

RITUALS, DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE IN OUR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A READING OF ESIABA IROBI'S *NWOKEDI* (A PLAY)

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Abstracts

The reconstruction and renewal of the society which rituals enact in traditional society have drawn the interest of contemporary dramatists in charting a course for the society beleaguered in political debauchery and social imbalance. This study examines the positions of the playwright in *Nwokedi* (A Play) as he offers antidote for the nagging problem of governance in our society through the traditional approach of rituals. Esiaba Irobi expresses disdain for governance in our contemporary society and advocates for its reordering through rituals. This paper assesses the workability of his propositions in redeeming our societal ethos and thereafter proffer acceptable solutions to the governance problem bedeviling our society. The paper concludes that the playwright's intervention is premised on demonstration of the artist's calling in social advocacy.

Keywords: Rituals, governance, *Nwokedi*, cleansing, rites, society, people.

Introduction

Rituals play significant roles in determining the wellbeing of the people in traditional African society. The importance of rituals hinges on the societies' prioritisation of purification of persons and the community at regular intervals. This purification or cleansing gives a sense of renewal to the community and rebirth to person(s) living therein.

In an attempt to fulfill their social responsibility, African playwrights recourse to the traditional society, investigate such measures that invigorated spiritual and moral status of the people and apply them in solving prevalent problems in our contemporary society. Adeoti (89) notes that:

Sometimes the playwrights creatively explore aspects of indigenous culture to articulate their political and artistic concern. One significant aspect of indigenous culture explored in contemporary drama is the tradition of purification.

The contemporary playwrights have realised that the level of decadence in our society contributes significantly to quality of politics and administration in our society. Hence, they see a need for ritual cleansing of the degenerate society, in order to minimise or reduce to the barest

minimum incidence of corrupt practices and immoralities. To this end, Irobi explores the essence of rituals in bringing about desired change in the society.

In *Nwokedi* (A play), Irobi presents revolutionary change of the status quo in Osisioma, a hypothetical African society which has experienced corrupt governance for a long time. The setting of the play symbolises some African or developing countries which have been experiencing misgovernance over the years. The Ekumeku age group which is similar to modern prodemocracy group spearheads the call for change and *Nwokedi* Jr., son of a serving senator, heads the group. The age group is disenchanted with the failed promises of the politicians, which has brought about corrupt tendencies of the politicians and the underdevelopment of the area.

Consequently, *Nwokedi* Jr. publicly revolts against his father, *Nwokedi* Snr. during his campaign for reelection and chose Ozoemena, an unemployed graduate, to contest in place of his own father and the people accepts *Nwokedi*'s proposal. This development causes his father to disown him, but *Nwokedi* remains unperturbed in his quest for entrenchment of good governance and orderliness in the society.

Meanwhile, the people of Osisioma carry out

annual rituals on the 31st December, which is celebrated with the spilling of the blood of a ram. Nwokedi, as the leader of the Ekumeku, the youth group that organises the festival, reorders the programme and substitutes the animal blood with human's. Thus, he machetes both Senator Arikpo, his brother-in-law and Nwokedi Snr. his father to cleanse the land of evil and invigorate it with renewal.

UFO – BEARER: An evil year has died with its ugly burden. An evil year has crawled past hunch-backed with grief and anguish. The hungry earth is gorged with blood.

CHORUS: And blood is the rain that falls upon the land.

NWOKEDI (A play) (93)

Nwokedi's murder of his father gives him renewed strength and he is able to carry on with the task of cleansing the society. Nwokedi sees his father as a hindrance to his aspiration and now that his father is out of the way, his aim will be achieved. This attitude is in consonance with Sigmund Freud's (176) postulation in "Totem and Taboo" as cited by Eric Gans thus:

Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength...

Similarly, Nwokedi Jr.'s action reflects the concern of literature as puts forward by Marxists that "the function of literature is to make the populace aware of social ills and sympathetic to action that will wipe those ills away" (Dobie 95). In essence, the people accept the violent aspect of ritual Nwokedi undertakes as a necessary means of effecting change in the troubled society.

