

Evolution of Modern African Drama: Kalu Uka's Transition from Evolutionism to Relativism in *Ikhamma*

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Abstract

Discourses on evolution of African drama reflect eventual periodization that produced three major eras of theorizations on African drama and theatre. There is traditional African and subsequently modern and African postmodern theatres. Traditional African theatre is the pre-colonial theatre, the unadulterated theatre of the people known for its oral, celebrative and participative attributes. Theoretical and critical issues surrounding evolution of modern African drama and theatre remain controversial and border on scholarly issues that engaged Western and African scholars alike in non-totalistic debates. By and large, three schools of criticism: Evolutionism, Referentialism and Relativism dominated theory and criticism of modern African drama. However, emergent trends in African theatre practice indicate obvious crisscrossing of literary scholars among/between the three schools. Kalu Uka is among the pioneer scholars who transited from the Evolutionist school to the Relativist school. How has Uka's transition contributed to the development and emergence of the dominant syncretic dramaturgy of modern African theatre? This is the subject of this paper in which the researchers attempt an appraisal of Uka's road to limelight using case study, content analysis and personal observation research methods.

Introduction

The evolutionary process of modern African drama and theatre may be grouped into historical, political, social, and economic headings. Considering this obvious diversity and non-totalistic debates on African drama and theatre, theorists, critics, philosophers, anthropologists and playwrights alike are still deliberating over what constitute African drama

and theatre. Given its ritualistic beginning, religiosity and functionalism there are divides and polarizations among scholars. Notable among these scholars are: Bakary Traore, Isidore Okpewho, Osita Okagbue, Tejumola Olaniyan, Anissa Talahite and Simon Gikandi. However, as a theatre of relevance, African drama and theatre are conditioned with among other things, cultural and anthropological factors, therefore, its evolutionary process is not totally divorced from societal and experiential issues in Africa. According to Bakary Traore (1972: xiv),

...Theatre should be analyzed as part of '[t]he total social phenomenon'....The colonial situation...led in the first instance to ...servile imitation. Then with the attainment of political independence...an attempt is made at cultural independence through a return to the language of the people.

The exploration of theoretical concepts in African theatre is as diverse as there is diversity of scholars in Africa and beyond. Ideological conceptions and historical concerns motivate each scholar's interest in any aspect of these issues and eventual contributions to the evolution of modern African drama and theatre. Traore (1972: 64); for instance, is interested in the social function theory when he says that, '...the Negro-African theatre has undisputable social function.' However, the cultural approach to the evolution of modern African Drama and theatre appears to have achieved wider reception since it links the traditional to the modern and the modern to the postmodern.

Origin, history and development of African drama and theatre are not entirely different from the historical origins of other theatres of the world. Like the West and the Orient, Africa had her traditional theatre before the colonial encounter. Traditional African theatre is the peoples' theatre; it is communally owned and celebrated as multifunctional festivals, rituals, initiation ceremonies and story-telling. Discourse on theatre before the encounter with the West has been very explosive ranging from the controversy of its existence, what it should be called to its constituents and dramatic categories. David Kerr (1986: 3) in a summative statement provides answers to some of these issues when he says that:

A study of pre-colonial African theatre must include a wide group of performing arts like ancestral rituals, funerary rites, initiation ceremonies, spirit-possession dances entertainment dances, tragic and comic masquerades, praise-songs and oral narratives. Theatre practice during this period was rudely truncated by the colonial encounter as the colonist embarked in a campaign against African tradition and cultural practices.

The colonists out of ignorance questioned everything African and forcefully enthroned their own forms of entertainment, governance and religion on the Africans. Sam Ukala (2001:29), quoting Jane Plastow, says:

Traditional dramatic performances were particularly disagreeable to the colonists partly because they considered them potentially detrimental to the safety of the whites and colonial governments. Hence, for example, the 1899 Witchcraft Suppression Act abolished the *Mande* dance of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), which the colonists thought was witchcraft.

Initial resistance put up by the African theatre practitioners to checkmate erosion of African culture by colonialism made the colonial masters soften their hostility against African performances. They started the consideration to incorporate aspects of indigenous performances into their own foreign models and eventually the outcome was the popular theatre. The popular theatre was a popular dramatic genre during the colonial period. It had large audience patronage mainly because it bestrides the indigenous world of the Africans and the alien world of the colonists. According to Tejumola Olaniyan (2007:356),

One reason for such wide appeal is that the theatre (popular) is most often performed in the indigenous languages, or hybrids of them designed to be understood across linguistic borders.

