view of Fulama's parentage' (54). It would be 'bad', as it seems to Umal, for Fulama to suffer as if she were a commoner. Of course, if it were Iyebi or Unata, they would have been executed, since their being the president's wives does not delete their ancestry, the status into which they were born. They are in a sense regarded as 'newcomers',to use Nietzsche's term.

The masses in *Akpakaland* transcend Nietzsche's 'imaginary revenge'. They unanimously revolt. Aseki and Iyebi as has been noted helped in planting this consciousness of revolution. As Aseki is being forced out to prison, he says: 'ours is a nation without, without treasury, without progress. We do nothing about that. Instead, we are zealous to see the bottoms of women' (47). He is actually pointing out to the masses the many 'lacks' or 'privations' in their society, the many evils in short; and he chides them for not acting, for being excited about seeing the nakedness of women, a thing that is irrelevant to salvaging their situation. In places where there is so much hardship and oppression, the ruling class sometimes invents ways of distracting the suffering masses from the real issues plaguing them. As in *Akpakaland*, such a private matter as one of the president's wives having a tail is treated as a matter of national importance. This act is supposed to serve the ideological purposes of distraction, of hiding sufferings, of giving the masses a sense of 'importance' that is in fact ephemeral. But this is where Akpaka and many of his ministers misfire. If the play were to be read as Akpaka's tragedy, this is the point of his hamartia, his missing the mark. The 'strip show' culminates in the perversion of justice in the face of Fulama's culpability, the final evil that

breaks the people's back. They revolt, killing Fulama, Ogunpa, Iya Fulama, Umal, Seotu, Yeiye, Guards and Akpaka, in that order.

The people killed in the Nietzschean sense of *slave morality* are evil. They represent what the people know as evil. To use Richard B. Sewall's words, the people killed represent 'the forces…that make for [the common] man's destruction, all that afflicts, mystifies, and bears him down, all that he knows as evil' (47). Thus, whatever the commoners perceive as bearing them down, as the 'real enslaving power. The symbol of captivity' (Ricoeur, 'Symbols I' 292), as undermining their humanity and aspirations, as afflicting them, is evil and it is this evil that they have overthrown or displaced by killing Akpaka and his acolytes.

**_Break a Boil_ and 'the Magical Conception of Evil as Pollution'**

One of the images or primary symbols that Paul Ricoeur identifies with evil is the one of evil as stain or 'the magical conception of evil as pollution' ('Symbols I' 289). Reflecting on *Break a Boil* through this primary symbol actually launches our meditation into a metaphysical terrain, replete with great insights into the contagious nature of human evil. Although the dominant vision of evil in *Break a Boil* is that of pollution, there are other strands which are interconnected in the weave-work of evil in the text. For instance, Gidi is said to have inflicted madness on Uwa in order to usurp the latter's position. Nkanka confirms this when he tells the audience that 'it was the Oba himself who secretly hit his elder brother first. And he thinks the man doesn't know' (66). This had happened before the time of the play, and explains why Gidi is the King and not his elder brother, Uwa. That is the evil of privation, the privation of justice, for the throne is by tradition Uwa's entitlement. It is also the evil of 'deviation', 'transgression' or 'crooked path' (Ricoeur 'Symbols I' 289), for it is a violation of the unwritten moral code of brotherhood, a wandering away from a communally sanctioned sense of rightness.This act of Gidi was the first stain, the first evil. There is a sense in which that first evil could be said to have proliferated into other evils in the play.

Another evil is the snatching of Uki from the king of Ugbon, a thing from which his elders dissociate themselves. Taking someone else's wife is, by communal wisdom and tradition, evil. This transgression adds a diabolical strand to the evil already there. Evil proliferates, spreads, like the proverbial finger that contacts oil and spreads it across to other fingers. From that first evil by Gidi emanate other dimensions of evil that eventually consume the traditional royal house of Gidi. Osahon captures this when he says:

> But we have seen that blood, like flood, picks up rubbish as it flows downhill. The first Gidis did not inflict madness on their brothers in other to snatch their throne. They did not steal wives from the market place. A king dies when evil begets evil, endlessly, in his court. A king dies when he becomes a bad example. (115)

Osahon makes this statement while he was endorsing the choice of the stranger, Eririnma, as the next king of Gidiland. For him, the royal house has been polluted. In fact, there is a strong sense of the proliferation of evil in the play. Even at the end, during the coronation of Eririnma, when Osahon fails to lift and drop the crown for the final time because of the interruption caused by Gidi's entrance, Nneka plays up that image of evil proliferation or pollution again. She cries: 'oh cursed Gidi you have passed by again and spread evil everywhere' (116). But Eketu has to immediately allay her fears: 'Don't worry. There's no pollution without a cleanser' (116).

