

# THE CULTURAL AND MARXIST AESTHETICS IN THE WORKS OF SAM UKALA: A CELEBRATIVE RECEPTION OF HIS DRAMA

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## **Abstract**

*Same Ukala is one of the foremost Nigerian playwrights, director, actor, short storyteller, film producer, and an academic par excellence. As an all-round creative artist, writer and a man of the people, Ukala has circum-navigated greatly around cultural and revolutionary aesthetics in his works. His passion for cultural nationalism and utilitarianism knows no bound as exemplified in Placenta of Death, Akpakaland, and Break a Boil among others. He has propounded to his credit the theory of folkism that enables not only him but other literary artists to situate their plays on indigenous history and culture and to compose and perform such plays in accordance with the aesthetics of African folkloric composition and performance. Playwright in such a society, whose artistic observations are sharpened by the heart-sickening and unappealing happenings of his time, tends to be an agent of change. It is these attributes that necessitates the study to interrogate the cultural and revolutionary ideologies of this theatre icon.*

**Keywords:** culture, aesthetics, Marxism, folkism, revolutionary

## **Introduction**

Writers, especially Marxist writers have for long metamorphosed into visionaries, soldiers of sort, agents of social change by using their writing as a weapon against all manners of injustice pervading their society. No wonder Maxwell Okoli (2003:72) explains that, "great writers work for progress by transforming their societies and its conditions; arousing men from their apathy and servile silence, delivering them from the shackles of enslaving tradition, religious dogmatism and political dictatorship." These great writers, Okoli contends, "often times launch into militant literature, raising their ideals like a banner, like a light for the people, and pulls off a revolutionary change that leaves society wiser, better and even more progressive." The implication of this is that progressive and stable democratic societies are as a result of decades and even centuries of battles by militant and fearless writers to wrestle power from despotic and tyrannical regimes of their times.

The works of these writers serve both socio-religious and political causes that could be used to hatch and realize revolutions. It has the power to destroy in order to reconstruct. They are catalysts of

social, economic, and political reforms as well as a missile against all forms of abuse. In this vein, E. N. Obiechina (1988: 1- 4) in his article entitled "The Writer and His Commitment in Contemporary Nigeria Society," adduces that:

The writer's career is a profoundly serious one which is to be espoused with a deep sense of responsibility and a god-like commitment; anyone who finds the demands too heavy may reconsider whether it is worth his while to take up the writer's career in the first place.

Explaining further, Obiechina sees the writer or the artist not as an isolated figure; not like Robinson Crusoe, living out his life in a lonely island. To him, the writer or artist is first and foremost a man living among men, feeling the same needs as other men, sharing other men's joys and sorrows, their fears and hopes. He is a man who feels the pulse and the heartbeat of his contemporaries because he is one with his contemporaries. He is a man who speaks to his contemporaries about those matters of weight and moment which define their destiny as living and loving and dying creatures. For the writer to play his roles, Obiechina also contends that, he must be a reformist and a social crusader for social justice, for the rights of the individual, for the rationalization of life and for the dispelling of ignorance and superstition and all those forces upon which oppressors and exploiters have played over the centuries in their attempt to hold the people down. The writer must have a special allegiance to the down-trodden in the society, to the socially handicapped, to the women, the children, the unemployed, the sick and all those who are not able to fight their own battles. Above all, he should take his position against national hypocrisy, against those who pretend to love the country but are busy stealing the public goods and converting the meagre resources of the nation to their private use. The implication of the above is that the artist is an all-rounded fellow whose works are geared towards the betterment of the society. He plays multifarious and multidimensional roles to achieve a just and orderly society devoid of injustices.

In his book titled *Playing Dangerously: Drama and the Frontiers of Terror in a Post-Colonial State* Femi Osofisan (1988: 29) reasons that, "though plays do not have the power to topple governments, but they can in the words of the Latin American writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, become a meaningful and positive activity, which depicts the scars of reality and prescribes remedies, frustrating officials lies so that the truth shines through." To this end, therefore, anyone seeking to

change the world in a socialist direction, according to Ken Smith (2003:1), the ideas of Marxism are vital, even indispensable a tool and a weapon to assist the working class in its struggle to change the society.