The emergence of the popular theatre did not end European antagonism against African theatre rather the more the popular theatre exposed quintessence of African theatre to the Western world, the more it raised theoretical issues on criticism, form, structure and definition of African theatre. Efforts by pioneer modern African theatre practitioners to respond to these issues produced people like James Ene Henshaw, Kobina Sekyi, Hubert Ogunde, Kofi Danquah and so on. The contributions of these playwrights to the emergence of modern African Drama and Theatre cannot be ignored. However, they operated within the framework of "Theatre of Surrender" which Ukala (2001:30) says:

The African surrenders to the aesthetics of his colonial master and is content with hack and/or abridged translations, adaptations or reproductions of popular European plays, music and dances.

The interplay of forces that culminated in the eventual evolution of modern African drama and theatre occurs as themes and dominant ideas

in most African plays. For instance, interaction of historical, political and social factors produced radical theorizations on African drama and theatre during the second phase in the revolutionary trend of modern African drama. Quoting Frantz Fanon, Ukala (2001: 31) says, "[t]he second phase . . . yielded the theatre of re-awakening, manifested in theatrical adaptations of African legends, myths and folktales . . ." This era saw the emergence of the three schools of criticism on African drama and theatre: The Evolutionist, Referentialist and Relativist schools. The Relativist school in their contention insists that African rituals, myths, festivals, and folktales are drama and theatre because according to the Relativists they possess the requisite features of drama as stated by the context of performance in Africa. Ossie Enekwe (1981:6), a major exponent of the Relativist school, maintains that:

...drama and ritual "are not anti-podal", but rather, reciprocal in function and similar in structure", since one can easily lead to the other, depending on the context.

Inih A. Ebong, later found a middle course between the contention for existence and non-existence of African drama and theatre. He identifies the Referentialist school of thought within which he grouped scholars with the proposition that African performances are not all that drama. The Referentialist school is neither here nor there since their argument ended in a quasi-dramatic tradition. Ola Rotim (1981:77), who is a prominent member of this group, posits that, "any ritual display which contains "mimetic impulse" ought to be classified as drama, not ritual. Rotimi is interested in the structural aspect of African theatre, influenced by European models; he tackles issues of suspense, imitation and plot in his essay, 'The Drama in African Ritual Display' and posits that:

If we are to further accept the immanence of plot, with its implied vitals of suspense and conflict as another criterion, we find that the number of ritual displays that can be labelled drama whittles down considerably. (1981: 79)

Given the functionalism of ritual and debates about whether ritual is drama or theatre, Rotimi sees the framing of African theatre on Western European models as unnecessary Euro-centrism. The rigid proscenium Western stage does not allow the participatory interaction that accommodates audience contribution in the fluidity of traditional African theatre space.

Contrary to the views of the relativist and the referentialist M.J.C. Echeruo (1981:7), a chief proponent of the evolutionary school, a product of colonial institutions who was under the influence of Western theorists like Aristotle and Ruth Finnegan, contends in his "Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual" that '...there are considerable limitations to be encountered in any attempts to classify Igbo festival as drama'. Echeruo argues that until the ritual content of Igbo festival (for example, *Mbom-Ama* and *Odo* festivals) is forced "to yield its story," the dramatic content of those festivals will remain subsumed in their "ritual purity." Since ritual is a dead-end. "What is needed is to . . . expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base".

Critical analysis of the treatises of these three schools reveal that evolutionary trend of modern African drama is polarized. The relativist school is interested in a personality theatre that may be regarded as indigenous to Africa. While the evolutionists are interested in an African drama structured after European model.

Kalu Uka belonged to the latter; he is another pioneer contributor to the development of modern African drama and theatre. Uka was a bondsman of Euro-centrism and apostle of evolutionism before his eventual maturation and transition to the relativist school. Uka in his initial postulation on modern African drama and theatre cautions:

What is usually called traditional drama . . . is not yet drama. It is the legacy upon which drama may draw and draw with ever increasing returns . . . what some usually and glibly call traditional drama is properly and essentially elements of drama. (in Ogunbiyi, 1981:7)