*Break a Boil* is littered with images of pollution, of fouling, of stench. Uki is for instance disgusted by the stench of Nkanka, who she claims stinks more than a seven-day old corpse (65). Nkanka is worried that the king would die 'of pollution', a reference to Uwa's sexual relationship with Uki, one of the king's wives, the very one Gidi stole from the king of Ugbon. Ison's apathy towards divulging to the king the illicit relationship between Uki and Uwa stems from her fear for her life and the fact that 'this will not be the first time justice has fouled the air in Gidiland' (81). Ison tells Uki during their quarrel: 'Have you no shame? Your mouth smells like a latrine. Once you open it, the air is fouled all around' (82). All these images strengthen the statement which the play appears to be making: that evil is synonymous with pollution; that it smells and spreads.

What we may call the master symbol or image in the play is the character Nkanka. Nkanka's status in the play as some sort of watchdog is apparent, but no critic has pointed out the symbolism of Nkanka's sores, together with the stench. Nkanka is the *monitor* of evil. The sense of monitor intended here combines the idea of the word as one who watches and the way the word is used in computer science, as a screen which displays the actions performed by a computer. Thus in addition to being a watcher, Nkanka displays the evils of the evil characters, not just literally but symbolically. He is not evil, but his body is the sight and site of evil. The sores that have corrupted his body and made it stink typify what evil does in a society. One might even say that Ukala wants us, through the disgusting condition of Nkanka, to have an idea of the nature, face and stench of evil. Nkanka's body becomes a symbolic

crystallization of, at one level, the privation of communal 'health' in Gidiland and, at another secondary extra-textual level, the privation of social 'health' in Nigeria, the evils that have continued to dot our body politic.

Furthermore, we can also understand the reason that Nkanka's presence so displeases Uki and Uwa through the symbol of monitor that we have already mentioned. First, it is because Nkanka watches their actions. Second, and at the symbolic level, it is because the stench and corruption of Nkanka's body reflect their own moral corruption. Nkanka becomes 'evil' to them; in this sense, I am pandering to another of Ricoeur's conception of evil: evil as 'weight', that is, as 'burden' or 'guilt' ('Symbols I' 289). We can actually say that, in the play, there is an 'Nkanka problem'. What do you do with the sores and stench of Nkanka? The various attitudes of Uki, Uwa and Gidi to this problem are reflective of the cosmetic or useless solutions we resort to when the evils we engender in society stare us in the face. For instance, Uki's wish is that Nkanka should remove himself from view; in her words, 'my wish is that you carry your tattered body out of public view' (65). For Uwa, 'he should be sent away to the leper settlement in the evil forest' (78). But they are missing the point, the very point that Nkanka raises when he says: 'but would it solve any problem if I merely took myself away from the public view? Am I in anybody's way? *Even if I took myself away from public view, the public would still suffer from my stench*' [our emphasis] (65). Uki and Uwa actually misfire when they conspire and kill Nkanka. Nkanka is not the evil but a monitor through which they are confronted with the face and stench of their own evil actions. Just as it is in computer science, you do not remove a corrupt file by destroying the monitor whose work is merely to display the corrupt file. Gidi's approach to the Nkanka problem is different from those of Uki and Uwa. He does not have any problem with having Nkanka around. He tells his brother, Uwa: 'I'm surprised that it's beginning to stab your nose afresh. I thought all the noses that frequently visit the palace had made friends with it. Nkanka and his stench are part of this palace. He serves a purpose' (79). This really should not surprise us. It would appear that Gidi has mastered the art of living with guilt and their reminders. He has no scruples about having Uwa as his personal guard, the same person that he robbed of his throne. He does not feel any shame about going to Ugbon to tell the king he robbed of his wife to relinquish his right to Uki. He would rather try to ameliorate evil or give it a facelift than extirpate it. Curing Uwa of his madness and appointing him personal guard are supposed to help paper over the evil of usurpation. Getting the king of Ugbon to say that he (King of Ugbon) no longer has any right over Uki is supposed to right the wrong of

stealing someone else's wife. So he gets Nkanka fresh herbs that are supposed to wash the sores dry.

