

Twenty-two essays in this volume are neither fortuitous nor accidental; rather, they constitute a most worthy tribute to a scholar who has worked in all the sub-fields covered. As one moves from one chapter to the next, one comes to realise that these essays add up to a compendium of original research and thinking in the field of African oral and written literature, performing arts and culture. The essays in their totality emerge, to use a visual arts simile, like a well-woven *adire* cloth with complementary colours and motifs.

ISBN 978-136-142-5

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Essays on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba.
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Essays on African Literature in Honour of **Oyin Ogunba.**

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TRADITIONAL CLEANSING RITES AND STATE RECONSTRUCTION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA

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The trajectory of Nigeria's post-independence history is disturbingly marked by inter-ethnic hostilities, religious war, unemployment, poverty and illiteracy. The alternation of power between the military and civilian elite has not yielded lasting solutions to these obstacles to national development. Ideally, the inauguration of another democratic experiment on May 29, 1999 ought to be an opportunity for a new beginning. It should have laid the foundation for the enthronement of democratic ethos and purgation of anti-democratic tendencies accumulated over long years of military rule. However, the opportunity has not been sufficiently realised as such. The crucial challenge posed by this reality is that how can Nigeria rise above those vices that have been impeding the realisation of democracy and good governance?

Dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Esiaba Irobi, Ahmed Yerima, Ben Tomoloju, Tess Onwueme and a host of others have engaged the political imperative sketched above. They have used their arts to denounce the greed of Second Republic politicians just as they have censored the excesses of soldiers while in power before and after the Second Republic. Thus, they have generally shown interest in the project of national re-birth in a way that is different from the superfluous and grandiloquent spirit of Ethical Revolution (launched by Sheu Shagari's government) or War Against indiscipline (prosecuted with ferocity by the military regime of Muhammadu Buhari). Rather, these writers have grappled with authoritarianism by exposing those variables that encourage the incessant recourse to violence and abuse of human rights in the polity through their plays.

Sometimes, the playwrights creatively explore aspects of indigenous cultures to articulate their political and artistic concerns. One significant aspect of indigenous culture explored in contemporary drama is the tradition of purification. What is purification and how is it effected in different traditional societies? What are the religious, political and artistic purposes of cleansing rites in such societies? How are the rites creatively appropriated to achieve socio-political ends in the selected plays? What lessons do the rites and the dramatised reality have for state re-construction in modern Nigeria? These are some of the pertinent questions that this chapter addresses.

In traditional societies, myth, symbols and religious rituals nurture social interactions. Thus, the ritual of cleansing is common to many communities in

pre-colonial Nigeria as it was a significant aspect of the people's religion and civic culture. Whether among the Edo or their Yoruba kinsmen or the Igbo across the Niger, different communities dedicate certain occasions to spiritual renewal by individuals and the community as a whole.

One scholar who has done a considerable amount of study on traditional festivals of purification especially their artistic and socio-political import is Oyin Ogunba. He remarks that communal purification is a key aspect of Yoruba tradition; hence, it features in all categories of Yoruba festivals whether they are associated with divinities, ancestral spirits or kings. This is anchored on people's belief that festivals provide occasions for the return of metaphysical beings to the human community. In his words, "the physical presence of supernatural beings at festivals of all categories is regarded as laden with purification possibilities and people do take advantage of them for their own benefit." The people use such occasions to purge themselves of "all the accumulated spiritual filth of the old year in order to enter the New Year a chastened, reborn person" (2002, 25-26), especially when such filth can rupture social harmony among the living. It is to oil the wheel of communion and strengthen the connecting chain between the living and the ancestral spirits who in African thought are regarded, in the words of Efua Sutherland, as "Souls who have preceded us" ¹ (1999, 88)

In *Myth Literature and the African World*, Soyinka explains that sickness, infertility, death etc experienced by an individual are signs of a rupture of the natural rhythms and cosmic balances of the community (51). Cleansing rites can be seen as part of those modalities, which are established by most African traditional societies to guarantee the restoration of harmony after disruptions of cosmic harmony. This point is further elaborated in *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (13).

When the community and individuals are purged of their misdeeds, they can brace up to the challenges of the coming year with renewed vigour, and thereby ensure what John Mbiti calls "an ontological balance" between "God and man, the spirits and man, the departed and the living" (1980, 59). Perhaps, the importance of purification is better realised when one considers the dangers of unatoned or unpurged vices as expressed by Mbiti: "When this balance is upset, people experience misfortunes and suffering, or fear that these will strike them" (59).

