ABSU *Journal of Arts, Management, Education, Law and Social Sciences*.
Vol. 10&11; 167 - 173, 2020/2021 www.absujamelss.org

USING DRAMA TO PROPAGATE HOME-GROWN INNOVATION: REFLECTIONS OF AN IDEOLOGICAL PLAYWRIGHT.

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt by a playwright to discuss the basis for an ideological play that he co-authored with Benedict Binebai. Conceived as a play which approximates a public policy statement, *Dancers from Africa* is critiqued by one of its authors and in the process highlighting the Africanist fervor therein. In contextualizing how Africa played noble paths in the past to advance human civilization, the play by Greg Mbajiorgu and Benedict Binebai is positioned as a pro-innovation drama. The paper addresses how through the debate Dida has with the Eurocentric Edward Powel and Henry Duke we come to terms with the near-existential argument about the contributions of the ancient centres of civilization to modern concepts of copper, bronze, brass and silver casting. Dance is conceived as a paradigm through which the misinterpretations of black history are re-examined and placed in their right context. The paper confirms that there are instances in which drama could be harnessed to play the same role a position paper can play.

Keywords: Innovation, dance, African dancers, civilization, ideology, drama.
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Introduction

Africa's Home-grown innovation has for years remained an attractive subject matter for scholars in the sciences and social sciences. However, this has not been reflected in the Arts and Humanities. Perhaps, the reason could be one if not all the following:

a) Most Grants for development-oriented studies and researches are limited to scholars in the science and social sciences.
b) The Humanities Qualitative research method may be inappropriate for conducting such studies that require quantitative approaches.
c) Government and NGOs feel that Artists and Scholars in the Arts make little or no tangible contribution to Development or to issues relating to economy and progress and as such they are often excluded in policy round tables.

As Playwrights with great love for issues on the front burner, we have been working to counter such narratives. It is crucial to mention here that this is not our first effort towards suggesting solution to serious national or global issues.[1]

We as experimental Playwrights found it attractive to welcome the assignment from the African Innovation Foundation, Switzerland, demanding that we script and produce a play on Africa's home-grown innovation for their award dinner night.Their terms of references include that our play should function as a kind of catalyst for the advancement of Home-grown innovation in Africa.

As Authors of this play we see ourselves as inventive and protean members of contemporary African avant-garde activists. The idea of a pro-innovation drama sounded drab to us at the initial stage, but after our extensive research it was possible for us to develop a story from this complex subject.*Dancers from Africa* chronicles the contributions of Africans to the advancement of Human knowledge in the areas of invention and innovation. In this play, we employed dance and choreography as our major dramatic strategy.Our main thematic thrust hinged onthe misconception and ignorance of those who see their own cultures as superior while negating others whose cultures are presumed inferior. Through subtle invectives, we condemn racial prejudice while celebrating the greatness of Africa through her illustrious icons like Professor EL Anatsui and others. These are the heroes of African civilization.

Dancers from Africa is thus symbolic of the struggles and aspirations of men who were motivated by their love of and passion for innovation and development which apparently drove them to aim very high in their fields of endeavour. Dance ultimately in this text becomes, according to Frye, "an inexhaustible source of new critical discoveries". In a broad collective sense, *Dancers from Africa* is brimful of choreographic dimensions and metaphorical allusions. In a brilliant innovative strategy,the researcher and his co-author bridged the boundaries between elocution, songs, mime, dance and stylization techniques. A coalescence of gesture and movements, rhythm and synchronization of diction imbues the text with aesthetic sublimity and semantic density. Metaphorical configurations find rallying points in the structural elements and emotional signals of leitmotifs, the figurability of conflicts, surrealist imageries and inventive spectacles that define the entire text.

Deliberately, we desired the play to open with the irruptive forward movement of African Dancers, "towards the hall hosting the international congregation of great minds" (3). In our hermeneutics of the text, "African dancers" "the hall", "international congregation", "great minds" (3) take an archetypal symbolization. For Northrop Frye, these symbols embody associative clusters (124). These lexical entities constitute poetic universalizing tropes. Each is a specific representation of anidea, or genus. As archetypal metaphors,they embody concrete universals and each is identified with its class as well as other things. Frye in consonance with this perspective writes that the literary universe is a universe in which everything is potentially identical with everything else we conceived (124). For example, we conceived the phrase "African dancers" not in its literal sense but in its metaphoric connotation. It could be interpreted as an entity, a metaphorical representation of the entire African continent imbued with dramaturgical consciousness. The poetic "hall" also represents a universalizing element - "a universal garden" where in the words of Obiechina, “every people bring their own seed to plant and tend" (47). Obiechinagoes on to add that "in the universal hall the soil is indifferent. Every seed planted there will germinate and grow. How it fares will depend on how much skill, industry and conscious labour the group brings with them to tend and husband their tree" (47). Lexical items such as "hall', "public building", "universal garden" are tropes whose meanings are multidimensional.

