

Tradition and Social Commentary in Kalu Uka's *Ikhamma* and *A Harvest for Ants*

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Abstract: Kalu Uka arguably falls in the first generation of Nigerian playwrights even though his creative works have not enjoyed the much critical attention that those of his creative peers have. This neglect, nonetheless, does not diminish the quality or value of his works. The paper focuses on two of his plays (*Ikhamma* and *A Harvest for Ants*) as evidence of not only a continuing tradition of relevant commentary on the state of the nation but also as reflection of the paradox of our existence as a people; indeed it defines also the unending search for the meaning of existence that each of us is daily engaged in. The (playwright) espouses that the African man, consciously or unconsciously, engages in this search on a daily basis as he finds himself trapped between a culture where he is a custodian and another where he seeks a friendship that ultimately drowns him. This, the plays, and indeed, the paper argue(s) makes him a perpetual slave to two cultures: one intervening and the other made subservient by either neglect or total abandonment.

Keywords: drama; tradition; criticism; Kalu Uka; history

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INTRODUCTION

A dominant motif in modern African drama is the recourse by playwrights to cultural traditions as source material with which to build their theme for the edification of their audience. Kalu Uka can be said to write in the tradition of the first generation of dramatists in Africa, namely, in addition to the above, the obsession with the cults of the ancestors, the concern with the collision of traditions, etc. This no doubt must have informed his adaptation to stage in 1975 of Achebe's *Arrow of God*. And it was this feat that established Uka as a consummate experimental artist of the virtuoso kind combining as critic, playwright and director; having also already established himself as a courageous scholar in the evolutionist school of the traditions of theatre in Africa in the 1960s. Thus his plays have a touch of the classical tradition of the Sophoclean model where his central characters evoke our sense of compassion. Our focus in this paper is with his two plays: *Ikhamma* and *A Harvest for Ants* (adaptation of *Arrow of God*)³. One interesting feature about these plays is that their background presents unique cultural experiences of the Igbo people of Nigeria. And it is glaring how he makes effort to pass on these experiences to his audience. The composition generally is based on the Igbo folkways. This becomes the kernel that feeds his artistic oeuvre through and through. And it is needful to note that he does not in either play present an uncritical picture of his people's tradition. Therefore, two issues shall form the centre of our discussion of these plays namely, the interaction between drama and tradition, and the playwright's attitude to the tradition of his people in the face of a fast changing society.

IKHAMMA AS RELIGIOUS COMMUNION

In *Ikhamma*, ritual permeates the entire world of the play. The playwright himself confesses to the fact that "the need to shatter the core of ritual as part of original religious communion and communication grows every day as we shift from the old ways into newer ways of looking at our life in Nigeria and Africa" (preface, vii). *Ikhamma* can then be said to be a play in search of the rituality of life in the hope of regeneration and rediscovery; one of those 'searches' in the mode and mould of an artistic renaissance.

The character of Joe glass combines the traits of the stranger-enemy with those of the indigenous enemy in a drama that seeks to attain peace through a conflict of wills. The introduction of the Stranger element brings to mind a tampering of tradition with the demands of a fast changing *modern* world of mechanisation. Joe Glass is portrayed as a well travelled man who returns with new enlightenment different from the people's ways of life. Thus, he seeks love in the most modern way; a search that brings him into serious controversy with established and deep-rooted costumes and traditions. He may be in search of true love within the inhibitions that tradition places before him but he is also interested in and he pursues the true discovery of his roots. He affirms this:

True, Wise tongue
Of the stores of legend and legerdemain ...
I am sure. I am sure you know
That I was here before, in my own right!
Do not ask me to return. To turn
Me back, is like sending me in circles
Round and round ...
I have returned – If you but
Let me, as I ask, this one time,
This great EKE day, if you gave
Your place to me, try to link

³ His other plays are *Corridors of Booty*, *Eavesdroppers*, *Iyienu*, *Lunch Break*, *Drums in the October Twilight*, *Offia*, *Stone Walls*, *Rag Day* and *Killing the Eagle*.

Me back to the soil and ancestor-beings
Beneath, I will become a new man (26).