Furthermore, Uka proposes a definition of the traditional drama to re-enforce his argument. He insists that, ". . . traditional drama is the sum total of the doings of peoples before written records were kept". (Ogunbiyi, 1981:7) Kalu Uka's seminal theoretical beginnings revolve around architectural structuring of what constitutes a play, the theme and contents of African drama. Interestingly, Uka's postulations raise vital theoretical issues bordering on the contradiction inherent in Echeruo's theory and the linguistic issue. Echeruo's theory is axiomatic, time tested and eclectic enough to influence the relativists and even, motivated the era of experimentation that led to the eventual maturation and emergence of syncretic dramaturgy in modern African drama and theatre. What Wole Soyinka, the leading exponent of the relativist school, did in *Death and the King's Horseman* is actually what Echeruo asked the Igbo to do so that ritual can yield the drama in it. However, Echeruo stymies the potentials of this embracive dramatic theory by adding that, "ritual is a dead end it

cannot grow". Uka's theory by its insistence that dramatists can draw from these indigenous performances endlessly, purges "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual" of the inherent contradiction. Uka's position shows that ritual can grow, mutate and transform into literary drama. Uka in his postulation provides the necessary link between the evolutionary and the relativist school in conformity with the emergent and dominant literary aesthetics of his time. Uka goes further to experiment and concretize his postulations in one of his plays, *Ikhamma*, using the Ohafia Mbom Ama ritual of the sanctification of space to stamp his authority finally as a relativist.

Though Uka writes in English language, his thematic fixation shows re-interpretation of African experiential issues to enable the African understand his root and head homewards. However, some theorists insist that evolution of modern African drama and theatre and its eventual decolonization crusade is impaired by the medium of expression - language which Ngugi wa Thiong'o dwells on so much. The truth, however, is that the exploration of theoretical issues in modern African drama is as diverse as there are diversity of scholars in Africa and beyond. One or more ideological conceptions motivate each scholar's interest in any aspect or issue that constitutes modern African drama and theatre.

Wa Thiong'o is particularly interested in the language issue. He ties the decolonization process to the language debate and in a confrontational crusade for the eradication of hegemonic capitalism. Thus, according to wa Thiong'o:

The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a peoples' definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment. Indeed in relation to the entire universe. (wa Thiong'o, 1986:4)

Though, Ngugi, like Uka, in his own transition, changed this earlier view on the language issue. Wa Thiong'o in his writings and continuing interrogation of Africa-West relations and in his arguments about the role of indigenous and foreign languages broadened his views and ceased to see English language medium as an impediment on modern African drama. Divergent views and non-totalistic argument over the definition and what constitute modern African drama and theatre is expected mainly because of its hydra-headed nature.

Wole Soyinka's interest in the cultural renaissance of African societies and performances manifests in his exploration of his Yoruba worldview as the basis for the evolution of modern African drama. He sees African drama as uniquely archetypal and collective in nature and says that:

...The difference, which we are seeking to define between European and African drama... is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone it is representative of the essential differences between two worldviews, a difference between one culture whose very artefacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics (Soyinka, 1979: 38.)

Concluding the question regarding the differences between African and European Dramas and theatres; Soyinka says it is mere cultural approximation. Be it as it may, the juxtaposition of these diverse but scholarly opinions only affirm that the roots of modern African drama and theatre lies in Africa's pre-colonial history, the subsequent colonial enigma and the complexities of her post-colonial experience. Therefore, modern African drama and theatre is a triangular conception, hinged on the tripod stand of traditional African theatre, popular theatre and Western literary drama. Hence, "this triple heritage" according to Ali Mazrui, has made modern African drama and theatre to remain hydra-headed, thus, raising dialectical and philological questions about its form, praxis and aesthetics.

The emergence of the post-relativist school was anti-climactic because of the impact made by the relativist school and its pioneering and influential scholar, Wole Soyinka. The post-relativist school had little prominence and backing until Kalu Uka added the fifth and sixth schools during his epoch-making Inaugural Lecture that marked the final concretization of his treatise on African drama and theatre. Uka's Alienist and Diasporan schools are circumstantial. According to (Uka, 2000: 22) the Alienists 'are those who totally deny the prior existence of drama or theatre in Nigeria or Africa'; Oyekan Owomoyela, Victoria Ezeokoli-Taylor are exponents; while the Diasporans are 'younger scholars and searchers in the post-decolonization-of-African literature era from 1980 to the mid 1990's'.

