

**STAGE PERFORMANCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY:
IMAGES OF INSECURITY IN KALU OKPI'S
ECHOES IN PERFORMANCE**

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Abstract

*The spate of insecurity in Nigeria is alarming and spreading fast to all strata of the society. It is a negative trend that limits progress, inhibits national and individual development. The recent security concerns in Nigeria show that Nigerians neglect their cultural values and disciplinary tenets which in the past shaped their communities as peaceful and violence free. These values are waning hence the upsurge in crime and all forms of vices which are signposts of insecurity and loss of identity. However, these can be curbed through a conscientization of cultural ethics, taboos and norms as contained in drama and performances on stage. This paper argues that stage performances are key instruments that can be used to reconcile and re-orient the masses towards recovering their lost and dented identity. The research explores the treatment of topical issues such as corruption, insecurity and the role of the family in Kalu Okpi's *Echoes* as panacea to socio-political conflicts. Using a socio-cultural analysis of the text and a participatory observatory approach of the performance, the researcher's findings reveal that performances influence the sensibilities of the audience to take positive action. The paper concludes that performances should form part of national vehicle towards re-orientation; rehabilitation and re-conscientization of the Nigerian masses towards national identity, ethnicity and social stability.*

Introduction

The arts have continued to make man its primary concern. From the time of the primordial man till the post modernist age, drama and theatre continue to reside within the ambiance of man's existence and his conflict with the environment. However, while man understands his environment through his interactions with fellow homo-sapiens, the study of the graph of natural occurrences, and the reaction of man to it, shows that human beings learn better using these natural configurations. Culture could be said to have united people of the same descent in time of crisis because they are bound by the same norms and values. However, the amalgamation of various non-cohesive ethnic groups into an entity called Nigeria, means that this amalgam of culture is a multi-cultural experimentation. Thus, every now and then, frictions will arise. Just as Nigeria is multi-cultural so also are issues pertaining to violence, insecurity, killings, prostitution, armed robbery, cheating, deviancy and inexcusable corrupt practices many.

The merging of non-cohesive entities together has increased ethnic politics, nepotism, rivalry and competition. From tribal to ethnic sentiments, Nigeria now witnesses individualized politics where those voted into public offices represent nobody but themselves. The sense of representation and collectivism has left them as they pursue individual materialistic interests. This is why communities have also lost grip of their representatives; restless youths now pursue their own interest through violent and desperate means in order to measure up in the society. Contentment is no longer a virtue in Nigeria because the 'money politics' has enlarged the appetite of Nigerians for materialism which also accounts for the high drop-out of boys from school in Eastern Nigeria.

Basically, when the culture of a people is bastardized,

every other evil which has been allowed to persist for a while, becomes an acceptable norm, Ezenweke notes that the “rich cultural values, coated with sense of sacredness which aided African civilization and which seemed to have been swept off by the wind of globalization” (267) had in the past influenced positively the lives of Africans/Nigerians. Therefore, the core identity of the people has been trampled on and replaced with that of British and this occasioned injustice and corruption. Hence, today's Nigeria, built on foreign foundation and idealistic visions of a better country is on the verge of collapse with incessant instabilities in every region of the country.

The Stage holds a beacon of light for mass re-orientation and a re-awakening to traditional system of leadership. The imperative for reviving cultural and traditional norms in dramatic performances and cultural education is highly necessary. This paper analyzes the stage as a catalyst towards socio-cultural and political re-orientation of the populace especially in curbing violence, insecurity, killings, deviant actions and instabilities in the Nigerian society, as exemplified in the stage performance of Kalu Okpi's *Echoes*.

Performance and the Society

Ceremonies and festivals have in the past fostered peace amongst people and communities. Usually, it was the forum where progressive pronouncements were made and evil and deviant activities condemned. During festivals or ceremonies, activities are accompanied with music, dance, masquerades, masking as well as wrestling. From these activities, people are entertained and enlightened. Which goes to say that performance in a village arena often elicit the presence of men, youth, children and women. Its allure cuts across every section of the society because the “masses find solace when drama is

taken to them” (Ogbonna, 1) as it touches their sensibilities. Also back in the days of folktales at the village square “reminiscent of old tunes sung when time was young and beautiful” (1), it was a forum for the learning of culture, taboos, legends and myths from which the people's lives were pitched, and a belief system that fostered peaceful coexistence among communities. Kelechi Ogbonna stresses that “drama as a genre of literature occupies itself with the business of man in action. Man being the thematic kernel of drama seeks for his salvation from the society and by so doing purges himself and purifies the society” (38). Hence through performance, the belief system of the people is strengthened, it creates an atmosphere of peace, it re-enacts the sacredness of the people's norms and values and by so doing the people reconnects. Akomayo Oko refers to the dramatist as a visionary “who shines through the society the scourging light of purification” (99), who through his performance redeems. According to Inegbe, the pre-colonial Nigeria is of the opinion that “theatre is a reflection of life. Right from the pre-colonial, pre-literate days, it has been in existence and it is reflected in the people's festivals, rituals, mythology and other forms of social engagements” (1) hence, performances were some kind of informal education that groomed and indoctrinated children into the society.