However, it is wrong to classify Nwokedi Jr.'s action as a means of festering personal discord with his father whom he sees as an obstacle to realisation of moral ethics in the society. Therefore, we disagree with Douglas's (116) view

that: "... public rituals may express public concerns when they use inanimate doorposts or animal sacrifices: but public rituals enacted on the human body are taken to express personal and private concerns ..." Given the sociological privilege a senator's son enjoys in Nigeria, it will be improper to attribute Nwokedi's action to settling personal scores with his father, because his grouse with him is for public good and killing his father is aimed at redressing the ethos and values of the society and not for personal concern.

The Playwright – Esiaba Irobi

Esiaba Irobi belongs to the category of Nigerian writers referred to as emerging writers. This group of writers projects the cultural milieu of the Nigerian people as well as satirises contending issues in the Nigerian society. The first generation of Nigerian writers is: Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe etc. The second generation is: Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Olu Obafemi, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, What distinguishes the emerging writers from the previous generations of Nigerian writers is the emphasis on satire, due apparently to their disdain for misgovernance in the country. Obafemi describes these writers thus:

The generation of Nigerian writers who began to flourish from the late eighties had no pretension of any sort to committing their writing to specific ideological standpoints. These young men and women were and are justifiably impatient with the exponential rate at which chaos and incoherence which manifest in poverty, injustice and squalor have overtaken the country, richly endowed, but wantonly impoverished by philistine and cynical leadership (29).

Irobi, however, situates his writings within the sphere of the Igbo cultural realm (Igbo is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria) and this is projected in his other plays: *Cemetery Road*, *Froned Circle*, *Am I Too Loud*, *Hangman Also Die* and *The other side of the mask* Ajumose describes Irobi's drama in the following words:

...Irobi has specifically interpreted myth within the Igbo cultural tradition to suit the contingency of a post-military

Nigerian generation. More so, Irobi has articulated nascent dramatic and cultural theories that corroborate the corpus of his distinctively polemical drama. (37)

Aside from drama, Esiaba Irobi also writes poetry and his collections have won him accolades in the Nigerian literary climes. Among his published poems are: *Cotyledons* (1987), *Inflorescence* (1989), *Why I Don't Like Phillip Larking and Other Poems* (2005).

Nwokedi (A Play): A Reflection of the Nigerian Socio-Political Environment

The playwright reflects the turmoil in the socio-political ordering of Nigerian society through the satiric portrayal of decadent governance of both military and civilian administrations. Both the military and the civilians have the Nigerian society at different times and the results have been disastrous for the populace as a result of corrupt practices of the leaders.

Irobi registers his displeasure with the state of affairs in Nigeria through his characters, especially the protagonist, Nwokedi Jr. and to a significant extent, Mrs. Nwokedi. In the first act of the play "first circle", (*Nwokedi* is a three acts play and the acts are named: "First circle", "second circle" and "Third circle" respectively), the playwright reveals the inept leadership of the politicians which results in bad governance, mindless plundering and siphoning of the people's recourses. Irobi reiterates that the people should do away with their complacency and confront the politicians by preventing them from seeking re-election. Senator Arikpo informs Mrs. Nwokedi how the youths of Ugep revolted against him and touched his magnificent house because he failed to heed their warning that he should not seek re-election.

ARIKPO: They planted a bomb in the parlour and blew it into pieces. In-law, they razed it to the ground, to the very foundations.

MRS NWOKEDI: Why?

ARIKPO: They said I built it with stolen money, political money, corrupt money, the voter's money. They said I didn't perform in my first term of office (cynically). That as a senator, I should have made laws which would abolish

unemployment in this nation. Imagine that, in-law. What one man can bull-doze the Senate into manufacturing jobs for the jobless multitudes parading the myriad streets of this nation?