Uka evolved his ideas and classification on an evolutionary trajectory from evolutionist thinking to a relativist stand through intellectual growth, years of experimentation and exchange of ideas. His *Ikhamma*, for instance, was created through a diffusion of African thematic materials with Aristotelian conventions of drama. Hence, he succeeded in crystalizing definition and theoretical issues of African drama and theatre into a framework that is nothing short of cultural approximation. This artistic adoption of the relativist methodology enables him to demonstrate in his plays that each region in Africa (North, South, East West and the Horn of Africa) has peculiar problems, which in turn influence the individual and

indigenous art of her dramatists. Therefore, thematic issues like cultural conflict, colonialism, neo-colonialism, religious fanaticism, political oppression, racial antagonism and hegemonic capitalism among others, dominate themes and content of modern African drama. The thematic thrust of Uka's plays such as *A Harvest for Ants*, *Corridors of Booty* and *The Hunt for Sugar Baby* also show the transition from an interest in rural agrarian settings to the semi-urban and urban societies.

There is no gainsaying that the emergence of modern African theatre was a product of years of experimentation, the outcome of intellectual harvests organized by the grand patrons and custodians of African art such as the Ghanaian Kobina Sekyi and Kofi Danquah, Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Wole Soyinka and so on. These early practitioners and writers laid down essential performative techniques, dramatic structure and style of language from which modern African drama and theatre continue to draw. They created the artistic consciousness that led to evolution of a robust modern African drama that resulted in the blossoming of modern African theatre practice from 1960 till date. Hence, discussion of the evolution of modern African drama cannot be complete without mentioning the likes of James Ene Henshaw in his *This is our Chance*, Wole Soyinka and his *Dance of the Forests*, Kalu Uka and his *Ikhamma*, Ola Rotimi and his *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Ngugu wa Thiongo' and Micere Githae Mugo and their *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, J.P. Clark and his *Ozidi* Tewfik Al-Hakim and his *Fate of a Cockroach*, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona and their *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Lewis Nkosi and his *Rhythm of Violence* and others down to the contemporary trend of Femi Osofisan, Emeka Nwabueze, Efua Sutherland, Bode Sowande, Osita Okagbue, Esiaba Irobi, and the budding exploits of Tracie Utoh, Ray Emeana, Charles Nwadigwe, Alex Asigbo, Effiong Johnson, Emmy Idegu and so on.

The paper recognizes the contributions of these playwrights and theorists; and those not mentioned in this essay, to the evolution and development of modern African drama. However, the contribution of each playwright cannot be accommodated in this essay. Therefore, the pre-occupation of the researchers is to zero in on the study of Kalu Uka and his *Ikhamma*. This scoping enabled the researchers to highlight the colossal influence of Uka and his numerous contributions to the development of modern African drama and theatre. In the same vein, an analysis of *Ikhamma* exposes Uka's artistic and creative ingenuity, and the artistic philosophy that propelled his transition from Evolutionism to Relativism. *Ikhamma* is, therefore; the benchmark upon which the map encompassing constituents of modern African theatre as proposed by Uka is drawn. Since its publication in 1982, *Ikhamma* has continued to dictate the con-

tent, nature of language, structure, plot, and character exposition of most African plays published after it. Muiyiwa Awodiya (2011:136) affirms that,

... every Nigerian theatre artist has a little of Kalu Uka in him or her.... Indeed, one may have read some of his plays or watched productions of plays directed by him or read some of his lucidly poignant essays in his critical and theoretical writings.

The enviable status which Uka enjoys in Nigeria and African literary world, cannot be divorced from the success, timelessness and relevance of his theories and plays, especially *Ikhamma*, described as "... ritualistic, re-juvenatory...a masterpiece of imaginative construction and thematic innovativeness". (Uwem Atakpo, 2011:27)

Footprints of Kalu Uka's Creative Transition

Change is a human and historical phenomenon and Uka recognizes the importance and the imperative of change as a transitional instrument of human and societal development. Hence, he does not need further application of empirical proofs in order to accept new directions in modern African theatre practice. Thus, Uka's theoretical and ideological conceptions are conditioned by the dialectics of change. His reference to transition in his inaugural lecture is like a re-occurring decimal in theatrical mathematical calculations. Uka's creative impulse is emphatic, inspirational and therefore motivates the creative mind of young researchers in the theatre. Uka affirms below that his transition from Evolutionism to Relativism is only but an aspect of a macrocosmic transitional force that propels the relentless evolutionary force of a given society, Uka (2000: 8) posits that:

We of a certain generation (were) nurtured before this Internet age of computers (so, we) embrace a continuum of traditions that is a fusion of pure, pristine traditionalism through a transition into modernism and now into post modernism.