Before now, performance was rife among Africans because they celebrate marriage, birth, death, initiations, coronations and all forms of activities. Folktales, dances and wrestling are means of expression amongst the people. Oftentimes, these traditional celebrations carry information on sacred norms, taboos and moral values. Performances therefore serve as vehicle of integration. Hence, Inegbe opines further that:

Nigerian playwrights in the years before and immediately after Independence wrote to correct certain misheld notions about her people. Others wrote to magnify and eulogize those aspects of the Nigerian culture that promote good will and social harmony.(1)

It is germane to note that the improviser, the drama, poetic and narratives created for the performance on stage, chronicles the failings of society, leadership and human concerns. These artistic expressions painted against the backdrop of the people's culture helps to retouch their sensibilities and correct their actions. Performances as vanguard for national identity and sustainability will archive cultural elements and positive traditional norm and values as means of agitation on stage. Ipso facto, mis-governance, tribalism, ethnicity, kidnapping and bombing are aberrations which Ekweariri and Onyemuchara maintain, arise "because military rule is seen as an aberration, (hence) the performing arts as an arm of art was used to speak out against the administration" (359). Thus performance as catalyst for change is a medium that vivifies in visual and aural appeal that positive life style, stable and peaceful co-existence as well as humane policies that ensure social stability. Hubert Ogunde's theatre played similar roles through performances. In 1944, Ogunde's *The Garden of Eden and The Throne of God* was staged at the:

Cherubim and Seraphim sect based in Lagos...in aid of the Church building fund...Ogunde decided to make his first social satirical comment by writing a play designed to expose the vulgarity and ostentatiousness of the craze. He called the play *Human Parasites: A Tragedy in Two Acts*. (Clark, 296-298)

A Social comment on prevailing issues through dramatic performances receive more attention, corrections are easily effected because the audience keeps remembering the images displayed in the performance.

Echoes in Brief

The performance of Kalu Okpi's *Echoes*, at Theatre Complex Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri, as directed by Confidence Onyechege, presents to us the Ezeogo and the elders of Amaukwu in a quagmire. The play is a tale of a traditional Chief who decided to give out Chieftaincy titles to people so that money can be realized to develop the community. By such decision, the Ezeogo selected a man with questionable character and life style. The elders of the village who were not part of the selection opposed the king's decision. However, the king furthered his plans and conferred a Chieftaincy title on Innocent Nwoke; a man whose father disowned because he stole a Church wall clock. Prophet Innocent Nwoke is a notorious thief known by all in Amaukwu. The man; Innocent Nwoke graduated from stealing a wall clock to robbing a bank and fraudulently becoming a prophet in the house of God. He made so much money that the Ezeogo's daughter became pregnant for him. Despite the pleas and demand for moral rectitude, the Ezeogo defied the elders of Amaukwu and crowned Innocent Nwoke, a notorious armed robber; the Onwanagbaraoha 1 of Amaukwu. During the coronation the Ezeogo's crown fell on the ground and the dancers trampled on it. After the coronation, the newly crowned king began to harass the elders for boycotting his coronation ceremony. Fortunately, Sergeant Musa, a police officer investigating Prophet Innocent Nwoke trailed him from Lagos to the village and arrested him and his touts. In a faceoff

with the Police, Prophet Chief Innocent died and his parents were invited to identify and collect his corpse.

The Stage and Social Stability

The stage serves as a social-political commentator and a catalyst for change. The stage can be any found space where a performance can be realized before an audience. Every performance carries a message; information, awareness or values that benefit the audience. Both moral and ethical values help to shape an individual. These values are waning hence the upsurge in crime and all forms of evil vices which are signposts of insecurity and loss of identity. However, these can be curbed through a conscientization of cultural ethics, taboos and norms as contained in dramatic performances on stage (Be it Arena, Thrust, or any Found Space). Stage performances are key instruments that can be used to reconcile and re-orient the masses towards recovering their lost, dented identity and gain stability in homes and community.