A German social scientist, historian and a revolutionary, Karl Heinrich Marx (1818 - 1883) who is considered the father of Marxism reasons that, "Marxist ideals add to the understanding of the capitalist world and how to change it." Marxism has been described as a tool for changing the status quo between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and enthroning a classless society (Ken Smith (1981: 1). It is also a philosophy aimed at expunging all traces of exploitative and oppressive tendencies of the government against the governed. This means that Marxism right from its evolutionary trend work towards dethroning all exploitative and tyrannical regimes to enthrone democratic establishments.

As an exponent of the above philosophy, Terry Eagleton (1981:14) in his book titled *Marxism and Literary Criticism* sees Marxism as "a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them - meaning that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression." While reflecting on the aesthetic ideas of Marx and Engels, a theatre scholar, Saint Gbileeka (1974:40) describes Marxism as "a philosophy of praxis aims at the radical transformation of human reality based on a dialectical interpretation of history." Marxism is also transformation targeted at establishing a society that gives free reign to its essential powers, frustrated, denied, postponed and emancipated for so long.

From the above antecedents, the study tends to interrogate the commitments of Sam Ukala towards freeing the society from the shackles of exploitation and oppression by the establishment as captured in his plays.

### **Ukala's Cultural Aesthetics**

Culturally, Ukala is at home with the African, Nigerian, and indeed, the culture of his people - of the Niger Delta extraction. Culture predominates most of his plays like the *Placenta of Death*, *The Slave Wife*, *Akpakaland*, *Break a Boil*, *Odour of Justice*, among others that deal with the issues of male child successor to the throne on the exit of the King. For instance, in *The Slave Wife*, the Oba of Idu, Ogiso needs a son as his successor to the throne. Unfortunately, none of his wives, including the slave girl who the Oracle had ordered him to marry

bear him the longed after son. Eventually the slave wife produces the heir-apparent after many trials and tribulation, only to have him thrown into the river on the conspiracy and jealousy of the other wives. However, after many years of hardship and as fate may have it, a stranger announces the arrival of the heir to the throne of Idu, much to everyone's consternation.

As Amen Uhunwangho (2011) aptly says, Sam Ukala in *Break a Boil* shows himself as "a sensitive observer who does not merely project his culture but consciously investigates to reveal covert elements the less insightful may ignore." He has been able to turn stereotypes inside out to explore the relationship between appearance and reality..." He concludes that the play is bubbling with revolutionary implications.

By culture, it means the way and manner individuals, or groups of people live their lives. According to Austine E. Anigala (2005:11), "culture is the thought patterns, attitudes, modes of communications, and celebrations among others exhibited by an individual or individuals within geographical orbit, to express the cultural quotients of their community." These expressions can also be manifested and exhibited in the economical, philosophical and social lives of a people.

Culture also serves as a springboard for the development of "rounded" characters within a geographical environment in which individuals imbibe the stipulated ways of life and practically express themselves emotionally, politically, socially and spiritually. Victor Turner (1982:33) in his article titled "Performing Ethnography," views culture as the "experience of individuals and collective experience of its members embodied in myths, rituals, symbols and celebrations." This means that culture encompasses those traditional elements found in various villages that help to identify what those people stands for among other societies. To Zulu Sofola (1977:16) culture is "the totality of the individual in relation to all the forces acting upon him and his reaction to them." Culture, therefore, manifest itself in the way people think, dress, speak, act, behave and even their eating patterns. Culture is equally and deeply embedded in the traditional festivals found in many African societies. It portrays the beliefs, ideas, and customs of its society of origin which give birth to communal ceremonies. Such activities, according to Anigala (2005:5) "are expected to bind the society together."