Uka is therefore a man of all seasons; he is an embodiment of the traditions of his generation, but like an ever-flowing fountain, he diffuses the icons of emerging generations with his charismatic artistic molecules in an evolutionary force that is crystallized in *Ikhamma*. Uka's footprints are traceable on the literary sands of time; in his giant stride to greatness, Uka published articles in academic journals, chapters in books, edited books and journals, wrote, acted and directed plays. His footprints are to

be found on the ever enlarging Afro-Western theatre canvas. Uka's seminal beginnings in evolutionist thinking can be traced to, 'Drama in Nigerian Society' published by *The Muse* at Nsukka in 1973, quoted by Yemi Ogunbiyi in his *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a Critical Source Book* and "New Directions in Theatre Practice at Nsukka 1970 – 1975" also published in *The Muse* in 1977. In these essays and others, Uka analyses African ritualistic performances, myths and festivals using Aristotelian conventions of drama and concludes that, 'what is usually called traditional drama... is not yet drama' (Uka, 2000: 7) What Uka has done in his analyses is to adhere to the Western textual and literary traditions; he overlooks at his evolutionist stage the archetypal oral, esoteric and folkloric nature of African performances and equates them with Western drama and theatre. Though, he refuses to accept the existence of drama and theatre in Africa based on his Western adjudicatory icons, he concludes that myths, rituals, and festivals contain elements of drama and therefore are capable of development and transformation into drama and theatre. This evolutionist thinking and his experiments with these sources and elements of performance led to the development of syncretic and cultural dramatic aesthetics that actually facilitated Uka's transition to relativism.

There is no doubt that Uka's cognizance of the emergent and dominant global literary conventions helped his transition. Eventually, he begins to see major elements of experimental African drama and theatre as important materials, especially as it pertains to identity, theme and content of African drama and theatre. It becomes obvious to him that an indigenous modern African theatre and cultural identity cannot be achieved in the face of the continued reliance on foreign aesthetic models that denied African drama the very evolutionary root he had earlier advocated. At the same time, for the African dramatist to be active in the global politics of aesthetics and that re-positions African theatre in the world literary market, there was need for Uka to revisit his earlier position on modern African drama and theatre. Uka embraced this task with bold strides and set out to experiment his new thinking in the play, *Ikhamma*. The outcome of the experiment affirms that these indigenous performances can also be given new forms when appropriated with the emergent literary conventions through textualization. This achievement in *Ikhamma* finally marked his departure from the Evolutionist school, to the Relativist school.

The *Ikhamma* experiment is not a flash in the pan; it places Uka in perspective and crystallizes wide acceptance of the wind of syncretism blowing across the African continent at the period *Ikhamma* was written. Hence, the adoption of the syncretic creative style by many African

dramatists enabled them to experiment with indigenous and foreign materials in their plays. Some contemporaries of Uka such as Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman*, experimented with Yoruba royal rites of passage that dwelt on the burial rituals of Alafin, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin in *Oda Oak Oracle* explores the communal dedication ritual of the sacred Oda Oak oracle, and latter playwrights such as Esiaba Irobi in the *FronDED Circle* forces the life swapping ritual of Ngwa people to yield the drama in it; while Emeka Nwabueze in *The Spokesman of the Oracle* secularizes the ritual of chieftaincy selection in a syncretized mode that gave the play a contemporary interpretation despite its ritualistic implications.

Kalu Uka's Transition from Evolutionism to Relativism in *Ikhamma*

Uka grew up in the robust rural environs of Ohafia community in Abia State and was therefore nurtured by its attendant cultural norms. Uka's knowledge and appreciation of his peoples' culture is evident in *Ikhamma*, chosen for study. The play derives from traditional ritualistic performances and mythology of the Ohafia people. Precisely, *Ikhamma* is a ritual drama based on the sanctification of space during the Ohafia fishing festival. Fish hunting in the border-waters is not an ordinary fishing festival for the Ohafia people because on the other side of the river is the Biase territory. The feud between the two communities stems from the fact that each community nurses the feeling that the other community is responsible for the mysterious, occasional disappearances of fishermen and women hunters from either side. Hence, the festival's informing myths, the rituals behind the preparation for the festival, the sacrifices for protection and propitiation that make-up the rituals that characterize the fishing festival are extended, literalized and textualized alongside other Ohafia mythologies by Uka in *Ikhamma*.