The Stage is a vital factor in information dissemination, advocacy, cultural and political enlightenments. It chronicles the socio-political and cultural orientation of the people as well as offer remedial and redemption channels by which certain anomalies can be corrected. Performing live on stage the snapshots of anarchy, nepotism, killings and maiming of life and properties does not solve any problem. When these negative trends are jettisoned through a viable redemptive approach; the populace is easily sensitized to shun violence, corruption, terrorism and all negative vices that impede development and national unity. Hence when playwrights scribble plays that ask for a re-orientation of the people towards upholding cultural ethos, moral values and national identity, they write to foster social stability, peaceful co-

existence and national security. Because any country that is devoid of corruption enjoys sustainable development.

The metaphor of Kalu Okpi's *Echoes* is a statement on traditional/communal government. Kalu Okpi in his wisdom creates characters from traditional background who happen to be the custodians of culture and guardians of moral tenets. The Ezeogo is the traditional ruler of Amaukwu and therefore a custodian of the tradition and culture. The members of the cabinet are elders of Amaukwu who are versed with the cultural and moral tenets of the land; hence these characters are the gatekeepers of the people's norms and values. Again, Kalu Okpi has painted on the canvas the family as a socializing agent that promotes moral values. How and why Innocent Nwoke turned to a 'bad apple' is unexplainable since his parents are of good character and moral rectitude. Here the playwright points out that environment also play dominant role in forming the character of children.

Through the character of Innocent Nwoke, Kalu Okpi makes a generalization of corruption as an ambit of evil that has penetrated all facets of Nigerian economy. We learn through the performance that this evil also permeates the life of some Christians and the Church because Makinde scolds Innocent saying:

I took you to my Church and the Church adopted you and made you into a man...I helped you rise in the Church and then I took you in as my own son...I channeled contracts from my Ministry to you. (P.15)

In reply, Prophet Innocent retorts:

Is it your meager level 15 salary that built this house and all others scattered all over Lagos?

You spend and spend as if money is water... I am not to be trusted; my people are not to be trusted, yet your husband there, big Churchman that he is, trusted me to burn down his office to cover his embezzlement. He trusted me to poison his boss, Mr. Okeke so he could take his position. Mr. Okeke, a man of my own tribe. And yet I am not to be trusted. (P.17, 18)

Conversely, the imperatives of performance as a vehicle to remedy an ailing nation are enormous. When people watch a performance, the action speaks directly to their sensibilities. The images of corruption and that of goodness highlighted in the performance are stamped in their memory for them to choose and align themselves aright. Also a performance brings to the knowledge of the society those hideous practices going on around them. Such information arms the audience with certain precautions. Interestingly, the dramatic literature understudy is a guide in a performance that is geared towards exciting change. A play script targeted to orientate, enlighten and foster positive change is subjected to editing, re-editing and restructuring in order to suit the purpose.

Performance

The performance of *Echoes* at Theatre Complex, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, was tailored towards the orientation of youths to shun corruption, armed robbery, violence and materialism. People are convinced about what they see in action happening before them than what they hear or read about. Seeing a performance taking place before you means that the action is real, there are possibilities that it can happen. The possibility and plausibility sensitizes the

spectator/audience into action. The playwright, penciled down his observations in Amaukwu community, Amaukwu community is a microcosm of Nigeria. The theatre director selected the play to physicalize it, orchestrating its strengths and values in order to educate and enlighten his audience.

The presentation of *Echoes* on a live stage re-enacted the story to a living audience. One of the advantages of a performance is that it offers opportunity to a large audience to see together, hear and understand the storyline. Thus, it furthers awareness and the lessons learnt are implemented by many. During the performance, we learn from the Ezeogo that his intention to crown Prophet Innocent Chief is because “Amaukwu is still very backward: we have no electricity, no pump water, no maternity, not to talk of a hospital. Our neighbours have these things” (P.23). The elders were happy to hear that the Ezeogo had plans of development, but when the name of Prophet Innocent Nwoke was mentioned as the intended son of the land to be crowned Chief, the elders protested and the argument ensued in this manner:

Ezenwata: One of our sons. Pray who may that be?

Ezeogo: It is no other than Innocent Nwoke the son...

(The elders exclaim in disbelief, confusion, anger, bewilderment. Only Nze Okeosisi remains calm)

Ezenwata: Did I hear you well? Did you say Innocent nwoke?