Omosade Awolalu and Adelumo Dopamu equally affirm the anti-defilement and renewal theories of purification rites in traditional African communities when they declare that the rites are embarked upon to "cleanse the culprit, by washing or sprinkling" (219).

However, purification goes beyond ethical or religious re-birth. It also implies a political contract as it is used for the affirmation, or in some circumstances, subversion of a reigning hegemony. Where the goal is affirmation, the rulers and the ruled amidst drumming, singing and dancing, are united in a bond of peace sealed in the consenting and awesome presence of the supernatural. Usually, the rites include spilling of blood of animals like goat, ram, chicken and pigeon. Other items like leaves, water, fire, broom etc whose inclusion are informed by their symbolic association with the idea of cleansing can be used.

Let us take some examples of purification and we start with Igue festival of Benin Kingdom. This is a purification festival aimed at achieving spiritual rejuvenation for the Oba who symbolically bears, on his shoulders, the burden of the Kingdom.² The Oba's wellbeing is closely linked with the well being of the kingdom and, by the rites and sacrifices that accompany it, the welfare of the Oba and the people is ensured. The Igue is preceded by a series of events like Otue, Erhoba and Iron.³

Ogiefa, the priest in charge of communal cleansing, clears the kingdom of desecration through white chalk, leaves and herbs. By rubbing the body of the Oba with these objects, the priest accentuates the Oba's legitimacy and control over the kingdom. As R.E. Bradbury puts it, through the purification rites, "the divine power of the Oba is renewed and strengthened" (1959, 202). During the Igue Ewere that follows, the youths take Ewere⁴ leaves and joyously dance around the town, stopping at various homes to wish the people well and leave behind some of the leaves at any house so visited. Ewere is a symbol of peace, joy, long life and prosperity.⁵ The burning fire with which the youths parade the city is used to drive away evil (ubi) from the town.

The Ebi festival of Ikija Ijebu features individuals who on behalf of the community ward off dangers. This annual purification festival enables people to renew the covenant of vertical and horizontal social relations. Purification in this context is achieved through fire. As Ogunba explains:

Each person ... carries a burning torch and goes into the nooks and crannies of the house and into the streets chasing evil spirits around and roasting them up (2002, 25).

However, in the case of Okebadan in Ibadan, it takes the form of free exchange of abuse and unrestrained expression of obscenity. During the Edi in Ile-Ife, an individual collects curses and woes of every one in the community as

he marches through the town and bears them away in a symbolic act of cleansing. The awesome bull-roar sound of the "Oro" is believed to be capable of scaring evil forces away from the community. Thus, its festival in Iseyin, Oyo State, is devoted to collective purification. In some parts of Yoruba land, renewal can be in the form of sweeping the streets with broom to clear all evils from the path of participants.

The Ekpe⁶ festival among the Ngwa people of Abia state in South Eastern Nigeria is also relevant here. Being a traditionally agrarian society, the Ngwa Society uses the festival to purge the community of blemishes of the outgoing year in order to ensure good harvest, increase in livestock, prosperity, good health and stability in the polity. Amidst song, dance, colourful costume, ribaldry and communal procession of Ekpe, the community refines itself through the blood of the sacrificial animal – a ram.

It is established from the foregoing that the rites of renewal that feature in many traditional festivals serve religious functions just as they fulfil political ends in their respective communities. One should stress that the social order expressed through the rituals is stratified, hierarchical and inherently un-democratic. However, if carefully examined, the manifestation of these rites still contains seeds of democracy which can be of wholesome benefit to the state project in contemporary Nigeria.

For instance, through the rites of cleansing, the legitimacy of the *status quo* is sought and secured and the bond between the ruler and the ruled is renewed. Beside this, there is a sense of co-operation as the rites take place under an atmosphere of peace, devoid of any threat of violence. A festival like Okebadan puts aside social/class distinction as the noble and the common are abused for their *misdeeds*. Admittedly, this social transformation is temporary as the society returns to its stratified order. But while the festival lasts, purification is conducted within the context of freedom of expression, freedom of movement and social equality. These are fundamental elements of democracy. It also underscores the value of tolerance as the noble ones are made to contend with abuses from commoners without recursion to persecution (Ogunba: 1982, 47).