Nwokedi (A Play) (4)

The attitude of Senator Arikpo is common place in the Nigerian political set up, as politicians do not see performance as a yardstick for seeking re-election to office. Such politicians rely on "god fatherism" (a Nigerian English coinage which means political leadership that exerts undue influence on elected political office holders. Such influence, more often than not, is to the detriment of the populace) and their stupendous wealth in foisting themselves on the hapless masses and the people. The mass of the people, in most instances, indulge the politicians who perpetually confine them to penurious existence. Irobi satirises similar situation in the Nigerian society in a bid to advocate for a better society for the people to live in. However, in the Nigerian society, a Senator Arikpo, will be allowed to campaign, contest and probably rig himself into office while the people will only grumble and lament their predicament of misrule of additional four years. Jega (2007) notes:

... elected Nigerian civilian leaders have demonstrated ample evidence of squandering of opportunities for national greatness and an inordinate ability to merely muddle up our socioeconomic and political predicament (179)

The prevalence of unaccountability in governance in Nigeria has limited the socioeconomic development of the nation and rendered infrastructural facilities prostrate. Consequently, the populace becomes the most hit in terms of neglect and dubious politicians who caused untoward hardship for the people enjoy their opulence by junketing across the globe and amassing stupendous wealth. As this worrisome situation continues, Nigerians, in most instances, look on as they are confined to miserable existence or lay their complaints on the doorstep of God for solution to their palpable problem.

The playwright proposes challenge of the politicians in order to stop their intransigence. Such challenge will question the rationale behind the re-election of the corrupt and inept politicians

and makes the people to determine whether their performance actually merits a second time in office. Nwokedi demonstrates quintessence of patriotism through his rejection of his corrupt father in public and presenting a resourceful young man in his place.

The playwright uses “a play within a play” device to reveal the episode where Nwokedi Jr. inspired Ekumeku youths to reject his father. The device enhances entertainment and strengthens the plot of the play. In *Nwokedi*, the “play within the play”, through Mrs. Nwokedi, the readers experience how Nwokedi denounces his father’s re-election bid, advises the people to reject him and urges them to accept the candidacy of a young unemployed graduate, Ozoomena, to replace him at the Senate.

MRS NWOKEDI: (*Pointing at Arikpo*) Standing beside me is a distinguished rogue, a political obscenity, a resourceful liar who thinks he can come here every four years and commandose us into selling our destiny to him. Before you Ekumeku, is a high-degree thief, a confidence trickster, a carapace tortoise whose gray-haired eneration as ruptured our future and left us floundering in the wind like yellow leaves in harmattan. This same crook standing here, this vegetable who calls himself my father, summoned us like this four years ago. Did he not?
(Emphasis mine)

Nwokedi (A Play) (11)

Nwokedi’s conduct is in contrast with ethnic jingoism that is in vogue in Nigerian politics. It is rare to see a politician’s son, his entire family or his community to reject him on account of non-performance in the Nigerian society as Nwokedi has done in this play. Ethnic consideration plays significant role in determining acceptability of politicians. Performance, more often than not is overlooked. Kukah (1999) is of the view that:

Most students of the African political scene are agreed on the fact that both ethnicity and religion are the most

dangerous threats to the attainment of democracy in Africa (93).

Nigeria’s growth and development are stunted and ultimately retarded because ethnic bias is placed above genuine patriotism and service to the country. Irobi, through his protagonist, canvases for a synergy between performance and re-election into office, and that, in the occasion of failure, unsatisfactory or non-performance of a politician, he should be rejected right from his immediate family to the entire community.

The stance of the playwright on politicians does not in any way connote that, he has preference for military rule in Nigeria. The conduct of Nwokedi at the National Youth Service Orientation Camp demonstrates the playwright’s outright rejection of military institutions and government in Nigeria. Nwokedi rebelled against the military authority at the Orientation Camp in order to educate the other young graduates that military authority is an anathema to development and growth in the country. The following conversation between Nwokedi and the NYSC Orientation Camp Commandant, Awado, attests to the former’s disdain for the military:

AWADO: Come here! Why you no dey for parade? (*Nwokedi ignores him*) No be you I de ask? Why you no dey for drill?