Uka seems by this to seek a return or reconciliation of the new with the old ways. What is intoned therefore is the fact that those who have received a new enlightenment from overseas must still return to their roots. Glass is made to acknowledge this fact of their existence and accept it to 'learn anew'. He indeed seems a surrogate of the playwright who has 'always wished to return' to his roots after several travels and sojourns to other lands. He becomes indeed the searcher for a *return*. He hopes to cement this sincere desire for reunion with his roots in a consummation of love with Ugomma and he is also poised to surmount all the barriers to and crucible of his desire; although from the actions it can be deduced that there is some lack of love lust. And this could account for the constant reference to Joe Glass as the stranger from Biase in a manner that invokes a leprous image of his identity. This reference itself is not strange is not a strange development to those engaged in cultural research. Apart from the fact that he hails from neighbouring but different community, he has been estranged from his own roots for a long period of time; therefore he is an outsider to the culture from which he undertakes his search.

One interesting feature of the play that we need to note is that the realm of ritual exposes us fully to the surreal world of it in the same manner it illuminates the realistic world of man. And this is what makes the drama of discovery more interesting as the play in its resourcefulness further throws itself for rich and diverse interpretations.. And the ritual drums never really go out from beginning to the end of the actions of the play; whenever there is a silence it is that of a signal, an omen for caution. Generally, the music from the abyss keeps and sustains our attention on the very essence of ritual. Ritualism in both plays "serves as an active contrivance and 'dramatic motif whose aesthetic formalism dissolves the barrier of individual distance,' is a remedial activity which ensures the constant regenerative process of the universe" (Adedeji 106). The beginnings of both plays fully explicate this world of ritual enactment and at the centre of the stage of action is the village shrine conspicuously placed, which is an indicator of the people's tradition. Take the opening of *Ikhamma* for instance:

A gigantic Mask, three-faced, life-sized, imposes a commanding presence over entire acting area, its nostrils, eyes, ears, and mouth large enough to take a full-sized man. Each view of the Mask is a shift in perspective and perception (xiii).

It is within this setting that the ikolo drums rend and decorate the air to prepare the ground for the ritual atmosphere of the actions of the play. It also sustains the constant interaction between the real and surreal worlds in union of dependence and interdependence. Like every traditional society, in *A Harvest*, Umuaro depends on constant ritual performance which Ezeulu carries out on behalf of his community at the sighting of every new moon.

Part of the occasion that involves ritual again is marriage and this seen in the bridal union of Obika and Okuata. In this case the basic features must not be missing. Within the ritual, the playwright exposes one aspect of materialism that has invaded the ritual tradition of his people, namely: when Anosi the medicine man insists on taking home the sacrificial hen, Edogo agrees with Obika that this trend is not only strange but also a sign of greed. Edogo seems to hand Anosi to posterity: "As father would say, if a diviner wants to eat the entrails of sacrifice like a vulture, the matter lies between him and his *chi*" (25). A man's *chi* in Igbo culture is his personal god which also adds up to his conscience. This shows then that in as much as the playwright is devoted to more substantial spheres of his people's culture, he is not altogether indifferent to the 'crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs' (Williams 48). By so doing the playwright at this point maintains a critical distance between his culture and himself as a dramatist-critic in order to be able to satirise the unbecoming attitude of supposed custodians of culture like Anosi who after taking what is his share from the suppliants also eats what belongs to the gods. Again, since the playwright is not only interested in adapting the original prose work to stage, he sustains his critical balance as sensitive needle to justify the fact that just as social abuses are argued against from religious standpoints so also are religious abuses condemned from social or political or literary dramatic positions (Coleman 61).

A HARVEST OF FOR ANTS: SEEKING CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

A Harvest for Ants can be said to be the playwright's apologia for tradition as well as an activist commentary on the social realities of modern Nigeria. Uka's interest in adapting Achebe's *Arrow of God* for the stage can thus first be understood in his ardent love for tradition of an enlightened kind and his piquancy for institutionalising it even in the face of a modern Christian-dominated and technology-driven world where he is a convert. However, in the face of this Christian conviction, his voice can clearly be heard in a search for an equipoise between tradition and the Christian faith (or should one say, modernity?). Thus, while he does not deny the sacrilege committed by Oduche in the latter's imprisonment of the sacred python, he handles this action with a somewhat kind finesse and rather makes Oduche to apologise to his father:

I am sorry, father. Mr Unachukwu and Mr Goodcountry misled me. They also introduced me to Mr Clarke, one of the new whitemen. That is why I have come back (50).