From the above antecedents, it is noteworthy that Ukala's works have deep expressions on culture, especially on the issue of

male chauvinism and the attendant heir apparent which demands that a male child occupies or takes over the place of the father or the throne as the case may be. This kind of inheritance is commonplace in patriarchal societies. In *The Slave Wife* by Ukala, the culture of inheritance is well established to the extent that the Chief priest – Obu had to divine according to the dictate of their ancestors (gods) for Ogiso, the Oba to marry his slave as a wife in order to get a male child (heir apparent) because the other wives could not give him any. This act led to serious envy, jealousy and eventual conspiracy by the other wives led by Alahin (first wife) against the slave wife, Igbon. In *Akpakaland* too, the culture of inheritance resurfaced in which case Akpaka's first wife Fulama out of envy for the new-found romance between Akpaka and Unata (one of the other wives) retorted:

**FULAMA:** Everyone says, The President is good. The President is impartial. The President is straightforward. The President is this. The President is that. Let them come into the state house and see. The moment the President married the Beautiful One, I, Fulama, the light of his morning ceased to shine. For weeks the President slumbered in the arms of the Beautiful One while the joints of my waist grow cold and stiff. (To Akpaka) you thought that would give heir to your throne? Men do not decide such things for the gods. I have just a daughter but I'm not barren. The Beautiful One may have two children, but aren't they also girls. Excessive beauty may not beget an heir. It may not solve overnight, the problems of Akpakaland (14).

This emotional outburst by one of the Akpaka's wives as captured by Sam Ukala reflects vividly the seriousness with which male-child syndrome has taken root in most societies even to the extent of seeing it as a do-or-die affair. In *Break a Boil* by Ukala, we are also greeted with another bitter envy against the throne in which Uwa (elder brother and personal guide) to Gidi, King of Gidiland planned to dethrone his younger brother. Uwa full of envy to the throne conspired with one of the King's wives (Uki) to dethrone him.

However, their romantic escapade and diabolical adventure to wrestle power from the incumbent Gidi of Gidiland (an act contrary to the culture of the people) were thwarted through the

instrumentality of both Nkanka (a young man suffering from yaws) and Ison (the first wife) who vowed to speak the truth and have honour. This act was exposed by one of the characters, Nkanka thus:

**NKANKA:** ...the Oba's brother might come again today. Any day he's expected, Uki (Oba's wife) chases me away from here like a fly. I thought he was to accompany the Oba on his state visit to Ugbon. I overheard the Oba say he was going to pick him up on his way. (TO THE AUDIENCE) Didn't you? Well, I guess that the Oba doesn't know how vengeful this his brother is. The man means to kill him quietly ... kill him with pollution and elephantiasis so he can regain his throne. But what is there in kingship that a brother should kill a brother for? But it was the Oba himself who secretly hit his elder brother first. And he thinks the man doesn't know (66).

The Oba sensing some plots against his throne has this to say:

**GIDI:** You cannot stop the dance of the little bird on the ground until you've stopped the drumming underground to which it dances. Eririnma, my War Minister, Uwa, my brother, and Uki, my sweet egg, are hiding a kernel and daring Gidi to seek it. Gidi shall find it (70).

Uwa and Uki now filled with self-guilt and realizing that their game is up revealed their secret escapade when he says:

**UWA:** Your offensive almost landed us in trouble, I tell you. The king now suspects everyone. He, surely, would question the stranger in private and the stranger would have no choice but to disclose how dancing with you can pollute the king and cause his death by elephantiasis. I'll be executed and your shame will tower to the sky (74).

**UKI:** Are you such a fool? Are you going to wait for all that to happen? Have you no mouth yourself? Can't you tell the king...?

**UWA:** Tell him what? That I ... I did it?  
The secret love affair between Uwa and Uki was further revealed by Nkanka and Ison (first wife) who says:

**NKANKA:** I must go look for Ison. We both must ... (flog a fly) testify for the prosecution. We must be the watchdogs

of the society! We must light the oil-lamp of truth and tend it. Therein lie patriotism and honour (89).