NWOKEDI: (*With epical disgust*) Drill? Isn’t it drill that took away your reasoning?

AWADO: (*grabs Nwokedi by the arm*) I dey ask you! Why you no dey march?

NWOKEDI: Marching deflects a man’s thoughts, deflects his reasoning, turns him into a zombie.

Nwokedi (Play) First Circle (26)

Nwokedi’s abhorrence for the military indicates that the military governments have not fared better in governance of the Nigerian society and as such, may not be a preferable option. It would be recalled that, the country went through unprecedented oppression, repression and tyranny during the years the military governed. Consequently, there was stagnation in economic development. Dasylyva (2003) notes:

In recent times, the Nigerian polity has witnessed the worst of violence

and gross violation of fundamental human rights during the last two decades of military rule. This is predictably so because the military government is fundamentally an aberrant government. Its usurpation of power from the civilian government makes it hyper-sensitive to criticism, besides it is trained to kill and to destroy (not build) the enemy. The military in Nigeria seemed until recently, to have often regarded itself as an army of occupation treating the citizens, the intelligentsia in particular, as an enemy.

(215)

Irobi's renunciation of the corrupt politicians and his denunciation of the military institution in his play provide enough justification that he hinges salvation of the country on credible democratic rule. Such civil governance must prioritise the welfare of the people through provision of adequate infrastructural facilities which will impact meaningfully on the existence of the people and make the leaders accountable to them. The contemporary situation of graft, pilfering and squandering of the nation's resources by the political class is not acceptable to the playwright, hence his call for a total overhaul of the system. The playwright's postulation is in line with Ngugi Wa Thiongo's assessment of the role of writers in our societies as he observes that:

A writer responds with his personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. Wa Thiong'o (47)

Irobi insinuates that our society and the political gladiators require ritual cleansing for positive changes to take place. In the play Nwokedi takes on the people's oppressors violently, which is in line with Marxists' revolutionary leaning of outright rejection of complacency of the people in the face of moral degeneration in the society. He confronts the political loafers and looters of the common till,

headlong in order to revert power back to the people. Hence, Nwokedi can be considered a Marxist because as Dobie (90) notes, "the Marxist, then works to reveal the internal contradictions of capitalism so that the proletariat will recognise their subjugation and rise up to seize what is rightfully theirs".

The Paradox of Purification in the Play

In traditional African society, ritual cleansing is prescribed for bestowing renewal on a debased society. Such ritual is couched in blood sacrifice, which the generality of the people believe, is capable of relieving them of their myriad of problems. So, everyone looks forward to the time, a ritual would be performed for the reinvigoration of the land. Kyalo (2013) observes that: "Ritual is, often communal, consisting of prescribed actions performed periodically and /or repetitively. Ritual is a form of giving confidence in the face of dangers" (34).

In the play, the Ekpe festival is performed annually to celebrate the death of the old year and birth of the new one. It takes place on the 31st December of the outgoing year and Nwokedi has been mandated to carry out the slaughter of the sacrificial animal at the shrine of the gods. The blood of the sacrificial animal is meant to renew the strength of the land and the common till.

Consequently, courage is required from anyone undertaking the ritual of regeneration which Nwokedi is to perform. Nwokedi's age grade and the society must have noticed such virtue in him, and his actions in the play leaves no one in doubt about his bravery and revolutionary aura, which are demonstrated at every instance in the play. In the first instance, Nwokedi, who as a son of a serving Senator is expected to give unalloyed support to his corrupt father because of the immense benefit such cooperation is capable of bestowing on him, rebelled against his father in the glare of public scrutiny. Thus, altering the societal posturing of giving support to your kith and kin, even when he or she violates the norms and nuances of the society. Irobi speaks to the society through the protagonist of his play on the need to do away with politics of ethnic loyalty and team up with the progressives in order to move the nation forward.

