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Stage interpretation of Spencer Okoroafor's "Battle of Wit and Will": An Adaptation of Achebe's *Arrow of God*

Nwafor, Friday, Ph.D.

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Port Harcourt

Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: friday.nwafor@uniport.edu.ng

Phone: +234 8053277794

Bature-Uzor, Nkechi A., Ph.D.

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

This paper is an appraisal of the power of adaptation in literary text. It is motivated by the need to critically assess the impact of the act of adaptation in play productions. The study used the historical method to reveal the power of drama in vividly exposing themes originally in the work of the first writer. The researchers discovered that the act of adaptation consistently helps to promote and popularize the work, the author, and ultimately the culture in focus as in the prose being studied. The paper recommended that more attention should be given to the act of adaptation of literary works from poetry and prose to drama. The excise helped to foreground the thematic thrust of the original text, while expanding the target audience. This particular adaptation further projected the Igbo culture depicted in the prose which forms the corpus of this research.

Key Words: Adaptation, playwriting, production elements, betrayal, performance

Introduction

The successful adaptation of the Greek classic *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles to *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi in 1968 had an effect on Sophocles' original text. In addition to popularizing Sophocles' work, the Greek mythology is further understood by readers. The trend to adapt literary works from one literary form to another is not unconnected with its power to strengthen the original author's idea. Works of different authors have been adapted for wider readership and appreciation in the area of literary criticism. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe has been variously adapted by Adiola Onyedibia, Basseff Effiong, etc and *The Concubine* and *The Great Pond* by Elechi Amadi have been adapted by Imo Edward for example. Adaptation is motivated by the acceptability of the original work by the reading audience or popularity of the writer in the literary world. Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* has been adapted by Kalu Uka, Ben Nwabueze, Spencer Okoroafor, and Attah Ogezi. "Battle of Wit and Will", the adaptation by Spencer Okoroafor is the text for this study. According to Hutcheon (2006),

Adapting is a bit like redecorating, which is an apt description of what is happening across the media landscape today. Interior design shows have revitalized countless homes with new paint and selective staging, bestselling novels have revisited familiar characters and settings without their original authors, film narratives move from the screen to the stage then back to the screen in a few short years and video games extend classic films and television programs in order to allow gamers to navigate (and often shoot their way) through familiar cinematic environments (p. 405).

Whittington expatiates Linda Hutcheon's position as gleaned from her *A Theory of Adaptation* when he posits that the practice of adaptation is central to story-telling and imagination. Adaptation provides a concise exchange and this occurs during the process across various media forms. Very germane to this study is the attention drawn to performance: this has to do with exchanges between telling and showing; specifically, interpretations encompassing gestures, dialogue and the voice. Nwafor & Azunwo (2015) asserted that:

Playwriting is a scholarly activity engineered by creative imagination. It is the art and techniques of dramatic compositions and theatrical representation. Therefore, it is not merely a letter but a creative one that articulates the vision of the dramatist in a given period of human experience, it involves some rules and conventions that are peculiar alone to its practice. It involves the dramatic composition of a play (p. 31)

It involves the dramatic composition of a play which Yerima (2003) observed as "a letter from the playwright to the director, actors, and other members of the production informing them of a particular vision of his or hers" (p. 15).

Playwriting has seen many definitions by different authors; hence, Nwamuo defined it thus:

Playwriting is the art of creating replicas of human actions rather than the mere recording of it, as in the novel or responses to such actions as poetry. It is an academic discipline, an adjunct of critical studies and a scholarly activity involving the recreation, reorganization and amplification of human experiences with a view to improving the human beings (qtd. in Ohiri 2005, p. 1).

Playwriting as a profession is a body of imaginative literature composed creatively for the purpose of sanitizing the society. No wonder Bamidele (2000) opined that

Imaginative literature is a reconstruction of the world seen from a particular point of view which may refer to as abstract idealism of the author or the hero, while the writer may be aware of literary tradition, it is the unconscious reworking of experience, fused with his own definition of a situation and his own values that produce the fictional universe (p. 14).