Compare this with the original text:

That afternoon Oduche returned, looking like a fowl soaked in the rain. He greeted his father fearfully but he ignored him completely (Achebe 60).

Oduche's approach may be likened to Gideon's radical approach in the Bible where the latter broke down the idols of his people in an attempt to prove his faith in the God of Israel. Thus, while the playwright may wish for an embrace with the 'new ways of looking at our life', the approach should come in form of an understanding by all parties concerned. In this regard, Uka seems to explain that the presence of Ezeulu as priest could also help to mitigate Oduche's offence in the face of a penalty or vengeance coming from Ezidemili. The handling of this conflict can be described as the embodiment of the society's knowledge of, and ways of dealing creatively with some of the problems that are associated with death like oath-taking and witchcraft (Amali 17, 13). Therefore, against all threats from Izidemili for propitiation or punishment an intervention is sought in order not to toe the extreme side of what may be the demands of tradition in such a matter.

However, one thing is clear from this incident and what finally befalls Ezeulu at the end of the play: the coexistence of two conflicting elements in Igbo culture and social life at this time. Ezeulu is the traditional priest of Ulu and yet he still sends his son to be his ear and eyes in the Whiteman's religion. From here, one is open to the thinking that the Igbo people at this time, like any people who find themselves in similar condition, subscribe to two apparently contradictory set of beliefs: they seem torn between their weak acceptance of the Christian faith and their already imbibed traditional culture. This may be one of the reasons why the playwright provides an opportunity to mitigate Joe Glass' sacrilege in *Ikhamma* for touching the maiden of the sacred shrine of Ibinna even though this quest eventually fails. It is actually an attempt at reconciling an age-long controversy between two enemy-communities. And even in the face of the seeming success of the attempt the people's tradition still punishes Joe Glass. Nonetheless, it is evident from the concluding voices in the play and the seeds he 'has poured into Ugomma's bowels' that a new dawn beyond their tradition is being charted for the people.

Another aspect of Igbo tradition (also present in many other African cultures) which is evident in both plays is the problem of predestination and reincarnation. These theological problems form the centre of the conflict in *Ikhamma*. The play deals with the problem of predestination and the attempt to reverse unpleasant curses in the face a contravention. In this regard, Ugomma seeks deliverance from the fate of being a devotee to a shrine by yielding to the stranger's love advances and faces the wrath of tradition. Both of them face imminent danger and now with the approval of Ugomma's mother they seek a solution to avert this unpleasant state of affairs. The playwright seems to assure us that it is possible,

though not always certain, to atone in sacrifices for such curses brought about by man's disobedience. This is a testament to the fact that "man lives secure in the conviction that between the inexorable fate laid down for an individual and the execution of that fate lies the possibility of the way out" (Britwum 83)⁴.

These sacrifices, the play intones, are needed for peace otherwise the reason is not clear why Nneugo for instance would let go her husband and seven sons. Again, the sacrifices bring to mind Oko Akomaye's religious paradox in Soyinka's plays and thus "from the religious sphere has come the boldest and most creative attempt to resolve the tragic collision of social forces created by the phenomenon of acculturation" (34). This development is evident in Joe Glass and his actions can also be explained in this light as with Oduche in *A Harvest* which temporarily tears the society apart and strengthens the antagonism between Ezeulu and his malefactors. More so, what the playwright does not resolve in *Ikhamma* in our opinion is the fact of why a willing Joe Glass should be allowed to die because, on the full realisation of his sacrilege, he is ready to undergo another search of confusion into a remedial action but the overzealous Oriji truncates the process, casting him, in a tacit agreement with Ibinna, into the rivers of eternity. Curiously, Attama flees betraying a sign that he was originally part of the ploy to bring the sacrifices into a disaster; thus, taking the offenders to the people's court of appeal and their embodied spirit to determine the real values whose face has been defiled in Ugomma. This embodied spirit is what Raymond Williams would call the 'idea of culture of a people'. And for Joe Glass a modern man who also has imbibed the diverse (modern) cultures of institutionalised British functionalism or American historical reconstruction or both, he faces double hurdles of identity crisis and inter-clan feud⁵. The point being made can be said to be that in the play ritual sacrifices paves way for the final judgement to appease the gods and ritual music usually provides the needed background for all searches.

