

THE POETICS OF REVOLUTION, THE LOGIC OF REFORMISM AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: SAM UKALA'S TWO FOLKSCRIPTS

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Abstract

*Currently in Nigeria, the word 'change' is often times used to ridicule the optimism with which it was conceptualized during political campaigns. In its really optimistic sense, the concept of change connotes a reversal of governance from administrative ideologies like clandestine democracy, capitalism and revolutionism, among others, to "African socialism", true democracy and reformism. The question now is: Since the idea of change has turned into a mere mockery of its true self in socio-political circles, which administrative strategy can be employed to reposition it on its authentic path? In response to this question, Sam Ukala's folkist, revolutionary aesthetics in some of his plays ironically points at the ideology of reformism as largely appropriate for a successful change management in Nigeria. These plays dramatize revolution in order to expose its follies and allude to the urgent need for reformism. Backed by Reader Response theory, this paper demonstrates how Ukala, through his plays, **The Placenta of Death** and **Iredi War** suggests reformism as a suitable ideology for change management in Nigeria.*

Introduction

The form and contents of an artistic display or composition which depict a socio-political revolution can be referred to as the poetics of revolution or revolutionary aesthetics. For example, the features of a play which, not only portray the revolutionary dreams of some of its characters but also experiment with a combination of traditional and western dramatic forms are recognized as poetics of revolution or revolutionary aesthetics. The aesthetics, which emerged in Nigeria "since the 1970s" (Umukoro 21), became popular by the 1980s and picked diverse innovations by the turn of the millennium.

Various levels of socio-political mismanagement, class discrimination, oppression of the working class, corruption and injustice are showcased in the drama of this bent, while consciousness is raised against the evils. A notable

revolutionary dramatist outside Nigeria is Bertolt Brecht who initiated a revolution in European dramatic form while adopting the Marxist socialist ideology. He dropped the conventional realistic form and picked a technique he called epic theatre to differentiate it from dramatic theatre. The Marxist socialist ideology is a revolution oriented perspective.

Within Nigeria, some first generation radical (revolutionary) dramatists are Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Tunde Fatunde and Kole Omotoso who also followed the Marxist ideology and adopted the Brechtian, revolutionary, dramaturgical form known as epic theatre. Revolutionary writers of the later generation have in the forefront, Sam Ukala, whose new form known as 'folkism', which is neither a Brechtian technique nor a core follower of Marxist ideology, rates him highly as a folkist revolutionary dramatist. Folkism refers to what Ukala calls "the tendency to base literary plays in the history, culture, and concerns of the folk (people in general) and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale" (285). The folkist approach entails the employment of "folk linguistic, structural and performance techniques" (Ukala 38). Folkist revolutionary aesthetics, therefore, is the employment of African folktale compositional and performance techniques to dramatize the story of socio-political revolution while alluding to, passing comments or raising major ideas on how to manage the transitional consequences.

Reformism and revolutionism (the practice of or "support for" social or political revolution) are processes of change but they differ in their modes of operation. Reformism refers to "any doctrine or movement that advocates social or political change in a gradual manner, within a democratic framework rather than a revolutionary change" (Chambers 1028). Revolutionism is "the theory of or support for political, social, etc., revolution"; and the revolution refers to "the (sudden or abrupt) overthrow or rejection of a government or political system by the governed (Chambers 1053). Obviously, the idea of change is central to revolutionism and reformism but while the former implies the use of force, may involve violence, disorder, suddenness and anti-democratic principles, the latter is democratic and does not require violence or abruptness.

Democracy (democratic process or governance), here implies what Afolabi Ojo, describes as being "predicated on the principles of liberty, fraternity and equality... implies justice, fairness, equity and freedom ... presupposes peace through the protection of the rights and dignity of the individual" (qtd. in Fosudo 119). This concept of democracy tallies with the African perspective of socialism, which differs from the Marxist, socialist

ideology. The African perspective favours equal rights and justice as a sine qua non, hence, it is operational in both a poor and a rich community (Umukoro 31). The Marxist ideology calls for the availability of abundant wealth for equal rights in sharing of the abundance to be feasible. In other words, abundance of material wealth is a precondition for the Marxist socialism.