However, Eririnma (the war Minister) who was ironically implicated by Uwa and Uki as the adventurer was eventually vindicated and crowned as the next Gidi of GIDILAND for standing by the truth to expose the intrigues, permutations, and mudslinging perpetuated by Uwa and Uki to take over the reign of Gidiland. Though he initially rejected the offer to become the king as it ran contrary to the culture of GIDILAND but out of persuasion, he eventually consented. This event is exemplified in the following dialogues that ensued:

**ERIRINMA:** Mischief! That's what you've up to. Your king lives. Even if he were dead, you have a tradition of hereditary kingship. I am but a stranger. No drop of Gidi blood flows in my veins (114).

**NNEKA:** Take it, my son, take it. A king is crowned in the spirit-world. Coronation on earth is only a re-enactment (115).

**OSASHON:** I call you, Eririnma! I call you seven times to present your head for the crown. For it is the worthy head that dons the eagle's feather. The fire that is put in the palm of a child never burns him (115).

### **Ukala's Revolutionary Aesthetics**

Sam Ukala can best be described as a man of the people, an artistic director, writer, actor, poet, storyteller, film producer and an academic – all rolled into one. As an African theatre advocate, Ukala believes that the African folktale in performance is a veritable example of a total theatre concept distinct to the African experience, hence, his theory of folkism. The quest to establish and uphold a base or platform in the development of African folktale necessitated Sam Ukala to formulate the theory of folkism and its eight laws of Aesthetic Response. The theory of folkism has carefully adopted our indigenous theatre forms and the western-oriented dramatic conventions for understanding and wider readership. Ukala's Laws of Aesthetic Response enable the audience to get involved in the story to judge characters by societal ethics. This also helps the message of the playwright to sink into the audience, and is achieved when the bad and the good characters are rewarded accordingly.

According to Eunice Adeighon (2013:1) the use of folkloric forms has been recommended as most adequate for use in African drama for the purpose of making the performance more popular and accessible to the majority of the audience. Since folktale is an old traditional story from a particular place passed on from one generation to another in a spoken form, it need be encouraged for the composition and performance of dramatic art forms. Laying credence to the concept of folkism as propounded by Ukala, Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma (2013:82) presents him as treading the path which other playwrights before him such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Zulu Sofola, and Wale Ogunyemi had fashioned, just that Ukala differs due to his driven sense of artistic mission anchored on the need to radically change the landscape of Nigerian theatre practice in form, style and content.

Ofonime Inyang (2008:187-9) submits that, "Ukala's technique is not only creative but also vividly orchestrates the African total theatre experience in its liveliest offer that incorporates music, dance, mime, chant, incantation, proverbs, wise sayings, epigrams, mores, and stylization - all fused to offer his plays a communal energy and artistry... Ukala as an ardent supporter of African decolonization explores in a very unique way African traditional aesthetics and progressively subvert Western dramatic art forms. His works, no doubt, cover a wide range of Marxist ideals by encouraging the oppressed and the exploited people of the earth to strive to unsettle their oppressors as a step towards achieving for themselves emancipation and honour.

Like Femi Osofisan and other foremost Nigerian playwrights with Marxist intent, Ukala's plays are revolutionary in that they show a radical revolutionary perspective on contemporary socio-political issues in the society. As is common in most Marxist texts, his plays champion a revolt against the oppressive and exploitative state structure by the down-trodden. These plays charge as well as encourage the poor and the down-trodden to shake off the shackles of docility imposed by the state establishment and rebuff them and their agents. Ukala's revolutionary ideals are vividly exemplified in one of his plays, *The Placenta of Death*. The play reveals the socio-political conflict between the oppressors and the oppressed majority in Owodoland. The play particularly shows the victory of the oppressed and down-trodden poor masses over the bourgeoisies through the assistance of some influential people at the corridor of power.

Summarizing the Marxian content of *The Placenta of Death*, Ifeanyi Ugwu and Aloysius I Orjinta (2013:79 – 85) note that the play smacks off an African brand of Marxism by recommending the class-consciousness of the masses, and raising the awareness to a level that inspires a collective struggle against oppression. Set in Owodoland, *The Placenta of Death* unfolds its story using the structural frame of traditional African folktale performance. The oppressive leadership is represented on one hand by Owodo III, Oba of Owodoland; Emeri and his daughter, Ibo who is the Oba's first wife. On the other hand, the oppressed comprise of the slaves and the free borns most of who are poor, including the Oba's second wife, Omon and her family.

