

# Sam Ukala: African Tradition in His Plays

by

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## Abstract

This paper discusses four of Sam Ukala's plays namely, *The Slave Wife*, *Akpakaland*, *Break a Boil*, and *The Trials of Obiamaka Elema* and posits that the plays are largely influenced by the playwright's Ikatraditional cultural experiences in the northwest region of Delta State in Nigeria. In the plays Ukala takes materials from the folklore of the Ika and blends them with his experience of the Western conception of drama to produce a somewhat new dramatic form which he labels 'folkism'. This investigation of the plays of Ukalashow how he exploits the intensive relationship between the audience and the actors/performers in a typical African traditional performance in his dramaturgy and of equal note how he use songs in the enactment of action in his plays.

## Introduction

Sam Ukala is a Nigerian playwright, director, teacher, and supporter of decolonization that works to explore African traditional standards of beauty and correctness (aesthetics). In the construction of his plays, he depends on the African oral tradition, hence belief or behavior passed within a group or society that has symbolic meaning or a special importance with origins in the past for his materials and structure. He selects his material from the oral tradition of the Ika people of the northwest region of Delta State in Nigeria, and thus works it into a modern dramatic mode to reflect his concern with the social malaise in the body politic of Nigeria. Hence, in this context, as O. R. Dathorne suggests, "the direction of development [of modern African drama] would be in the resuscitation of folk forms" and that "... traditional material helps to give historical depth and a time perspective to drama, even though it has been recorded by the imagination of an individual playwright" (309, 323). This seemingly appears to have informed Ukala in his dramatic productions because in his plays, he borrows extensively from Ika oral tradition to give his plays a unique identity.

And additionally, Abubakar (2009) in his discussion of the relationship between African traditional performances and the modern dramatic experience in the hands of the modern playwright in Africa observes that in the hands of such playwrights, “[t]he heritage of the two performance cultures no doubt has made African playwrights inventive as they strive to be contextually relevant without losing touch with universal trends”, like the modern stage and its appurtenances (175). We understand Abubakar to mean that modern African playwrights do not just ape the Western dramatic mode of presentation, but that they instead blend their materials from both traditions creatively to produce relevant theatrical experience that audiences from the traditional African performance and the Western dramatic tradition can both readily identify with.

Therefore, this paper will examine four of Ukala’s published plays: namely *The Slave Wife* (1982), *Akpakaland* (1990), *Break a Boil* (1992), *The Trials of Obiamaka Elema*, hereafter *The Trials* (1992), with the objective to show that he combines the folk materials of the African people which consists of story-telling, audience involvement in the enactment of action etc, with his European experience of drama, such as stage arrangement, lighting effects etc, to make comments on contemporary issues. Hence, the paper examines the plot, mode of characterization, language and various other structural devices in the plays that give them a distinctive touch in order to show how the playwright has used these to give depth to his plays and to categorically state that these derive from the dramatist’s experience in traditional African performance. In this treatment, we see that Ukala has indeed taken theatre from the proscenium stage and imbued it with traditional African aesthetics in its composition and enactment to utilize the basic features of performance via African folktale and other performances from which Africans create entertainment.

## Plot

M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham observe that “[t]he plot ... in a dramatic or narrative work is constituted by its events and actions, as these are rendered and ordered toward achieving particular artistic and emotional effects” (293). Conversely, the plot of a dramatic work is the arrangement of the incidents in the work that send basic sentiments that the writer wishes to convey, hence, Ukala depends on the African folktale via its oral narrative and structure in the construction of his plays.

*Akpakaland* is about a wife who seeks to destroy her co-wife out of jealousy. Fulama tells the President that one of his wives has a tail and, therefore, seeks to publicly disgrace the concerned woman. Meanwhile, she has made Unata, one of her co-wives from the "Province of the Poor," grow a tail through the help of Enwe, the native doctor, whom she deceives into assisting her. Her reason for this devious act is simply because “... The moment the president married the Beautiful One, I Fulama, the light of the morning, ceased to shine. For weeks, the president slumbered in the arms of the Beautiful One while the joints of my waist grew cold and stiff...” (5). Akpaka decrees his wives would publicly display their bottoms before the entire Akpakaland to see which of them has a tail. Unata, with the help of her father, Idemudia, seeks Enwe's help, thus, Enwe returns the tail to the tale bearer, Fulama.