In addition, the variety of dances, costume, songs and artifacts that the occasions of purification display shows diversity as a healthy political value. Meanwhile, the rites are often aimed at achieving social cohesion. As such they are communal in orientation. Even when the principal celebrant is the head of a community or household, it is done in the belief that his well-being is inseparably linked with that of the community. The notion of the community, however defined – whether as a city, state or nation – is crucial to democratic theory and practice.

The numinous actions and gestures of purification rituals are fast declining in their festival context. But they are being revitalised and re-configured in modern drama. In other words, the ritual texture of purification festivals are appropriated by dramatists to depict that which is wrong with the nation at the moment and also construct the way forward. In this regard, the rites are forced to yield new realities in the general attempt to interrogate authoritarianism. It is against this background that we shall discuss the exploration of cleansing rites as an aesthetic paradigm in three selected contemporary Nigerian plays. For the purpose of analysis, Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi: A Play*, Osofian's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* and Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods*.

Nwokedi is a drama of struggle for political change. Its strength lies in the appeal to traditional Igbo performance aesthetics, unique evocation of tragic pathos and fervid discourse of Nigeria's post independence politics. Irobi's portrait of leadership and governance is grim. He contends that the class of elite represented by Senators Nwokedi and Arikpo has to be eliminated before a new order can emerge. To sacrifice such politicians is to rid the nation of evil and begin on a clean slate. The death of the two Senators at the end of the play coincides with the deposition in a coup d'état of their corrupt and inefficient regime.

Irobi's framework of purifying the democratic space in *Nwokedi* correlates with the rejuvenative goals of Ekpe. The tumultuous procession and choric chants of the villagers, the cutting of the throat of a white cock and the smearing of the blood on cutlasses are theatrical evocation of Ekpe's milieu of atonement and purification. The transitional moment between the Old and New Year offered by December 31 is quite apt, considering the regenerative mission of the festival that provides the spatio-temporal context of the play. The two Senators (*SIN*ators) become the "carrier" through which the polity's "defilement" is symbolically purged.

The play's action proceeds simultaneously at two levels. First is the retributive sacrifice of Nwokedi and Arikpo for their crimes, which include murder, and looting of public treasury. Indeed, their greed while in power largely compromises good governance. Second is the depiction of the collapse of yet another democratic experiment. The play strikes a link between the two levels in its dénouement with the slaughtering of Nwokedi and Arikpo, like sacrificial ram. This act of purgation is a symbolic affirmation of the demise of the old order and the birth of a new era. Though it brings in a military regime, it still provides a chance for a fresh start, a revolutionary re-construction of the society along truly democratic values, which are elusive in the displaced political order.

Nwokedi is a generational statement by Irobi, calling on Nigerian youths to decisively intervene and participate in the task of re-inventing the Nigerian

state after the wave of authoritarianism. He advocates a violent revolution, which would sweep away "corrupt politicians" and their "evil regime" like the whirlwind. The Ekumeku age group in this play is the veritable whirlwind that demonstrates this vision. As youths, members of Ekumeku are celebrated for their vigour, vision, innovativeness and efficiency, contrary to the corruption, greed and incompetence of the old guards.

Irobi's solution to the crises of governance is somewhat too sanguinary and simplistic. Historical evidence has shown that violence is anti-democratic and should not be relied upon as an instrument of democracy. Violence usually breeds violence and often begets its greater self. Apart from that, the idealisation of youths makes the resolution more romantic than realistic. Experience of Nigeria since the aborted Third Republic, which expressed preference for the so-called "new breed" politicians, reveals that the "young" politicians are as corrupt, greedy, vengeful and conservative as the "old breed" whom they supplant. Nevertheless, that the play ends tragically is a moral lesson for the populace as electorate and the elected. Unless the sanctity of the tenets of democracy is recognised, the system will degenerate into anarchy as represented in the collapse of the Second Republic.

Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* also adopts the notion of cleansing to advocate an end to authoritarian rule. The play also stresses the role of youths in building a new nation that is uncorrupted by the antics of the so-called "wasted generation."

Tagged "a parable of our times," the play enacts the struggle against despotic regimes in the post-cold war era. When it was first performed at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan in 1990, there was already an outcry against despotic self-perpetuating regimes either in the form of military oligarchy or one party civilian administration.