Synopsis of Spencer Okoroafor's Adaptation of Achebe's *Arrow of God: Battle of Wit and Will*

Battle of Wit and Will by Spencer Okoroafor is a three-act script of 25 pages. The main characters include Ezeulu, Nwaka, Tony Clarke, Church Priest and the Chorus. Other minor Characters are Obika, Edogo, Ofoedu, Egonwanne, Ofoka, Akukalia, Mathew Nweke, Colonial Policemen, Warriors, Dancers, Drummers, Singers and Townspeople. Act one is made up of five scenes that opens in the community play ground with the appearance of Ezeulu (Priest of Ulu) in full regalia and a White Priest in his priestly cassock, each carrying their different insignias standing in front of their alters, trying to persuade a villager caught up in a conflict of religion. Unsure of which to follow, the villager escapes into the village. The Chorus thereafter welcomes the audience to Umuaro thus:

Chorus: Welcome to Umuaro, a community in conflict with itself and with the outside world as well. Welcome to Umuaro, a community battling for the very soul of its existence and essence. Welcome to Umuaro, a community that wants to remain the same in the midst of change imposed from outside. Welcome to Umuaro, a community that found itself at the crossroad of two powerful but contending civilizations. Welcome to Umuaro, the theatre of battle of wit and will (Okoroafor 2015, p. 1).

A stage direction by the playwright explains that the Bende war dance group takes the stage with their performance accentuating the mood of conflict that the stage depicts. As they dance out, a town crier sounds the *ekwe* (wooden gong) round the community summoning both the young and old to the square.

The gathering is specifically addressed by Nwaka who tells them how his father told him the disputed land between Umuaro and Okperi belongs to them (Nwaka's clan); how Ezeulu the

priest of Ulu is misguiding the people for his selfish interest to please his maternal relations of Okperi. He berated both Ezeulu and his lineage in different ways before suggesting that an emissary be sent to Okperi with a message that they keep off the land “in peace or pieces”. The conflicting stance of Nwaka and Ezeulu on the issue of the disputed land plays out in Ezeulu’s dream. In the dream, Ezeulu engages Nwaka in a wrestling bout, and on waking up speaks out in anger promising to give Nwaka whatever he wants. Against all entreaties to listen to the voice of reason by the chorus, he resolves to face Nwaka. Below is his argument with the chorus:

Ezeulu: (Contemptuously) Voice of reason, indeed. Where was the voice when Nwaka was rubbing shit all over my face? Tell me, where was this voice when he incited the whole clan against me? No, the score must be settled. If a man with genitals like mine comes into my obi to defecate, do I overlook him in the name of politeness? No, I will take a big stick and break his head. That is how it is. No one swallows his phlegm to please others, how much more poison. Nwaka has stepped on a soldier-ant column and must face their wrath. He must (p. 6).

In Scene Four the playwright describes the scenario using stage direction to show a funeral procession of a corpse carried home to Umuaro which is an outcome of the conflict between the two clans; Umuaro and Okperi. The atmosphere is tensed as the people of Umuaro demand retaliation, chanting war songs. The war Ezeulu called “war of blame” did eventually take place and Okperi and Umuaro suffer casualties. The District Officer, after listening to both sides, especially the submission of Ezeulu against his people, makes some investigations into the affairs of Umuaro and awards the disputed land to Okperi.

Act Two opens with the gathering of Umuaro grandees. It turns into a ground for a show of supremacy between Nwaka and Ezeulu. Nwaka presents before the people Ezeulu’s unpatriotic and selfish stance on the disputed land. Ezeulu continues by accepting all the accusations and adds that he even sent his son to the Whiteman’s school and will be paying visit to the Whiteman. Using the Chorus, the playwright guides and bridges the story:

Chorus: Ezeulu did indeed visit the Whiteman his friend at Okperi. But he did not come back as expected to tell of his encounter. As a result of some incidences and coincidences, he was detained at Okperi. Soon words spread about the impossible conditions being given for his release, conditions that were added to by the Whiteman’s messengers. Because of this unplanned absence, Ezeulu could not meet up with eating the symbolic yams, the last of which signaled the commencement of harvesting of farm crops. There is crisis in the land and forced hunger stares them in the face (p. 13).

The Playwright describes again a protest by stick-welding youths singing war songs, but dispersed by uniformed colonial policemen who shot into the air. Ezeulu is released by the Whiteman after eight market weeks according to native reckoning. He is received by his people, but he is prepared for a show down with his people over what he considers a betrayal. One or

two tubers of yam remain uneaten even as everybody knows that the harvest season has come. The people entreat Ezeulu to eat the yam without waiting for the mandatory monthly interval but to no avail.