Revolutionary aesthetics, the logic of reformism, as well as the folkist dramaturgy and their relevance to change management are explored and enunciated here through a close reading of the study texts. Deriving from the authority of reader response theory, inferences drawn from the textual reading will be validated. This theory posits that the meaning of a text is contingent on the reader's interpretation. In the words of Eagleton, the reader is:

All the time engaged in constructing hypothesis about the meaning of the text. The reader makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, and draws inferences and tests out hunches.... The text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning The reader 'concretizes' the literary work, which is no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page (66)

Reader response critics such as Derrida (1985), Barthes (1974) among others have written to project the reader as being important in giving meaning to a literary text.¹ Therefore, the reader response theory authenticates and fortifies the inferences this reader will draw from the cues supplied by Ukala's plays through their language and other structural features.

Textual Explorations: Revolutionary Aesthetics and Reformist Implications

The Placenta of Death

This is a tale of one nation called Owodoland, which is under the leadership of Owodo III, the Oba of the land. During this regime, which is a "change" of leadership after the reigns of Owodo's predecessors (Owodo I and II), the nation is disturbed by internal forces, like class distinction and political mismanagement. Although the class differences existed in the land prior to the

period of Owodo III, they become more pronounced under his maladministration.

The class differences are marked by the existence of a slave tribe in the land, called the Dein tribe, of which the Umuolua family is part; two other different groups are the poor masses and the rich, oppressive class. Mismanagement of the “change” (the regime of Owodo III) emanates from the Oba’s abandonment of his administration to his slave wife, Ibo, who is hell-bent on swinging the leadership of the nation from the freeborn to the slave class. These major forces generate socio-political tension, as a result of their related evils of oppression, tribalism, injustice, stigmatization, fraud, and discrimination. Consequently, the situation degenerates into a forceful, violent and sudden overthrow of the oppressive regime and inadvertently causes the unity of the slaves and the poor.

The ill-fated reign of Owodo III here represents a political mismanagement of change while the unification of the oppressed classes symbolizes an optimistic, new change. The new dimension is prophetic of a future that would continue to change to better days but through reformism. If governance were orderly through reformism, there would be no room for revolution, which is violent and anarchical. These thematic explorations of *The Placenta of Death* are further accentuated by the folkist dramaturgical techniques of the play. The structural features of folktale composition and performance, such as the opening convention, the role of narrator, audience interjection, and others are obvious. The skill which the playwright uses in reflecting the folkist techniques, gives a vivid picture of a story teller displaying his art and making both the events and the characters alive, as practical illustrations of what he is displaying.

As a folkscript, therefore, the play opens when the narrator begins to arouse the audience with an opening call:

NAR: (from AUDIENCE) Tohio!

AUD: Ya ya, Ya ya, kpo!

NAR: (Rising) Tohio!

AUD: Ya ya, Ya ya, kpo! (13).

This call signals the narrator’s greetings to the audience and his request for “a song of the times” (p.13) which he conducts and gets everyone to join in singing. This exposition introduces the setting of the play as Owodoland and presents a resume of the socio-political condition of the nation: “A nation shredded by riches and strife ... and riches begat power and injustice, enjoyment and anguish. Riches became a high fence between brother and

brother. Nature strangely welded opposites in order to level them up. But levelling up created charring frictions” (13). This picture of the fictitious nation prepares the mind for the challenges of the land. Moreover, it not only points to some African nations, including Nigeria, which are facing similar conflicts, and therefore, demands constructive suggestions towards a relevant and workable ideological solution such as reformism.

After the exposition, the plot begins to unfold and can be explored in four levels: first, the issue of Owodo’s marriage to Ibo and Omon and the attitude of these two wives to the palace servants – Izagodo and Ebuzun. Second, the births by the two wives and the conflicts generated in that respect; third, the revenge of Omon; and fourth, the revolution. Because Ibo has, since her arrival as the Oba’s first wife, failed to bear a child, pressure mounts on the Oba to marry Omon, especially as Ibo is also a slave who “cannot bear an heir for Owodoland, even though the goddess of fertility resides in her womb” (14). But Owodo initially rejects the proposal to marry Omon simply because she is from a poor background. Later, however, he succumbs and takes Omon as his second wife, though Ibo receives her with stigmatic disgust. It is noticed that Ibo does not receive people well in the palace. Apart from her unfriendly and insulting attitude to Omon when she arrives, she lashes and scolds one of the palace servants – Izagodo – and disallows his freedom of self-defence. She curses and insults the servants. Ibo puts on this oppressive demeanour, not so much for being the first royal wife but because she is from a rich family; and this bloats her ego, even though she is a slave.

This oppressive attitude is rather contradicted by Omon’s humane treatment of the servants when she meets them after Ibo leaves. Her attitude inspires one of the servants Izagodo, to declare:

IZAGODO: Come on! Let’s make this place sparkle for Omon’s sake... (21).