A festival of cleansing in honour of an unnamed river goddess in an unnamed village provides the setting for the play. Its agenda includes a period of cleansing of the environment by devotees of the river goddess, a period of private meditation by the priestess, and a week of peace during which everybody lives in perfect harmony with their neighbours. The night of courtship marks its climax, featuring dance contest among maidens. The communal nature of the festival points to the participatory essence of democracy. Apart from this, the festival seeks to rid the society of tyranny. By implication, the process of democratisation and state re-construction is presented in the play as a process of demilitarization or de-tyrannisation of the polity. The dialectical relationship between arts and politics is inscribed into the fabric of the festival as it explores the inter-link between

the society and rigour of governance on the one hand and the processes of music, dance, song and story-telling on the other.

The festival is originally meant to provide a platform for maidens to win husbands through their dancing skills. But more than that, it is an avenue for them to participate in the affairs of the village. The winner of the contest represents the youths in the Baale's council, as she is crowned the priestess. Iyeneri the incumbent priestess has, however, circumvented the practice by monopolising the priesthood over the decade. She has reduced the festival to an occasion for mere fun and selection of husbands. Herein lies the crux of Osofisan's play.

The despotic order represented by Iyeneri has bottled so much creative energy of the youths and turned the village into a land of misery. A return to its democratic origin is expected to channel the energy toward development. Iyeneri is forced by protesting youths led by Yungba Yungba dance group to accept her guilt and step down. Her exit witnesses the flourishing once again of democratic norms. Yungba Yungba's logical triumph is celebrated through the carnivalesque atmosphere that takes over the theatre during the dance contest in the epilogue. The hypothetical community rises above social paralysis engendered by dictatorship and harmony returns. The cleansing festival, rather than being used to affirm Iyeneri's hegemony as it has been done in the past decade, is turned into an instrument of delegitimation. Here is a manifestation of what Sandra Richards in *Ancient Songs Set Ablaze* describes as Osofisan's "revisionist sensibility" (15).

The Silent Gods is another artistic interrogation of Nigeria's unsteady politics of transition. The focus here is the Third Republic. Yerima's theme is that discrimination along ethnic, religious and even political lines is inimical to democracy and national development. Purification in the play is therefore necessitated by the urge to remove social cleavages constructed by people to gain advantage in political competition. Cleavages like gender, class, religion and tribe have often threatened the legitimacy of the state and undermined the fundamental rights of the "other", i.e. those who do not fall within the frontiers of each identity.

The Silent Gods is inspired by the negative activation of the centrifugal forces in Nigeria by the military as a ruling class and their collaborators outside the armed forces. In the words of the traditional story-teller who opens the play, the focus is on "the twist of life and the need to be together." "The twist of life," topical as it were, is caused by the annulment of June 12, 1993 Presidential election by General Ibrahim Babangida's regime and the attempt by the military to sustain the aborted transition to civil rule. The state of anomie that Nigeria became during the period is fictionalised in *Ilu-Oja*. The crisis of leadership in the town sets the people adrift as they are divided along primordial lines. This applies to Nigeria.

Yerima uses the market metaphor to capture the diversity inherent in the Nigerian Federation. Here is a community in search of a successor to its late king. Two friends, Aseburupo and Togba are fiercely contesting for the crown. The gods quite unusually decline to intervene in the choice process. Their silence gives the people a chance to exercise their democratic freedom to participate in the leadership recruitment process. Unfortunately, the opportunity is not properly utilised as such. Togba is chosen and installed, but he suddenly dies. The gods' ominous silence in the face of the confusion and bitter struggle for the throne aggravates tension. Intrigues, tyranny and vengeance take over the community. The cloud of tragedy is later dispelled when the gods break their silence. They choose the youngest virgin in the land for the throne, thereby casting aside the hitherto competing oligarchic interests. As peace and order return to the town, everyone joyously celebrates the divine choice and this is solemnised in the epilogue with the cleansing rites of broom.

It should be remarked, however, that the solution proffered by the playwright is inherently a tribute to confusion that is the dominant element in *The Silent Gods*. The cleansing and re-birth option, quiescent as it were, is a logical possibility within the Yoruba cosmology where the play's political framework is largely sourced. But from the way it is handled, it sounds facile and escapist as a solution to very real and sensitive problems. In the first instance, it fails to adequately address the root of 'ethnic' distrust that it raises in the plot and which in reality has been undermining democratisation in Nigeria since the colonial period.