The problem of reincarnation and the ritual calling home of the spirits of some dead persons receive focal attention in *A Harvest* where Ezeulu's first wife Okuata dies during the period of an awkwardly seated new moon. Accordingly, Obika's new bride is named after Okuata since she is seen to be old Okuata come back to the world of the living. Thus in the ceremony to welcome the new bride we are taken into the 'Sacrifice of Burial at the Crossroads'. This may be to drive out such spirits that may be responsible for evil deaths. However, the rites involved may vary from place to place. What is most important in such exercises is that "those who die unholy deaths must be accorded ritual transfer burials" (Ifie 150).

One important aspect of tradition of the Igbo people which marks them out from many traditional societies in Nigeria comes to the fore in *A Harvest*. There is no room for autocratic leadership because of the fact that the Igbo society places high premium on "independence of every man and of his right to speak on matters of concern to him and, flowing from it, a rejection of any form of absolutism which might endanger those values" (Achebe *Creation Day* 103). This is why the frequent open confrontation between Ezeulu and Nwaka can be sustained without any fear of repercussion of an attack on the respected priest of Ulu.

In *A Harvest*, the playwright brings elements of oral narratives which offer us the opportunity of the knowledge of the people's history, folktales, etc. The Story-Teller (Anosi) in the play is the playwright's mouthpiece; and so, from the very beginning of actions his intention is apparent as to the Whiteman's role in the desecration of the people's customs. This is not done in isolation of his comments on Ezeulu's extreme position in refusing to eat the balance of the sacred yams in order to pave way for the new Yam festival. There are certain aspects of tradition that the reader may not have had access to if not in the mouth of Anosi. The many feasts of Umuaro could not been well outlined as we find it in *Arrow of God* and thus, in Act V he systematically alludes to them with their specific uses. Again, he views the tradition that invests so much power in Ezeulu or makes him feel he has such powers as also enmeshed in contradictions: "Akubue's visit led me to know some of the reasons for that peculiar bitterness which Ezeulu wore" (43).

The playwright agrees that Ezeulu wields enormous power as priest of the most powerful god in the

⁴ Cited in Britwum (80-90) where he espouses extensively on this subject matter.

⁵ For details see Kaplan's Culture Theory.

land. It is to this power is that Ezeulu holds tenaciously to revenge on the people's purported abandonment of him when was imprisoned at Okperi. Granted that his absence as a result of his incarceration prevented him from eating the yams month after month as demanded by tradition; but his stubborn refusal at the end of to yield to the wish and plea of his people smacks of a desire to avenge than obey tradition. Thus at the end of he becomes the arrow shooting at the people as well as himself in a cause and effect fashion. But whether Ezeulu in his actions and as the embodiment of the community being can be seen to be the needed scourge against his community is however debatable at this stage, for he seems to have taken his vengeance too far in a society that savours individualism.⁶

CONCLUSION

Indeed, with the two plays, Uka has demonstrated that tradition has created in all us schizophrenia where "we are all products of both indigenous and borrowed traditions" (Uka *Creation* 14). In both plays this is evident. Two contradictory modes of life define the dilemma of the modern African man. This is the fate we find with the characters and communities in Uka's plays discussed here. *Ikhamma* is a play that its surreal atmosphere tasks the critic's mind but yet offers room for diverse readings. It defines also the unending search for the meaning of existence that each of us is daily engaged in. This is the search that Ezeulu engages in, consciously or unconsciously, as we find him trapped between a culture where he is a custodian and another where he seeks a friendship that ultimately drowns him.

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⁶ Obafemi (2001) sees Clark's Ozidi as a symbol of community being and a scourge against his community. See especially the chapter on Clark's animist vision.