Omon’s behaviour and the servants’ response, here, represent the play’s tacit extolment of even the least effort by the leadership of the country to respect justice, fair play and human rights, hence, an encouragement of democracy or reformism. The masses (represented by Izagodo and Ebuzun) are inspired to be more committed to the national interest if their rights and humanness are allowed a proper place in the affairs of the nation.

The births by Ibo and Omon, raise a number of issues that are causes of revolutionary attitude. The former, bore a son first. When Owodo prays over this good fortune, inviting the ancestors and gods to endow the child with wisdom, long life and prosperity “so he can rule Owodoland creditably after

his father would have been looked for and not found” (30), Iyasere – a prime minister in the nation reacts against the prayer. According to him “Owodoland cannot be ruled by a slave” (31). This evidence of class segregation is detested by Emeni (Ibo’s father) who denies being a slave. But when the Oba himself categorically declares him a slave, he gets angry to the point of rejecting the gifts meant for his house by Owodo, during the birth of Ibo’s son.

OWODO: Get seven fat nuts of kola, seven giant tubers of yam, a plump and virile he goat. Then ask our tapper to fill his largest pot with his best wine. Send all to Emeni’s house immediately (31).

EMENI: To the house of a slave? What dealings should a free born Oba have with a slave? Keep your gifts to yourself... (31).

Before he leaves in anger, Emeni threatens a revolutionary action against the Oba and his tribe who, according to him, enjoy “owning captives without a war” (31). Emeni’s riches make him arrogant and determined not to own up being a slave. Rather, he prefers to be called a captive. It is known that pride and insincerity have often contributed to anarchy and disquiet in a human society, such as Nigeria.

In consonance with the folkist aesthetics, at intervals, the M.O.A (member(s) of the Audience) throw important questions to the narrator, who promptly supplies the answers and makes the plot move logically. Example: when the narrator describes how Ibo deliberately shows a number of things to Omon – the second wife – and falsely claims that they are gifts from the Oba, the M.O.A ask:

M.O.A: How did Omon take all that?

NAR: She merely giggled Ti-hi Ti-hi (33).

Major trouble erupts in the story when the second wife of Owodo also bears a son and the Oba directs that the same quantity of gift meant for Ibo, be sent to her. But Ibo intercepts the gifts and fraudulently mandates Izagodo to replace them with roasted vulture, which she had earlier instructed him to kill and roast. This is sent to Omon. The consequences of this fraud instigate a revenge which moves the story to its climax. Omon declares: “I have eaten the vulture, the carrion eater. Now, Owodo will eat the carrion” (50).

She later succeeds in introducing human placenta into the soup which the Oba and some farmers who worked for him eat. When this crime is

uncovered, the Oba and his labourers begin to vomit. It gets to a point where one of the labourers dies.

The investigation that follows, leads Omon to confess her intrigue:

OMON.....

Owodo had guests

Samarhan

I put placenta in his soup

What Owodo did to me

Samarhan

Is what I've done to Owodo (67).

After denying that he sent a roasted vulture to Omon, Owodo proceeds to pass a death sentence on Omon, and this demonstrates injustice against the poor. Ibo and her father, who are rich, are absolved, despite their role in the crime. This level of discrimination has been a common experience in Nigeria since independence in 1960: The rich always manoeuvre their way to freedom at the expense of the poor. The poor sometimes suffer, even for crimes they do not commit. When the crowd expresses disapproval of Owodo's judgments, the Oba elects to take up his own fight. The battle that erupts leaves Ibo, Owodo, Iyasere and Emeni dead.

These deaths symbolize the demise of oppression, discrimination, injustice, capitalist exploitation, mismanaged administration, and therefore the ironical call for the option of reformist approach. The deaths also point at a new era, when the slave, the poor, and every one unite for a better future. This unification is achieved in the play when Olotu, a slave, refuses to fight Osaze (the symbol of the poor masses) in the above battle. In turn, Osaze refuses to shoot his pistol at Olotu as a mark of understanding that, as the latter puts it, "the slave and the poor are one..." (74). At the conclusion of the play, following the folkist procedure, the narrator makes a closing remark thus:

NARRATOR: Yes, Osaze, the slave and the poor are one (74).

Observably, Ukala employs what Abrams and Harpham call structural irony in advancing the logic of reformism as a suitable policy in change management. Structural irony refers to an author's use of "a structural feature that serves to sustain a duplex meaning and evaluation throughout the work" (166). His portrayal of revolution with its associated problems, ironically implies his suggestion of its reverse alternative, such as reformism. In view of this, revolution, which, as earlier stated, is forceful, violent, abrupt, and

undemocratic, inversely suggests and gives way to reformism, which is peaceful, gradual, and democratic.