Act Three opens with the Town Crier summoning the grandees again to the square. The Umuaros led by Nwaka seize the opportunity to get at Ezeulu because his son, Oduche locked a royal python in his box where it would have died. Ezeulu maintains his ground by putting up an argument as is read below:

Ezeulu: ...We all know that the killing of the royal python is an abomination. The penalty is not in doubt. But as it is, my son, Oduche did not kill the python. He only locked it in a box. So, let Nwaka tell us the penalty for locking the python in a box for I do not claim to know... Now to the second point: I am happy that I am in the midst of the grandees of Umuaro. Were it to be young people, I would have been hard put trying to explain the ways of things to them. But for those like Nwaka who pretend not to know, it has never happened in the history of Umuaro that the Chief Priest of Ulu ate more than one tuber of yam at a time even if there was famine in his household. So, the matter is simple: until the yam finish, I dare not call for the festival (p. 22).

Yet another stage direction by the playwright states that: more silence as incredulous faces yet look at one another then bow their heads low. Chorus enters and surveys the sea of heads. Before narrating that:

Chorus: The die is cast. Famine stares the people in the face. Ezeulu's hands are tied. As a result of his incarceration by the Whiteman for two months, by native reckoning, two yams are left uneaten and it is time for harvesting. It is an impasse; who will blink first? Meanwhile the church lurks around the corner like a hawk waiting to swoop on the unsuspecting chick. In fact, the priest has challenged them to call the bluff of Ezeulu and his master whom he describes as dead, and come to his own God who is capable of protecting them from every danger, real or imagined. Will the people stick with Ezeulu and Ulu and perish from hunger? Or will they heed the call of the priest and try an alternative? Who will be the eventual victim of this battle of wit and will? Who will win and who will lose? The die is cast (p. 23).

The play ends set as in the beginning. This time the earthen pot is without fire while the candles on the Christian altar are burning. Ezeulu arrives and after viewing the stage exits, laughing boisterously. At this point, the villager who left confused in the beginning returns and after surveying the stage, removes all vestiges representing the Ulu altar on him and kneels beside the priest mimicking his every move. Soon, other townspeople join to worship after dropping tubers of yam. As this continues, Ezeulu's boisterous laughter continues. The play ends with the Chorus stating thus:

Chorus: Umuaro, who are the victims? Who are the winners and who are the losers? Ulu deserted the people when they needed him most. The church offered alternative

and in the circumstances that bothered on life and death, they took it with both hands. Then things fell apart for Umuaro; the centre held no more (p. 23).

Account of the Stage Performance of *Battle of Wit and will*

The performance starts with the people of Umuaro gathered at the village square in a celebration mood. Just after the drumming and dancing scene, the stage light reveals the stage-set divided into two equal parts with a shrine on one side and a cross with crucifix and a bible on the other side. Ezeulu, the priest of Ulu and a Christian Priest enter the stage to perform their different duties at the altars after sizing up each other. A villager clads in both traditional worshipper's and Christian's costume carrying a bible and "ofo" (traditional symbol of authority) enters the stage confused on who to join among the beckoning Priests, then runs out. The Narrator at this point comes in to welcome the audience to Umuaro:

Narrator: Welcome to Umuaro, once a peaceful African community, now a community in conflict with itself and with the outside world as well. A community battling for the very soul of its existence and essence, a community that wants to remain the same in the midst of change imposed from outside, a community that found itself at the crossroad of two powerful but contending civilizations (p. 1).

Next is the entrance of a town crier followed by a meeting of the people of Umuaro indicative of the reason for the town crier's movement around the village and sounding his wooden gong (ekwe). Nwaka, an illustrious son of Umuaro educates the people on the ownership of the disputed land between them and the Okperi people. He exposes Ezeulu as being mischievous in his support for the ceding of the said land to Okperi people. At the end of the meeting, emissaries are sent to Okperi to stay clear of the land.

This is followed by Ezeulu's dream sequence as he engages Nwaka in a wrestling bout. He rises from the dream to declare war with Nwaka against the voice of advice coming from the Narrator (Chorus) speaking as the voice of the unknown.