The play is really about not only the proliferation of evil but also the possibility of exorcising it, whether this evil appears in the form of pollution, privation, transgression, tradition and so on. The title of the play in fact carries this image, this image of the abjection of evil. The breaking of a boil is to expel the foul pus inside. At the death of Uwa, Gidi is supposed to execute Uki to cleanse the land. He performs a shameful and costly propitiation instead. But this is unacceptable to the people. As the narrator tells us, 'so, the young men and the elders returned to more deliberations, but this time, on how to break a boil full of pus' (109). They must expel the traditional royal family because of its contamination. They must break tradition. There is, in fact, a strong sense in which tradition could be regarded as evil in the play, the tradition that denies good people certain rites and rights, merely because of their class or place of origin. For instance, the young men refuse initially to join Eririnma in doing the royal dirge in Nkanka's honour: 'it is not the tradition to sing a dirge and dance round a dog' (101). But Eririnma urges them: 'break your tradition. it's a boil full of pus' (101). They eventually heed his advice. That is however not the only instance in which Gidiland heeds Eririnma's exhortation. They are to eventually choose him to be their king, in spite of his being a stranger, a breaking of the boil of tradition. Eririnma represents what is good in the land; he is the agent of good, for the expulsion of evil, willing 'to impale any tongue that honours evil with a song' (108).

To relate the scenario in *Break a Boil* with the Nigerian political reality, it would seem that the play gives us a model that would ensure progress in our country. There are some good people who cannot lead Nigeria merely because of where they come from. We undermine good people just because they are not 'one of us'; instead, we canonize evil insofar as it is from one of us, insofar as it emanates from the traditional; we say, 'this person may not be good, but he's one of us. Let him remain there'. In this way, we fail to break the boil of that unwritten tradition that has ensured that the dream of a truly prosperous and united nation constantly elude us. But we must prove ourselves to be corrigible. We must realise, to use Nkanka's words, '[that] if we do nothing…evil will continue to triumph in this kingdom' (81). In this way, we will have grasped the revolutionary message of Sam Ukala.

**The 'Sense of Ancient Evil' in *Odour of Justice***

In his book, *The Vision of Tragedy*, Sewall talks about 'this sense of ancient evil, of "the blight man was born for," of the permanence and mystery of

human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life' (6). What Sewall is playing up here is the tragic vision of evil we have already encountered in the work of Ricoeur. Ricoeur locates this sense of evil within the Adamic myth. He writes:

> The serpent, at the very heart of the Adam myth, stands for evil's other face, which the other myths tried to recount: evil already there, pregiven evil, evil that attracts and seduces man. The serpent signifies that man does not begin evil. He finds it…the serpent stands for the tradition of an evil more ancient than man himself. ('Symbols I' 295)

To a large extent, the above mythical elucidation helps us to reflect on the evil in *Odour of Justice*. The major character Obiamaka is not evil. Instead he finds evil when he becomes the Elema. This evil is already there, has already been there. At the beginning of the play, we get the sense of what Nwokunbo calls 'an evil hand' lurking within. This evil has consumed Ofume, Obiamaka's elder brother. Obiamaka points out this evil as the reason he would not ascend the Elema throne. He talks about the nature of this 'evil already there', how it has consumed Elema after Elema:

> Vultures from among his people. So he built his mansion at Ogodo, not on his homeland. And what about my own father, Elema Ogun? Accountant with John Holt. Successful, rich, amiable socialite. At the age of 36, he came to this throne and died eight years later, destroyed by the land case between Ogodo-nta and us. And my elder brother abandoned his education and inherited this throne at the age of eighteen. Oki community cajoled him: 'we'll lift you up. You'll dine and wine out of the abundance of our homage. Out of our well-bred beauties, you'll pick a paragon for a wife.' But his life was a life of great wretchedness. There he lies daed at the age of 35, slaughtered by a great beauty of Oki. (131)

Obiamaka's enumeration and linking of the misfortunes of previous Elemas to some evil lurking within reminds one of Ricoeur's characterization of evil 'as historical concatenation, as reign of the already there' ('Symbols I' 304). Obiamaka does not want to be a victim of this evil, of the 'deep gullies gorging themselves on the bones of Elema after Elema' (132). But then he accepts to be Elema after so much persuasion from his family, who promise to fight by his side.At least, he has a clear sense of the evil already there, an evil more ancient than himself.