Ezeogo: The same. The son of Elder Nwoke. The one who is a billionaire in Lagos

- Ezenwata:** You must be out of your mind!
Ezeogo: No I am not. I know perfectly what I am doing.
Okosisi: No you don't. Don't you know the story of that boy?
Ezeogo: I know him well.
Okeosisi: And you will give him a Chieftaincy title?
Ezeogo: Yes.
Ezenwata: A chief of which land?
Ezeogo: A Chief of Amaukwu.
Obasi: Ezeogo am sure you are teasing us
Ezeogo: No, I am not. I am quite serious
Ezenwata: yes, seriously mad. That is what you are.
Ezeogo: (angrily) Is that a way to speak to your Eze?
Ezenwata: Yes when you have taken leave of your senses, we take leave also of our good manners...Now wait let me tell you in case you have forgotten Innocent is a thief-a common thief. He stole Church property here, ran away to Lagos and there lives a questionable life. He may be a millionaire but he is still a thief short and simple. (P.28-29)

The above dramatic altercation between the elders and the Ezeogo witnessed a mixed reaction from the audience with a majority applauding the reaction of the elders towards the

Ezeogo's request. The palace of the Ezeogo which the stage designer painted with strong metaphors of authority and leadership lost its balance for a minute because the people refused to accept a thief being imposed on them as a Chief. A Chief in Igbo land is one who knows the culture and traditions of the people and is sworn to keep it, protect it and practice it. Such a person bears the identity of the people not just in clothing (costume) but also in character. But the Ezeogo in his arrogance dismissed the elders, fixed a date and with a handful of miscreants and unknown faces, crowned Prophet Innocent Nwoke thus:

Ezeogo: (Hurriedly) With this cap I install you a Chief of Amaukwu. With this fan, I make you a member of my Cabinet of Chiefs. To all here gathered, be it known that from this day henceforth our young millionaire here, Innocent Nwoke, shall be known and addressed as the Onwanagbaraoha, Amaukwu. (P.38)

When we bastardize our culture, we blame the youth. The dramatist has shown in this action of the Ezeogo that those at the helm of affairs are responsible for the eroding culture, corruption, robbery and all forms of vices that promote insecurity, materialism and political bigotry. The resultant effect of this foolery is that the elders stood their grounds using traditional measures which helped the Police to step into the matter, arrested Chief, Prophet Innocent Nwoke and in the scuffle that ensued; the newly crowned Chief was shot dead.

Impact Factor in *Echoes*

The contributions of this stage performance to the society are enormous. From the performance, we uncovered the

questionable lifestyle of the young man Innocent Nwoke. We also learn of his robbery activities in Lagos, his ordination as a prophet and the people he murdered under the services of Mr. Makinde. We saw with our eyes the appeal made by the elders to the Ezeogo not to give Chieftaincy title to this man with questionable lifestyle, we saw the arrogance of the Ezeogo, we also witnessed the coronation ceremony, the arrival of Prophet Innocent Nwoke with his thugs, how his thugs murdered a man right at the ceremony and his visit to the elders with his thugs. Again during the coronation ceremony, we witnessed the bags of money given to the Ezeogo and his wife and how the Ezeogo's crown fell on the ground while he was dancing.

The impact of this performance in any community is that first, it will bring to the consciousness of the audience the cultural values that guide certain decisions; it will educate the youths to know that questionable lifestyle will deny one estimable positions. Again it will shape the leader/King to understand that despots lose respect from their subjects. The stand that the elders took in the play will encourage other elders, communities and Cabinet members to always do what is right irrespective of the king's decision. Above all, the performance will curb materialism because the storyline and actions reveal that integrity is much more than riches.

Amaukwu is a microcosm of Nigeria hence this negative trend analyzed in *Echoes* applies to all strata of the Nigerian society. We observe in the performance that the elders and the people boycotted the coronation ceremony and shunned the Ezeogo. It is a demonstration that they knew their culture and respected it. The myth surrounding their culture is that such abomination by the king will have consequences on the king and whoever collaborated with him. Hence the elders applied it and it worked for them. If the same approach by the elders in

Echoes is applied to the Nigerian situation, the resultant effect will be positive on Nigerian economy, leadership structure and social stability will be assured.

Conclusion

In the course of studying this performance, findings reveal that performances influence the sensibilities of the audience to take positive action. Also those cultural and traditional elements in the performance had significant impact because the audience identified with the codes and values embedded in the play. The paper concludes that performances should form part of national re-orientation; re-habilitation and re-conscientization of the Nigerian masses. That targeted performances are vehicles towards national identity, ethnicity and social stability. Theatre performances in the arena stage, proscenium, thrust, or any found space; market, village squares, streets or classrooms, excite change when shaped and targeted to a particular audience. The prayer of this paper is that Government and non-Governmental agencies should embark on dramatic performances as a therapeutic way of healing the nation.

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