Iredi War (2014)

The play is based on the conflict between a traditional African kingdom of Owa and the agents of British colonialism during the early 20th century. The attempt to impose colonial rule on the well-established political system of the kingdom is met with fierce opposition from the Owa people. This culminates in a war that leaves both sides writhing with the ugly experience of losing many able bodied compatriots in the battle field.

The play is considered revolutionary due to its portrayal of revolt and struggle by an oppressed, insulted and in subordinated people. The people are no other than the peaceful and united indigenes of Owa, who are revolting against the oppressive, arrogant and aggressive racist class of white colonial officers representing the British Monarch, king Edward VII. The oppressed class is denied her right to traditional authority. The tragic disruption of political and cosmic order is manifested in the insults directed at the revered monarch of Owa kingdom, Oba Igboba, and the burning down of the people's shrines and gods by the insensitive colonial agents.

The events of the story as presented below, demonstrate that tragic consequences of the racist approach could have been averted if the white man had applied reformist ideology in his administrative strategies within Owa kingdom. This would have encouraged him to be less coercive, more sensitive to the gains of justice and fair-play, and more respectful to human rights.

The revolutionary elements in the play are read here as ironical indices of their reformist opposites which are being advanced for change management. Hence, oppression points at the need for justice and fair-play, racism reversely recommends equal rights, absence of class discrimination and colour barriers.

As a folkscript, the play begins with the narrators' arousal call, which helps to keep the audience alert to the coming story:

NARRATOR I: *(Rises, and with her right hand, casts imaginary white chalk powder at the AUDIENCE).*

E ye m onu nzun! (I give you white chalk!)

AUDIENCE: I gwo, o re-e! (If you concoct, may it be efficacious!).

This opening call is followed by a song raised by the same NARRATOR I:

Luni ilu

Tell a tale

Ilu I – gboba	Tale of I – gboba
Do n’udo	Tug at the rope
Udo kpiri kpiri	it’s unsnappable (11).

Some of the performers accompany the song with drumming, while others dance. Many members of the audience join in singing, clapping or dancing.

After this arousal, the procedure of folkist performance is carried further when the narrator communicates directly with both the public Audience, and member(s) of the Audience (M.O.N) who are players seated in the audience. In this expository stage, Narrator I introduces the period of the story as June, 1906, while Narrator II outlines some of the characters of the play, such as Crewe-Read, who, Owa people address as “Iredi” or “Ikuru-Iredi”, Igboba, who is the Oba, and others.

The first major incident of the plot occurs in Owa palace court. The Oba and his chiefs are discussing with Crewe-Read who starts here to exhibit tactlessness and coercion in his dealings with the royalty. He disrespectfully addresses the monarch just as “chief” and when he (the Oba) wants to speak, he does not allow him to do so, but, instead, accuses him of rigmorole. Again, Crewe-Read is insulting in his statement:

CREWE-READ: Chief Igboba, your fathers were primitive,
ignorant and uncivilized barbarians (16).

This degree of insult on people’s ancestral background, intertextually smacks of the tribalistic attitude in Ola Rotimi’s *The God’s are Not to Blame*, which spurred Odewale to give the lethal blow that killed a man in his farmland (Rotimi 46), and the deceased turned out to be his father. Also, this racist sarcasm echoes the tribal tendency which contributed to distrust and hatred that finally degenerated to Nigeria’s civil war in late 1960s.

At this level of Crewe-Read’s insults, one of Owa chiefs sums up his observations as follows:

IWEKUBA: But where is our friendship with the white
man if we cannot share kola and palm wine with him? (17).

This remark, however, follows Crewe-Read’s rejection of the palm wine presented to him by Igboba, because drops of the wine were poured on the ground as prayer and respect for the ancestors.

Oppression of the blacks starts to rise with acuity after these initial insults. When the white man requests for fifty able bodied men to serve him as

additional carriers, the objection raised by some chiefs, attracts the following ominous threat from Crewe-Read:

CREWE-READ: Chief Igboba! Call your chiefs to order or I'll have them flogged (18)

Because the Townspeople express shock over this threat, Lawani, (a colonial police sergeant) and a constable, each with a horsewhip, rise and deploy themselves to observe TOWNSPEOPLE). What a humiliation! Other instances of insubordination and humiliation are spread in the play. But to add insult to injury, Crewe-Read declares finally that every adult citizen of Owa should pay a levy of two shillings only (p. 21).