The structure, "international congregation of great minds" is polysemous. It equates human society as a metaphor depicting people as aggregates of human beings, as one large universal body. The Christians often speak of the edification of the universal body of Christ. The Buddhist Lamas talk about the eternal bliss in which souls are merged in the one great body of the Brama. From another spectrum, it entails human beings organized around some socio-economic cum political formations. Such as the United Nations, Common Wealth of Nations and so forth. This perspective is conceived by some as opprobrium because in retrospect such conclaves have systematically negated other people's poetic landscapes. Yet this kind of reading is done in what Frye calls "verisimilitude" or "the context of plausibility" (124).Ricoeur also affirms that metaphor alludes to all things (66). Again, "international congregation of great minds" could mean an Eldorado, a Utopian idea that exists only in the imagination, a non-realizable reality, In other words it is only but a semantic oddity

The first major conflict in our text arises as the "African Dancers" advance towards the hall and" Officer Jones with a gun and a walkie-talkie barricaded their way" (5). "Officer Jones" is the representative of an established public power or state with all the instruments of coercion: a gun and a walkie-talkie. In the words of Engels "the shabbiest public servant of the civilized state has more "authority" than all the organs of gentile society put together" (207). From another perspective, "Officer Jones" represents a monstrous creation by the modern capitalist elite class. Imbued with an "Uncle Tom mentality", "Officer Jones" resemble a "slave foreman". Buddhism adopted the word Brahma from Hinduism.

According to Malcolm X "the slave master took Tom and dressed him well, fed him well and even gave him a little education... gave him a long coat and a tall hat and made all the other slaves look up to him. Then he used Tom to control them" (13). Chinweizu elaborates further:"An elite slave is still a slave, his economic mini-privileges and his carefully fostered sense of social superiority firmly tied his interest to those of his masters and made him loyal to the slaving system" (13). Moving in satiric perspectives, Chinweizu writes that, "in the global version of this American system of control, third world national elites are required to function, and many do like Nigger Toms" (440). And many do even more like "Officer Jones" either in the political arena or the ivory tower where many of the so called academics betray collective interests and indulge in pervasive kleptocracy. This has led to the impoverishment of African societies and promotion of rote-learning and ornamental attitude to the learning of Science and Arts in African universities. Obiechina is even more incisive in his delineation of Uncle Tom's mentality or "Officer Jones's consciousness". He writes that "there is a character in American folklore called Rip Van Winkle who forgot he had a farm while his own was overridden with weeds. Among the Igbos Rip Van Winkle would be called an *Akaloghori*or an *efulefu*"(47). Thus in English it means a loafer. Chinweizu declares that "trying to build on the traditions of others will only put us at a huge disadvantage' (47). Many Africanelities today behave like "Officer Jones" "Uncle Toms" and "Rip Van Winkle" (46). These are African academics who betrayed their calling as scholars, schizophrenic politicians and the parasitic *petite bourgeoisie*.

Conflict in the text is generated even more between the African dancers and the representatives of the comprador white capitalist bourgeoisie. The African dancers represent the black innovators. The conflict shows the irreconcilability of contradictions between the two groups.

This conflict raises the question of whether imperialism ever ended. It also shows the fundamental distinction of thought and attitude based upon ontological and epistemological processes between the West and Africa. The idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures is embedded in the views projected by Edward Powel and Henry Duke. To them, "*udu*" an ordinary musical instrument, is either an explosive device, "a bomb" or "a pot of *juju"* (22). Edward Said sees this as "positional superiority" (7) as stifling and often based on ignorance. A white character had out of ignorance asked Kabile "how many kilometers it would take to get from Kenya to a village, Nigeria?". Dida is at pains trying to debunk Edward Powel's ignorance concerning the origin of the metal age in Africa. Let us listen to Dida, Edward Powel, and Henry Duke:

Dida:

> ..Archacologists have discovered Ancient Centers of Civilizations in sophisticated known cultural areas in Africa like Nok, Ife, Igbo Ukwu and ancient Benin kingdom. According to Archaeological Reports there is overwhelming evidence of the settlers' sophisticated casting traditions in copper,bronze, brass and silver. There is no greater testimony of the ingenuity of Our Great Ancestors than these archacological findings. (shows Edward and Henry what she just read from the tablet).
>
> Edward Powel:

The ideas that inform their innovations in metal casting must have been borrowed from South-West

Asia, through Egypt to your primitive corner of the globe.