Omogwun, his late brother's wife, is the chief evil. She gets pregnant for someone else in order to have an heir to the throne.The product of this illicit act was to later be his ordeal, the kind of suffering that the Greeks call *bassanoi*. Beyond this, Obiamaka meets a corrupt system where the Task Force have been misappropriating the contributions made by the people towards the development of community. He dissolves the Task Force and sets up a new one. The development of the community is his priority and not the perpetuation of the land disputes that have claimed the lives of previous Elemas. He would not 'employ the unprofitable method of' his 'predecessors in dealing with the evil and unpredictable masquerade' of land disputes (159).

The evil that Obiamaka confronts is both within and without. He has to confront the Owodo of Ogodo who thinks Oki to be an extension of his kingdom. The real test of Obiamaka's will occurs in 'part two' of the play, entitled 'The Gullies'. This reminds us of the gullies that he talked about before ascending the throne, the same evil gullies that consumed other Elemas before him. Through the perversion of Justice, the King of Ogodo and his profiteering associates in Oki dethrone ElemaObiamaka and send him to jail.

If the play had ended in 'The Gullies' part, it would have been a fine depressing tragedy; it would have captured completely Sewall's view about tragedy being 'this sense of ancient evil, of "the blight man was born for," of the permanence and mystery of human suffering' (6). However, even though Obiamaka undergoes suffering, even though he suffers evil, there is redemption at the end of the play, the part captioned 'Victory Song?'. As it is with the other plays that have been examined in this study, evil is not allowed to endure till the end. Although there is suffering, mysterious and tragic-like suffering in the plays, the suffering is not permanent as in Sewall's vision of tragedy. Obiamaka gets a redress at the appeal court. This is where the play ends. But we would notice a tone of 'uncertainty' implicated by the question mark used with the title 'victory song'. Whoever knows the Nigerian system knows that political cases do not end in appeal courts; there is the recurring tendency for such matters to be dragged to the Supreme Court, hence the tone of uncertainty or temporary conclusion at the end. At any rate, the reader being aware of the facts of the case feels the sense of justice being done; of evil being overthrown.

**Conclusion**

There appears to be a sort of generic crisis in the plays examined; they are not thoroughgoing tragedies, for tragedies implicate a situation of

irredeemable evil. The plays are neither perfect comedies, for in perfect comedies people do not die; if they are comic at all, it is not because of lightness of any kind or the abundant presence of the laughable; if they are comic, they are so only because they show men's ability to shape and reshape their world (Akwanya 51), or the possibility of defeating the evil that crushes man in perfect tragedies. The plays are within the realm of the tragicomic, which is in fact the dominant generic realm of modern plays.

It is important to reiterate the social relevance of Ukala's plays here. Today, a lot of people adopt an attitude of hopelessness and apathy in the face of the many social privations, the many evils that characterize the Nigerian experience. However, in examining the plays in the light of evil, we notice a strong feeling grow in us, the feeling that Ukala wants us, first, to acknowledge the presence of privations in our socio-political life, of forces that undermine our collective aspirations as a people and bear us down, of evils in short; second, to recognise that these evils are conquerable through concerted human action, through the promotion of what is good, for if, as Saint Augustine has written, '[w]here there is evil, there is a corresponding diminution of the good' ('Enchiridion' 343), it should also follow that where there is so much good, there would be a corresponding diminution of evil. Ukala's plays are geared towards the transformation of social consciousness, which is the starting point of revolution. That is in fact the way that art changes the world, through changing social consciousness. It is the same sentiment that the Frankfurt School Marxist, Herbert Marcuse, expresses in a roundabout way when he writes that '[a]rt cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world' (32). The plays are part of this important bid to reconfigure and redirect the consciousness of our future world-changers.

This study does not pretend to have exhausted the dimensions of evil in the texts, owing of course to the ambiguity of evil as a philosophical concept. For instance, there is even the possibility of reading the human acts that make the exorcism of evil possible as 'evil' in themselves, at least from an 'impure sense'. We are referring to Cole's idea of an 'impure evil' as contrasted with 'pure evil' (3). Evil is not just a condition; it is also an act, any act that harms another person is evil in a basic sense. The French Revolution for instance featured the guillotining of members of the royal family; that is evil too, a sort of purposeful evil used to end what the people perceived as a greater evil. Such is the ambiguity of evil.

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