Through the intimidation and oppression of the poor Emeri, a father in-law to the Oba, and his daughter, Ibo succeeded in manipulating Oba Owodo into the disaffection of Omon's family. Emeri and Ibo achieved this by changing Oba's gifts meant for Omon when she is delivered of Oba's son, to the meat of a vulture. Disappointed, Omon picks the smoked placenta of the vulture, which at the appropriate time, she secretly puts into the Oba's soup and he eats it. In the battle that ensues, the Oba and his slave-allies are killed by Omon's supporters and the sympathizers of the poor masses. Owing to the earlier developed socio-consciousness among the down-trodden in Owodoland, the oppressed slaves united and declared their oneness with the victorious poor, thereby, portraying the eminent emancipation of the oppressed.

In *Akpakaland* by Ukala, Marxist spirit was also explicitly portrayed when the Members of the Audience (M.O.A) inquired from the Narrator how the poor masses could seize power from the oppressed thus:

**MOA:** How may the poor unite and seize power?

**NARRATOR:** By cultivating self esteem and refusing to be bribed with crumbs from the oppressor's table. By being dedicated to the course of self-liberation and self-humanization. By looking among the poor for a true, selfless leader ... (35).

*The Placenta of Death* and *Akpakaland* reflect to a significant extent a true Marxist text because of the following attributes. The plays deal with class analysis between the "haves" and the "have nots" in which there is a culpable gulf between the rich and the poor or between the upper and the lower classes. The arrangement is such that the commoners or slaves are constantly being manipulated by the

Oba and his bourgeois allies leading to what could be described as social alienation.

The plays like other Marxist texts also point out the inhuman conditions of existence in a capitalist system that results in tensions between the upper and the lower classes. The problem of such plays is human-centred – human beings create problems for its kind that necessitates a change. Such a change or revolution is usually violent in Marxist plays.

Marxist plays are replete with characters with leadership qualities rather than mere charlatans. Such characters or protagonists like the Owodo III in *The Placenta of Death* must be ready to survive the confrontation with the forces that exist within the dangerous terrain of transformation. Conversely, some other characters (antagonists) exhibit selfish and despotic tendencies towards their subjects as portrayed in *Akpakaland* when Idemuda while discussing with Enwe about the wickedness of Fulama said:

**IDEMUDA:** Are you surprised that Fulama is wicked? Didn't you know her father?

**ENWE:** Was he not the President of our fifth republic, who declared himself a Field Marshal. Sold our oil and armoury and built himself houses with blocks of solid gold? Was he not the one who personally cut off the fingers of journalists whose writing offended him? But he was a man with a man's heart (36).

Thematically, Marxist plays according to Nelson T. Obasi and Aloysius I. Orjinta (2013:37) are “devoid of ambiguities and contradictions. It should not convey multiple interpretations to the audience but uses direct statements.” To this effect, problems propounded by Marxist plays should be forthcoming with the attendant solutions. Usually, dialogues in Marxist plays are intra-class rather than inter-class – between two social forces or classes or between the oppressed and the oppressor, between a dominant and a toiling class.

### **Conclusion**

This study dwells on the cultural and revolutionary aesthetics in the works of Sam Ukala using some of his plays as an exemplum. In *Break a Boil*, *Odour of Justice*, *Akpakaland* and *The Slave Wife*, Sam Ukala explicates in no small measure the importance people attach to male issues in the family and society in general in order not only to

retain the family name but also to maintain the leadership position. As a revolutionary writer, Ukala in *The Placenta of Death*, and *Akpakaland* among other plays also exposes the economic, social and political exploitations in the society where a few privileged individuals had not only continually dominated the political scene against the poor masses but had also arrogated to themselves the collective will of the nation for their selfish aggrandizement. This is why Ukala is unequivocal in his support for a change in the society to bridge the gulf between the bourgeoisies and the proletariat class. By so doing, the society will be a better place to live in where all citizens will be treated equally. It is also a society where social justice, equity, rule of law and fundamental rights of the people reign supreme.

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