The play opens at a clearing before Ibina Ukpabi shrine revealing in the process, the imposing presence of the three-faced mask. Action begins immediately to punctuate the cosmic presence established by the communion with the triumvirate of the three *Chis*: *Chi-Chukwu*, *Chi-uwa* and *Chi-mmadu* which the mask signifies in Ohafia cosmology. Subsequently, groups of singers and dancers start demonstrating the communal veneration of the deity. Ritual drums - *ikoo* (*ikoro*), sounds distantly, while Nwanyife talks repeatedly to draw Nneugo, Ugomma's mother, into a conversation. Joe Glass, an Afro-American stranger, who Uka uses to portray the feud between Ohafia and Biase, enters and sees Ugomma beside the shrine's "*udala* tree. The playwright also uses Glass to portray slavery, diasporan and other colonial experiential issues. He is attracted and 'distracted' hence he tries to pluck the *udala* fruit without success, not

even Ugomma's assistance could help him. Nevertheless, Glass falls in love with Ugomma and promises to help her leave the shrine. As a character, Glass is a symbol of Uka's belief in the diasporan and the eventual home coming of Africans in Diaspora. Unfortunately, Joe is uncertain of himself and therefore derails in the process of realizing his newly found desires intended to be consummated with his love- Ugomma. In a reluctant but desirous move, Ugomma takes Joe to her mother, introduces him and immediately he offers his hand in marriage. The old man Attama, though skeptical of this illegal union starts the *Ikwu* (joining of lineage) initiation ceremony which serves as a pre-requisite for commencing the marriage rituals. During the process, Joe steals one of the carvings in the shrine, but Oriji the old man's attendant recovers it from him. This, the old man sees as yet another sacrilege and orders a fight between Joe and Oriji. Joe falls in the fight and like an archetypal African tragic hero offers his life for the reformation crusade. The villagers react amidst panic and confusion as the old man gives way for a new dawn ushered in by the community.

It is evident that the playwright interweaves the mythical belief that no one can steal from the shrine of a god in Igbo cosmology with the ritual of sanctification of space to achieve a meta-plot that bifurcates into a clash between the old and the new order. Myth operates outside empirical control or step-by-step sensory observation, so the playwright mystifies the power of Ibina through Attama and his acolyte, Oriji. As Glass confronts Oriji with his crusade for a new order, Oriji flees because in African cosmology, change is communally led. The individual is only a microcosmic element in the macrocosmic communality that dictates, regulates and sets the pace for change and transformation, so change in African ideological conception is conditioned by the community and carried out by the individual. The *Ikwu* initiation ceremony shows that ritual is a particular set of tradition made up of a collection of rites in a cultural enclave. The relationship between ritual and myth is like that of Siamese twins because myth validates ritual while ritual sustains myth. According to Ayisi (1979: 89):

Contact with the spiritual world, either to supplicate for beneficence, or to atone for sins committed, is established by following certain prescriptive rituals. These rituals are hedged about by myths in order to give them some validity and universal acceptance amongst the people.

The playwright uses the ritual of sanctification of space as a central thematic material; he builds into it multiple rituals that are validated as the play progresses with mythical beliefs. Nneugo creates the ritualistic

atmosphere and the mystic awe with her references to the sacredness of time, space and institutions of the community.

Nneugo: Why, on this of all days
Above the din of these drums
Do you lose grip of broom
And let your tongue kick
About and puff foul wind
Out of your throat?
Even an adder cannot lash
At Ikhamma
Ibina's waters
With such puffing
Try silence.
(Uka, 1982:2)

Nneugo makes allusion to the residual aspects of the play and exposes the thematic materials upon which Uka based his syncretic experiment. Apart from Ikhamma and Ibina; the *ikoo* (wooden gong) is a sacred communicative instrument of the Igbo, which the playwright uses to imbue the world of the play with cosmic and communal presence. As it sounds in Ohofia, it reminds the villages to prepare for the rituals of the sanctification of space and the fishing festival itself. Till date the people of Ohafia still clear and clean their roads, footpaths and streams in preparation for the fishing festival. The sweeping of "Ibina" shrine is remarkable; it is the core space, very symbolic, metaphysical and functional. Again, Nneugo in her warnings to Nwanyife once more, makes us feel the sacredness and importance of the festival, as well as the myths that validates its rituals below:

Nwanyife,
Keep your broom straight
Keep your hand firm
Before evil weeds sprout
out of this holy soil
you know no mortal pleading
can reach Ibina
when bad mushrooms rise
Raise no dust this year
Today we keep clean
Paths for those who should
Be returning loaded from

From their seven-week hunt
(Uka, 1982:3)

Nneugo uses her words as a gestalt of the many implications that are etched deep in the mind and require no elaboration; she shows that ritual and myth are gateways through which the profane world is juxtaposed with the metaphysical world. They are institutionalized intermediaries or sanctifying agents. However, Uka does not allow this traditional and annual Eucharistic communion of the ancient Ohofia kingdom to follow its normal and traditional course. He places obstacles on the elongation and progression of the ritual process to make it yield the subsumed drama. Uka employs the relativist creative technique in his plot development, characterization, use of language and conflict generation. Beyond the residual Ohofia world that houses the rituals and mythic beliefs that sustain the rituals, Uka creates a character- Joe Glass - to enable him introduce conflict that made the forces emanating from the world of the play clash with the encroaching forces of the new order. Nwanyife whom the playwright bestows with the responsibility of revealing this important character to the audience not only informs the community about his arrival but foreshadows the consequences of his romance with the very soul of the communal enclave. To Nneugo's greatest astonishment, Nwanyife announces:

Do they insist that the stranger /Nearly pulled young Ugo/ Across the
river with him yesterday? (Uka, 1982:1)

Nneugo is bewildered and does not respond or utter a word. Nwanyife presses on, continuing the taunt and saying:

Do they say
Biase fishermen surprised
Our men in their traps
And swear to stop the course
Of the river with bodies
Of our young men?
We will be a colony of widows
(Uka, 1982:1)

Yet Nneugo fails to respond even when Nwanyife refers to the feud that has claimed her husband and five male children. She adopts the tactic of silence defence mechanism and continues her sweeping. And Nwanyife goes again:

Do they allege that
This stranger is not even
Of Biase origin?
(Uka, 1982:1)

Nneugo is no longer able to hold her peace, the fear of a stranger and the worry over her dedicated daughter, her only hope and gift to the gods, given in exchange for the return of her husband and children forces her to speak. Despite her fears, Nneugo reassures herself, she reassures Nwanyife and the community as well as the peoples' faith in their gods, laying bare in the process the mythic belief elongated by the playwright. She says:

There can be no danger
When the strong arm of Iroko
Shields her here. No sorrow
For me any more since I gave her.
Ibina is not a vengeful, god
But a protector of the willing
(Uka, 1982:4)

Unfortunately, the arrival of the stranger poses a serious threat to the sustenance of her faith as young Ugo, in her innocence, joins forces with the stranger to shatter the old order. The conflict of the yielded drama heightens as the old man, Attama, addresses Joe Glass affirming what Nwanyife foreshowed earlier:

Come,
You Wanderer, impelled by curiosity
To fish in our forbidden waters
You scheme to hunt in impenetrable forests.
Come.
The deepest shades of your desire
Shine in the sands of our stream
You are not hidden.
Come.
You who have never but wish now
To feel the harsh cry
Of conquest in the night
You who desire to listen
To perilous breath blown out
Of ethereal flutes, by flutists

That rouse those who sleep and slumber
And give new life to them that linger
In the quiescent places of living
Come!
Stranger of the lost history
Bring your shadow, your last link
Between tree and its withering bark
Bring your mirrors! See, and be seen.
(Uka, 1982:19-20)

Attama in this summative address reveals Joe's identity, desires and mission; he lays bare the playwright's set-trap and triggers off the tragic impulse of the play. Having addressed the stranger, the old man reminds members of the community of their own contribution to the efficacy of the rituals, the importance of communalism, collectivity and commitment to the communal values of safety and welfare enshrined in the community's sacred order. He says:

Attama:
You are all gathered,
Suplicants here before Ibina's shrine
Draw near, our peoples, draw nearer
And witness them all, on the brink of
IKHAMMA
(Uka, 1982:22)

To complete the triumvirate circle, the old man finally reveals his own role. He cautions with these euphemistic lines below:

An old man's role is simple
Without question, but with a heart and hand
Shaken into the clutch of practice,
He must uphold custom, respect practice
In the name of the three households:
Ibina's, yours as supplier, and the peoples' ...
(Uka, 1982:21 -22)

It is on the fear of consequences of desecrating the land (as represented in the cleaning of Ibina shrine and river paths) and subsequently incurring the wrath of the gods of the land for breaking the ritual of the sanctification of space that Uka built the play, *Ikhamma*.