Be that as it may, the choice of a virgin and the concluding rites of purification are crucial to the understanding of the political vision embedded in the play. The virgin symbolises a political dawn and by extension, a departure from the repression and intrigues of the preceding era. The re-union during purification of hitherto estranged groups exemplifies the collapse of boundaries and the merger of interests, which are the ideals of modern democratic politics. Apart from symbolically cleaning the political space, the broom is used to emphasise the virtues of unity and co-operation. In the absence of these, democratic development will remain elusive.

In terms of structure, it is observable that the three plays are commonly attuned to the rhythm of purification. This implies an initial recognition of danger posed to order in the society as a result of people's action / inaction. This is followed by symbolic or real acts of cleansing to remove the threat to social harmony through sacrifice, propitiation and other emendatory acts. The ritual is capped with the celebration of a triumphant exposition and elimination of those forces that do inhibit or have the potential to disrupt the smooth flow of social interaction.

The plays end by opening a new but significant vista of reality. The elimination of a decadent political order represented by the Senators in *Nwokedi*, the abdication of the throne by Iyeneri and the restoration of mass participation / transparency in the conduct of the maiden dance competition in *Yungba Yungba*, the successful negotiation at the end, of turbulent transition politics in *The Silent Gods*, all underscore the pattern of events in the course of ritual observances associated with cleansing. Through this ritual pattern, the plays bring to the forefront of dramatic action, moral and social contradictions that characterise the Nigerian post-independence politics. They also bring to especial focus factors militating against the realisation of the developmental objectives of independence.

The preceding analysis has shown how some aspects of indigenous cultures can be enlisted in projecting democratic ethos in modern African societies. It has also demonstrated how the literary and performing arts of drama have enriched and can further enrich the discourse of state re-construction in contemporary Nigeria. The chapter establishes the socio-political purposes of purification rites in traditional African societies.

Perhaps, as an eloquent evidence of the dynamism of culture, the attenuation of traditional rituals in various communities in recent times has not prevented them from serving artistic and political/ideological purposes in contemporary drama. Nigerian dramatists in their experiments have tried to re-engage these rites. The endproducts are assimilated into artistic creations that essentially question the status quo. This, of course, is a legitimate option. As Wole Ogundele reminds us, "a ritual can serve to affirm the status quo or be used to question it.... A dramatist working as a free creating agent can, however, appropriate and use it to express his own dissentient vision..." (1994, 48-49). Through this traditional praxis, the playwrights create models against which contemporary Nigerian society can re-evaluate itself so as to make progress.

Notes

1. Efua Sutherland attests this belief in her comedy: *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The invocation of ancestral spirit via libation by Ananse, though sourced in Akan lore of Ghana is similar to what obtains in many cultures in Nigeria.

If you have gone, it does not mean
You have neglected us
You are with us
In difficulty and in joy (88).
2. The period of Igwe festival is a period of rest for the Oba during which he is believed to communicate with his ancestors in awesome solemnity. He does not receive visitors except certain categories of his chiefs. The presence of a stranger is believed to bring pollution, hence, it is forbidden. The defiance of this ritual observance in 1897 by Consul Phillips and his party of colonial traders were violently resisted by some members of Benin court who executed the white traders. The British retaliatory attack led to the sack and looting of Benin kingdom. It also resulted in the trial, deposition and exile of Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. It is on this foundation that Ola Rotimi and Ahmed Yerima construct their historical tragedies - *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* respectively. In both plays, the Igwe festival of purification provides the spatio-temporal context for the conflict of interest between the cultural sensitivity of Benin Chiefs and the arrant mercantilism of invading expatriates.
3. *Iron* is a festival of chiefs to affirm the supremacy of the Oba and the loyalty of the chiefs to him. It features a mock fight between the Oba and Uzama. The Oba is always victorious and Uzama's submission re-affirms the Oba's supremacy over forces threatening peace and stability in the kingdom. See R.E. Bradbury "Divine Kingship in Benin" (186-207).
4. I am grateful to Ose Emmanuel for the information on Igwe festival.
5. Oyin Ogunba has drawn attention to the similarity between *Ewere* leaves and *Woro* leaves used during Ebi purification festival among the Ijebu in his paper: "Ijebu-Benin Relations in Ancient Times".
6. For further discussion on Ekpe, see James Amankulor "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama" in Y. Ogunbiyi (ed.) *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Sourcebook*, (113-129).

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