As a result of the land dispute, war ensues between Umuaro and Okperi leaving many casualties in the next scene. The district officer, after listening to witnesses including Ezeulu who supports Okperi's ownership of the land awards the land to Okperi. This action worsens the problem between Nwaka, the Umuaro people, and Ezeulu.

On the invitation of the district officer, Ezeulu is detained and he stays away from the community unable to eat the tubers of yam he is expected to eat in other to usher in the new yam celebration in Umuaro. Ezeulu, feeling like a hero challenges Nwaka and his cohorts to go ahead and eat the yam since he is not important. He also maintains his stand before the district officer by refusing all the offers for him to accept the post of a warrant chief by the Queen. At the end, he is released.

Ezeulu, on his return to Umuaro refuses to eat more than a tuber of yam at a time as suggested by Nwaka. He faces yet another challenge of his son, Oduche who locks up the sacred python in a box. Although, he outwits Nwaka by asking to be told the penalty of locking the python

in the box because it is abomination to kill the python, he still faces the people who are afraid of dying of hunger.

The play ends with a poser by the narrator. “Will the people stick to Ezeulu and perish from hunger? Or will they heed the call of the White Priest and try an alternative? Yes, they did. Indeed, they did. They jettisoned the traditional religious belief for the alien Christian religion.

The Role of Production Elements in the Performance of “Battle of Wit and Will”

In the performance of “*Battle of Wit and Will*”, production elements played an important role in communicating the main idea and also in realizing the re-interpretation. Stage productions depend on assembling images and sounds as signs to tell a story. Production elements provide the means through which the events in the story are brought before the audience. The elements refer to aspects of the play production that aid narrativity. They can also be referred to as narrative agents. They include set/scenery, costume, make-up, lighting, props and sound. Their function is to bring to life the playwright’s ideas in visual and tangible form. Hence, the onus of the visual interpretation lies on the proper application of these elements for appropriate representation and semiosis. Each of these elements functions as sign in the communication continuum of the production. Thus, together, the signs produce the ensemble which is the dramatized piece the audience see and experience on stage.

For a play such as the adaptation of Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, the aesthetic appeal depends so much on the visual representations of the period and the thematic preoccupations in terms of the use of production elements. The elements which are signs by themselves are arranged to produce further signs which the audience appreciates. Hence, set and scenery provide the locations of the actions and events in play production. A production set and scenery also include furniture and the furnishings required for the flow of the actions in drama. Similarly, costume and make-up provide the visual characterization in the play production. Costumes are the clothes actors wear in performance for the purpose of characterization, while make-up includes substances and materials applied on the actors to aid their interpretation of the characters. Costumes also make use of accessories to further delineate character traits and mannerisms. They also furnish information on the background/locale of the character(s) and the story; the economic/social status of the character(s); the age/gender of the character(s); the occupation of the character(s); the characterization, mood and the thematic preoccupations in the narrative. (Asiegbu 2015, p. 121) Lighting is another important element in play production. First and foremost, lighting provides visibility for both the actors and the audience on stage. It is used to illuminate the stage and the actions happening before the audience. Lighting is used as sign to communicate several ideas to the audience in play production. Prop is another important production element used on stage. Props (properties) are physical properties handled by the actors on stage. Props simply mean properties. They provide clues about the personality, socio-economic status, religion, background, age, sex, and other information about the character. Props can be set props, hand props, or decorative props. Sound is yet another element of play production. Sound provides the audio part of stage production. Sound can come from

the character's speech or the environment as diegetic or non-diegetic. Most of the time, environmental sounds are cued-in into the action as the play goes on.

The stage production of 'Battle of Wit and Will' made adequate use of production elements to realize the adaptation of Achebe's *Arrow of God*. In terms of set and scenery, as already stated, the play is a three act play that presented different scenes of actions in each of the three acts. This is achieved through manipulation of several scene changes. The dominant set and scenery is the imposing tree at the up centre of the stage denoting that the actions and events happened at a remote village square as seen in Images 1a and b.



Image 1a



Image 1b

The other sets and sceneries include Ezeulu's shrine and house, the Priest's pulpit and the District Officer's cell. These sets were used interchangeably during the production due to the fact that all actions are happening before the audience. These representational set/sceneries aided in actualizing the playwright's idea on stage. For instance, village squares usually are in the center of the village with big trees which give shade while serious discussions are going on. Traditionally, these trees may be the ancestral home of the village totems and ancestors and it is believed that decisions taken here cannot be violated by the participants. Parts of the village square also provide the sets/sceneries for the Christian Priest's pulpit and the District Officer's cell in Images 2a and b below which is in line with the principle that such public services like churches, schools, courts and markets are housed in strategic, community-owned lands.