Henry Duke:

> How can primitive Africans possess the intellectual capacity to produce such sophisticated silver and bronze art works?It must have come through the diffusion of ideas from other continents (36).

Without doubt, the semitic theory which emphasizes the oriental mirage in the evolution of African civilization lacks empirical evidence. From the findings of Paleoclimatology, Archeology, Geology, History, Geography, Biology, Anthropology and Linguistics, Africa has had evolutionary history of cultures and civilizations. Onwuejeogwu has this to say about the evolution of the metal age in Africa South of the Sahara:

> In Africa, South of the Sahara, the appearance of iron-working, and its associated phenomena of farming and population growth occurred at different times in different regions. In the Nile valley the use of iron at Kush was common around 500BC. By 200 BC it was used at Meroe around 440BC it was also used at Nok in Southern Zaria (Nigeria). The Nok culture has proven to be a clear evidence of a transitional stage between a stone age food collecting culture and one that grew from food. The metal age of Africa emerged independent of Europe, and developed its distinctive features independent of Northern Africa (17).

According to K.B.C Onwubiko, "for long, the Negro peoples of Africa south of the Sahara have been sadly misrepresented in much European-Oriental history. The Negroes have been presented by many European writers as a race without a past, a people who had never evolved a civilization of their own and had contributed nothing to human progress" (91).

AdieleAfigbo also agreed that the European missionaries, administrators and scholars attributed whatever progress African societies had made to "Hamitic influence from the north and north-east" (2). For example, although Western historians give credit to the Sumerians as the inventors of writing, Egyptian hieroglyphics pre-dated the cuneiform of the ancient Mesopotamia. Egyptian and South American Civilizationshave historical records of communications from the ancient Atlantean and Lemurian cultures that attest to this assertion. ChikeAniakor equally observed that the Europeanization of Africa has depended on the epistemological constructions of the other, an alien methodology that mediates and interpretes Africa through occidental prism (59)Many important truths lie hidden from those who refuse to recognize the creative landscapes of other people.

The multifarious nature of the dance metaphor in our play is shown by the fact that the dance does not depend on physical dancing alone. It also articulates the dance within the various aspects of man's constitution and enterprise. The dance is figuratively astral or emotional. It is also a logical weapon aimed at debunking old cherished ideas of racial provenance and superiority. It is thus a dance visible and invisible and located at the physical and psychic planes. The dancers from Africa tell us that their dance is "metaphorical", thus alluding to various significations (3). They also tell us that their dance is a dance of celebration which is meant to "contradict the western ideology of dancing as aesthetics" (32). The dance also "exalts Africa's heroic spirit of industry and neologism"(32).

The dancers metaphorical allusions to great icons and innovators like Professor EL Anatsui, Innocent Innoson Motors, Allen Oyema,Onyema Aliko Dangote, ObioraUdechukwu, DemasNwoko, Phillip Emeagwali, Seyi Baba,NnamdiAzikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, NelsonMandella and others in the play, *Dancers from Africa,* are predicated on the impulsetowards a revicw of African history, culture and society. From our ideological projection, the dance by the "African dancers" is meant to distil valuable insights and interpretative meanings from a psychic recall. The dance is also a psychological study of African nations through which fields of meanings and symbols associated with a people are aesthetically or poetically evoked.

There is thus a striking theatrical immediacy and spectacularity of a dance which focuses on historical categories of black ideology, consciousness and aesthetics. The "dancers from Africa" appear surrealistic in their multi-coloured costumes and weird-looking musical instruments like, "udu", "oja", "ogene", "ekwe" and so forth. This unusual but spectacular dance is strongly rooted in visuality, sound effects and allusions to historical figures and innovatorsLike the literary icons(Chinua Achebe and WoleSoyinka, the sculptor El Anatsui etc.) and the industrialists (Dangote, Innoson, Allen Onyemaetc), would have their names rendered in a continuous narrative chant as the dance progresses. Asthe dancers perform, they also intone incantatory chants like "African innovators" "may your creative spirit never run dry", "may all your endeavours be happy ones" and so forth. These refrains also function as leitmotifs unifying the emotional, the intellectual, the ritualistic and the structural elements of the dance.