The creation of characters like Joe Glass appears to be a dominant creative methodology of the relativist syncretic dramaturgy. Joe's role is similar to Mr. Pilkings role in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, who headlong confronts Eleshin Oba, obstructing the ritual process so that it can yield its drama. In *Oda Oak Oracle*, Gabre-Medhin created the character Goaa and uses him to cut through the under-layer of ritual. Emeka Nwabueze also uses similar characterization techniques in his *Guardian of the Cosmos*. Akukalia obstructs the chieftaincy selection ritual and it yields its drama.

By this practice, Uka in his usual unyielding characteristics justifies his earlier evolutionist position where he left his stand open-ended, allowing time the arbiter of man and his aspirations to make a final judgment about the place of myths and rituals as ideological constructs for explaining and positioning a society in relation to its worldview. Uka's insistence that the traditional African theatre is a pool from which the modern theatre must draw is prophetic; this is in the sense that he foreshadowed what became a dominant aesthetic principle of modern African dramatists, years before its actualization. However, as he utilizes myths and rituals of his people as materials in *Ikhamma*, he transforms into a relativist since what he has achieved is a relativist cultural fusion that is a logical result of his society's development. By textualizing and literalizing the Biase/Ohafia myth, and the ritual of the sanctifying of space, Uka brings together two literary cultures, Western and African to arrive at a point in the development of African dramatic culture.

Conclusion

This essay has been able to reveal intricacies and aspects of the evolutionary process of modern African drama and theatre. It affirms that modern African drama and theatre is a triangular conception hinged on the tripod of traditional, popular and literary theatres. Thus, the place of myth and ritual, music and dance as well as the input of the pioneer African artists such as Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka and Kalu Uka is highlighted. The essay has particularly showed Uka's significant contribution to the evolution of modern African drama and theatre. The researchers show a transitional evolutionary process that illustrates an evolutionist beginning and a final relativist stand. The study also attests to the fact that all the schools of thought that contributed to the conception and development of African drama and theatre share the basic idea of the forms and praxis of indigenous African performances (myth, ritual, festival initiation ceremonies) as imperatives of African theatre practice. However, Uka's allusion to traditional performances as latent, residual and dramatic repertoire for

modern African theatre portrays them as artistic and cultural paradigms that are simultaneously explored by the evolutionist and relativist. Furthermore, Uka presents them as stages in an evolutionary spectrum which he gives a dialectical manipulation in his transition from evolutionism to relativism. Uka's visionary artistry in *Ikhamma* shows the intertwined utilization of myth and ritual as vital thematic materials. Uka shows in the play that myth touches essential aspects of the people's lives. Thus, myth explains in the play contextual issues of struggle and survival as portrayed by Nneugo, Joe Glass, Attama and Oriji.

The playwright's manipulation of his people's myth validates the assertion that myth provides emotional and psychological stability and the framework for redress and affirmation by pointing towards the redeeming features during bad situations as reflected in the ritual of sanctification. Space is symbolic in the African worldview; the Ohafia ritual of sanctification of space upon which Uka built the play *Ikhamma* shows that space is both a physical and metaphysical arena.

The paper posits that the play is the textualization and literalization of the ritual of sanctification of space; hence, it validates the myth of festivity and rapport with the god, Ibina. Therefore, Uka uses myth and ritual to evolve a new theatre that enables transmission, survival and preservation of the peoples' cultural values from generation to generation. Though this is an age-long dramatic and theatrical tradition, Uka's handling of these materials manifests as landmarks in his transitional journey to the relativist school. Thus the myth surrounding the ritual of sanctification of space becomes the framework for which the ritual drama is enacted. All the dances, songs, trance and movements are enveloped in the collection of rites that make up the ritual, showing in the process, essential aspects of the evolution of Ohafia society and culture. Uka's relativist's methodological approach, which concretizes his transition, affirms that myth, ritual, festivals are drama and theatre no matter the means, medium and manner of expression. They embody African drama, theatre, religion and cultural values and transmit them from generation to generation; first at the firesides, during bed times as storytelling, and now at the theatre as play productions.

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