Image 2a



Image 2b

In terms of costume and make-up, Achebe's novel, *Arrow of God*, from which the adaptation of "Battle of Wit and Will" is made, is set in the Eastern Nigeria during the advent of the colonial masters. This critical historical conjecture is captured through the background/locale of the narrative, costumes, make-up and accessories. Other basic functions of costume and make-up, are explicitly met in the presentation. Costume, make-up and accessories are used as signs of economic/social status for the different characters; to denote the occupations of the characters; to indicate the gender and age of the characters in the production; identify the different characters and also to strengthen the mood of the play.



Image 3a

Image 3b

Image 3a and b here present the background/locale of the narrative and characters. As stated earlier, the narrative is set in Igboland with the Anambra culture and tradition in focus. The images show traditional Igbo elders meeting in a village square.



Image 4a



Image 4b

In image 4a and b, costumes, make-up and accessories are used to signify the economic and social status of each of the characters. Nwaka's feathered cap, the design and size of his neck cloth and his hand fan are all indicators of his economic, social and political class as holder of the highest title of Eru, the deity of wealth. The status of other characters in the pictures is clearly indicative of their social standing. Ezeulu's make-up and accessories also denote his social and religious position in the community. Costumes, make-up and accessories are also used to denote the various occupations of the characters. As seen in Images 5a and b below, each of the characters is costumed according to his occupation. The D. O, Tony Clarke, the colonial police, Ezeulu, and the Reverend Father are all identified through what they are wearing.



Image 5a



Image 5b

Props are another important element used to realize the production of this play. Props have the ability to present the minutest details of characterization and the overall theme in a narrative. In this production, props are used to signify the background of the story; the character(s) traits; the economic/social status of the characters; ages and different genders; their occupations; mood and the thematic preoccupation. In terms of background - Nwaka's hand fan and elder's whisks have cultural meaning with the Igbo man's cosmology. Props are also good pointers to an individual's characteristics and economic/social status as seen in image 4a, 5b and 6b.



Image 6a

Image 6b

Furthermore, props are used to denote the different ages of the characters and their gender. In image 4b, the Narrator's walking stick clearly defines his age in the narrative. So also, in image 6a and 7b, the presence and absence of certain props help to define the age and gender of the characters. The women are mostly associated with going to fetch firewood in Igboland as seen in 6a. Then in the gathering in 7b, the young people are clearly denoted through absence of indicators of elderliness. The gun prop in image 5a and Ezeulu's staff of office in image 5b are indicators of the profession of the character. Image 7a captures the mood and the central theme of the production. The play is centered around the clash between Tradition and Christianity at the earliest advent of the colonialism in Eastern Nigeria. On the one side we have the Christian Priest and his bible, while Ezeulu and his staff of office "Oji" as Ulu's priest are on the other side. The two belief systems come face to face at the centre of the people's life, represented by the big tree at the village square where both the living and the departed spirits meet to chart the way in the people's existence.



Image 7a

Image 7b

Lighting is also another element of production used to heighten the stage experience of “Battle of Wit and Will”. Lighting is first and foremost used for illumination in the production, yet lighting is part of the elements that strengthen the structure of the narrative. For example, lighting indicates passage of time in terms of day or night in a production structure. In the traditional African societies, the Griot tells his tale in the evening under the moonlight. This is what is replicated in the theatre experience of this production. The Narrator in Image 8a below tells the tale of Umuaro, “a community battling for the very soul of its existence and essence”. The lighting in this scene tries to capture the moonlight aura as the narrator is before the audience who also are his audience in the narrative world.



Image 8a

Image 8b

In images 6a and 8b above, lighting clearly indicate night time, while images 9 below indicate day time.



Image 9a

Image 9b

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the use of dramatic elements by Spencer Okorafor to further bring the theme of religious conflict as contained in Chinue Achebe's prose *Arrow of God* to the fore. It further has provided a document written in dramatic form for the staging of the new work now titled "Battle of Wit and Will" making the act of adaptation very important in literary writing.

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