As playwrights, one of the things we intend to achieve in *Dancers from Africa* is the elevation of the gestural theatre to new heights. A dexterous combination of gestures, body expression, incantatory theatre chants, music and all possible scenic resourcesenrich the noble goal of our African traditional theatre. The consecutive linking of leitmotifs, especially in passages of declamatory elocution forms a network of extensive metaphor that gives rhythm and tone to the entire work. The dancers through improvisationperform like carnival players in a typical traditional African Theatre, thus transforming their dance into "a template of textual and imagistic inscriptions" (92). The rhetorical notion of Africa as a continent that has produced great innovative minds is a leitmotif that runs throughout the entire text. It is also a poser challenging contemporary Africa to come out of its recent trap of neocolonial delusion, lifeless mimesis and moribund modernity. The incantatory chants, elocution, rhetorical figures of expressions, conversational lines and declamatory passages ultimately constitute rallying codes that set out the structure of *Dancers from Africa*.

In fact, the strength of the play lies in its deployment of spectacle and ritual elements. Spectacle is driven by the variety of African colours reflected in the character's costume and make up as well as their colourful musical instruments. On the other hand, ritual is the modus operandi for the existence of African traditional drama. In this kind of play, ritual entails some kind of encounter with para-humans or supernatural beings, not the physical beings we find in modern theatres.

The songs, physical incantation and ritualistic dance we find in the play are conveyed as some traditional forms of worship or prayer.

The characters in the play are significations. They are semiotic images, and therefore not real human beings. This is why they are adorned in esoteric costumes and make-ups. If they were adorned in ordinary clothes doing those ritual chants and dances, the play's objective would have been totally lost.

Traditionally, African drama does not border on character development. Rather, they are about representations. In the play, Henry Duke, Edward Poweland Officer Jones represent Western value, while Dida, Farrah, Uche and Kabila stand for African values. Some have also classified the play as forum theatre. This classification arises from their conviction that it provokes discussion on serious issues necessary for the development of the African continent.

Dancers from Africa is also a colossal satire on human society. For emphasizing white superiority and propagating black inferiority, the West and her European allies must accept the responsibility for transmitting and sustaining one of mankind's most monstrous delusions through history. To Edward Powel, Africans are "full of diseases, mischief and violence" (14). To Officer Jones, if a thing does not have an English, French or Portuguese name, then that thing is inferior (13). If a local delicacy like "fio-fio"or "dodo" does not have the same taste as the so-called western cuisine" from European restaurants, then it is below standard.

As authors of this play, we are in consonance with Chinweizu who asserts that "no amount of personal wealth, athletic skill or intellectual achievements will help any blackman escape the contempt westerners reserve for all of any race whatever, who belong to groups which have become less powerful than their own" (351). The solution to coming to terms in a neo-colonial world order run by the West is for Africans to regain their dignity by ensuring by all means that no group ever tramples upon them again. They must, like Achebe advised, go back to find when and where the rain began to beat them.

Ultimately, *Dancers from Africa* engenders multitudinous perspectives through a network of metaphorical relationships, leitmotifs, gestuality, surrealist imagery, spectacularity, and thematic refrains. *Dancers from Africa* is meant for theatrical performance. The play embodies an apocalyptic vision of an earthly Armageddon. In the words of Chinweizu, "the challenge of the 21st century to black Africans is to make Africa economically strong and militarily secure by building a Black superpower" (39). He goes on to add that the Black race may be exterminated by the end of this century if she fails to do that. He writes, "some will think this is exaggeration. but they should be reminded that people have been exterminated in the past when they were judged to be of no utility or were said to interfere with the "vital interests" of those with more power. If the whites decide they need Africa without the Africans, (which they actually did when, in the 1960s, under President Kennedy, they set out to invent HIV as their weapon for depopulating Black Africa) what is there to stop them?" (40). Recent events in world history attest to this: the pillaging of the cities, libraries and museums of Iraq as well as the constant shedding of innocent blood, the terrible emasculation of the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza with Israeli F-16's, Drones and Apache helicopters employed periodically to 'pacify' defenceless civilians, the events of September 11 and the concomitant consequences on Afghanistan and Iraq. Literature has a social character and is amply situated in history, our culture and socio-economic reality. Our *Dancers from Africa* is a humanistic critique of a people in dire need of self-determination and survival.

However, there are few artistic gaucheries which even as playwrights we have observed in this first edition of *Dancers from Africa* but we have effected corrections in the second edition of the play which is almost ready for publishing.

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