Nwokedi also challenges overbearing

posturing of the military at the NYSC orientation camp by beating up Awado, a soldier in charge of parade. Such feat is novel in the Nigerian society, where the military prides itself as an arrogant institution that sees the people as underlings. Nwokedi hinges the liberation of the people on challenging the system that holds them in captivity and he does not see anything wrong in what he has done. The following conversation ensued between Nwokedi and the other corps members who do not want him to endanger his life through confrontation with the military officers.

HABIBA: Please drop these things and run
CORPER: Run for your life

NWOKEDI: Run? Why should I run? Why? (Fierily) This is our moment. When we must gather our strength and energies into the demands of a revolution. This is the moment when what makes us young men and women must muster us to the last and supreme sacrifice.

Nwokedi (A Play) (28)

Though the soldiers thereafter subject him to merciless beating, he has made a statement in ridiculing the military institution which the civilians had held in awe before then. The incident enhanced people's perception of Nwokedi as a hero because Habiba sees him as a kind of man she can date due to his bravery.

Nwokedi exhibits appreciable intelligence in unraveling the mysterious deaths of his sister and nephews who are members of the family of Senator Arikpo. It is through this revelation that the readers are made aware of the debauchery of Nigerian politicians in going to the extent of using their family members as rituals in order to entrench themselves in office. Senator Arikpo offers weak a defense to the allegation, hence raising the suspicion of his culpability and emphasising the brilliance of Nwokedi. Before then, everyone had believed that the wife and child of Senator Arikpo had died in the inferno that occurred in his house and it is the demonstration of sheer intelligence of Nwokedi that gave Senator Arikpo up. Hence, the playwright reiterates that liberation of the society should be anchored on enlightened citizenry in the

mould of Nwokedi, who combines courage with intelligence.

In the village, the tradition of ritual cleansing involves spilling the blood of ram, but Nwokedi believes the desecration of the ethical values in the society is enormous, hence the need for greater sacrifice in form of human blood. He initiates the change of sacrificial offering and executes the ritual through spilling the blood of his father (Nwokedi Snr.) and brother-in-law (Senator Arikpo). Thus, Nwokedi becomes the voice of his people throughout the play, as they appreciate his gallantry and give him the needed support. Osu (2011) holds the view that:

In the later play, *Nwokedi*, however, the dominant revolutionary atmosphere is that of a people who have transcended the realm of the old civilization. This signifies some moralist ideological progression in Esiaba Irobi. All through Nwokedi's rampaging and blood thirsty campaign of cleansing the society, the people stood solidly by him and the Ekumeku cult of young revolutionaries.

Though the play is written in the 21st century with its civilization, yet the playwright is able to blend traditional ritual practices with modern ideology in advocating for change in our value system. In an interview with Gbemisola Adeoti (2010), Esiaba Irobi avers that. "... The approach I am suggesting might involve slicing a few throats. But isn't sacrificing necessary for change?" Thus, he has proffered solutions to the problem of inept governance confronting the Nigerian society. Though the solution Irobi is proposing appears to be flawed and may not be realisable in the present dispensation because of our multi - ethnic orientation and religious dispensation.

Irobi's position in this play is contradictory, he advocates for politics devoid of ethnic and tribal considerations which is in tandem with the contemporary reality for nations desirous of growth and unmitigated development but on the other hand, the playwright's advocacy for traditional form of cleansing is capable of plunging the country into unimaginable crises. Irobi's approach of employing traditional values of rituals may generate unimaginable tension and lead to political quagmire in a multi - ethnic society

Conclusion

Irobi espouses the tenets of good governance and committed followership in *Nwokedi (A play)*. He sees this as the panacea for the evolution of an enduring society. To this end, the playwright advocates for politics devoid of undue favouritism, where performance will be the yardstick for sustaining political office holders in power. Irobi's

postulation on ritual cleansing is apt but the violent mode, he is suggesting is aberrant because of the backlash of ethnic colouration which it is capable of unleashing on us. If there would be ritual cleansing, such should not involve human sacrifice, because the violence which would erupt on its account may be too much to bear.

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