This exploitative inclination generates protests from townspeople who urge that Crewe-Read himself should convey the message to the people directly. He agrees to do so at 5p.m the next day, but before this time, he leads the Christian soldiers and missionaries to set fire on every shrine in Owa kingdom.

Reacting to some interjectory questions posed by Member(s) of the Audience (M.O.A), such as “who were those missionaries? Why didn't Owa attack them?” The narrator responds: “our black brothers” (24). The youth leader is expected to give the answer to the second question, and that would be no other response than war against the white man.

The war becomes imminent after a royal palace encounter with the white man's team, who are sent by Crewe-Read to arrest the Oba. In the encounter, the Oba is denied of his royal greetings by Lawani and constables who have come to arrest him. The scuffle that erupts, leaves lawani's arm cut by the assistant youth leader-Uzun, who is, in turn, shot dead by Constable I. Onyela- the youth leader himself is arrested and dragged off to Crewe-Read, who dispatches him to Agbor prison. A new youth leader, Ebie, is appointed.

At Crewe – Read's camp in the forest, at night, arrangements are already being made to request for arms and other needs for an imminent war against Owa. While the white man plans to march on Owa at 3 a. m, the warriors of Owa are also getting ready for battle in front of Igboba's court. Back at Crewe-Read's camp, even before he receives any feedback on his telegrams sent to Asaba for arms and other materials, gun shots start coming from the direction of Owa, and panic engulfs the camp. At this early stage, Crewe-Read is shot dead, and the war rages on.

Consequently, both sides of the war suffer heavy casualties. But with reinforcements, greater fire power and unexpected military tact from the white man's forces, the warriors of Owa are suppressed, though, not without killing

more of their enemies. The last tough battle is fought in Igboba's palace during the white man's second attempt to arrest the Oba.

"Using his astral body", Igboba spears Lawani in the chest, killing him. After further attempts to arrest Igboba, and the failure to do so, RUDKIN, (the leader of the arrest team), and the soldiers run away, leaving Lawani's dead body behind. Later, Igboba and some members of his court are found in the District Commissioner's office at Agbor where they are being interrogated.

The interrogation is still going on when Igboba discovers that he and his household are rather under arrest. He defiantly attempts to depart with his people while an attempt is made to stop him, which fails. However, the Oba, with his people, is finally seen moving behind some prisoners who are in chains. This becomes an index of the Owa people's defeat. As usual, the narrators make a closing remark that signs off the folkscript:

NARRATOR I, NARRATOR II: see you then.

In the play, *Iredi War*, revolutionary aesthetics ironically point at reformist options. Hence, racism, oppression, aggression, cultural denigration and other insults, ironically cry for their respective reversals since they are dramatized not for their being desirable but to conscientize against their evils and sharpen the vision for reformist standards.

Therefore, racism which Amirikpa Oyigbenu succinctly refers to as "inhuman treatment of the black race, segregation along racial line" (18) or "a condition of oppression, discrimination, injustice and inequality that the African-Americans were subjected to for centuries" (26), is obvious in Ukala's play as demonstrated by the way the white man tries to muscle their force and authority over the blacks. Inversely, racism here cries for fair play, justice, human rights, cultural freedom, racial honour to the black man and humane attitude to all. These standards encapsulate the reformist opposition to revolutionist qualities. It therefore, becomes tenable to observe that if Crewe-Read were humane, level-headed and just in his dealings with the culture and personalities of the Owa people, it would have been easier for the colonial administration to manage his political vision of change. Totally, the reformist ideology would have largely provided the desired result while avoiding revolution.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the two study plays and discovered that they tacitly portray revolutionary indices like oppression, injustice, racism, class

discrimination and others, as their ironical pointers to the reformist demands for justice, fair play, equal rights, democracy and the African brand of socialism. The option of reformism in the plays which tacitly contradicts revolutionary choices in the management of change, cries out loudly that socio-political adjustments or transition should observe relevant democratic processes in order to forestall anarchy and violence. Policy makers and leaders in Nigeria, and other African communities will find Ukala's plays, *The Placenta of Death* and *Iredi War*, very instructive and useful as notes of warning against disorders and possible revolutions in their administrative areas.

In the two study plays, therefore, the playwright has dexterously demonstrated great creative ingenuity in employing his new, innovative, folkist dramaturgy to address the sensitive issue of change management. And through this achievement, he has opened up a new vista in the realm of modern African drama's socio-political commitment.

Endnote

¹See Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2002) where these works by Derrida and Barthes are discussed in detail.

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