On the appointed day, all of Akpakaland is gathered to see which of the president's wives has a tail. After the wives are paraded, it is discovered that Fulama, the accuser, is, indeed, the tail bearer. Akpaka reneges on the earlier decree that the wife with the tail will be executed. He decides to administer a lighter sentence on Fulama because of her class privilege. The people spontaneously revolt against the president's decision and insist that Fulama be executed as earlier decreed. They insist on this because of Akpaka's attempt to subvert the course of justice. When there is a deliberate attempt at the subversion of justice as in this case, it unites the people and makes them challenge the status-quo. This is why Maurice Benn states that "... men and women can protest and revolt against their common suffering. Their sense of solidarity may give rise to a sense of responsibility for each other..." (71). It is this solidarity and sense of anger at oppression in the hands of the ruling elites that spur the people to revolt (here there is a complete turnaround in the plot which makes the play somewhat melodramatic as there is a twist in the action of the play different from the expectation of the audience).

According to Wale Okediran:

Initially *Akpakaland* seems to have highlighted the usual problems in a polygamous family. However, a deeper look reveals that the play is also a documentation of a class war between the rich and the poor and between the rulers and the ruled. This is because it is essentially Akpaka's decision to give Fulama a light sentence that sparked the revolution in *Akpakaland*. (3)

Ukala does not follow the story as it is known in the various traditions in Africa where the tale exists; rather, he switches to address a socially relevant issue in his society. Akpaka, Fulama, Iya Fulama and the ministers hold the people in contempt; and as a consequence, change the face of justice to spite them. This is the thrust of the spontaneous revolution in the play. Ukala marries the folktale through a subtle integration of action and dialogue to comment on present realities.

The structure of *The Slave Wife* follows basically the same line in that it is also the story of a jealous wife who struggles to maintain her privileged position in a polygamous royal home through overt and covert means. Ogiso, the Oba of Idu, is anxious to sire a male child who will inherit the throne from him. He enlists the support of his chiefs, and most especially that of Obu, the one-eyed oraclist, who after consulting his oracle, tells Oba Ogiso to marry one of his slaves. Apparently, this has not solved the problem, because as Oba Ogiso tells Obu: 'The slave you asked me to marry I have married. The blood of my body has fattened her buttocks not her belly. No heir has been born, and this kingdom will be deceived no more' (5). And thereafter, Obu consults his oracles and tells Oba Ogiso their directive, that he feeds his ancestors and his wives with "mashed yams" (6), and that the wife who eats the alligator pepper, which the Oba hides in the yam, shall give him a son. Hence, the necessary ritual is performed, and after some time, the Oba's wives indeed become pregnant, and as is the tradition, they are sent out of the palace to give birth (7).

The enslaved wife, Igbon, suffers all forms of deprivation in the palace. Her elevation from slavery to the status of a wife of the Oba does not lessen her yoke. The entire palace and the people of Idu see her as a slave and treat her as such. The Oba and his chiefs mock her elevation to the status of a wife, which in reality she is not. Igbon's composure and action are condescending, however, in the end, the enslaved wife gives birth to a son who Alahin attempts to destroy. And it is not until the miraculous arrival of her son and her subsequent elevation does Igbon exert her position as a royal wife. She warns Alahin, her major persecutor, with confidence and a sense of authority in the trial scene: "Be very careful what you say..." (51). After the chiefs have pronounced the judgment of guilt on Alahin to the effect that nothing short of her blood will cleanse the land, she retorts: "Nothing short of that will pacify us. Nothing short of that" (51). She says this with emphasis so as to underscore her desire for revenge on Alahin. As Alahin says, it is Igbon who sits in judgment over her in the end. She begs Igbon for mercy in the trial scene:

ALAHIN [*running to Igbon and kneeling before her*]  
Do you know what they are saying? They want to kill me.  
Please, my sister, forget whatever I did to you. Forget  
since your son lives... [*Weeps.*] The world has capsized  
like a boat. I didn't know it would. I didn't know you will  
sit in judgment over me ....(51)

This is quite a different Alahin from the one who in her glory says of Igbon: "Look at this one of the swine family. Oba's wife! Osalobua laho!" (18). Here the contempt is unmistakable; but, in the end, Igbon is indeed, the Oba's wife.

*The Trials* is the intrigue in the succession to the throne of Oki after the demise of the incumbent, Elema Ofume, Owodo II is opposed to Obiamaka Elema because of his refusal to be used as a drain on the people's resources by the dissolution of the task force, which guzzles the people's development funds and waste it on unprofitable ventures. Thus, they create obstacles for the new Elema which culminates in the 'installation' of the bastard son of Umogwun as the 'Elema of Oki' by Owodo II and some of Oki's renegades. After tortuous trials and detentions of Obiamaka Elema, the courts finally establish his innocence, and set him free.

The play is woven around common themes, and Ukala uses the features of the folktale, which include the opening formula, audience participation, and the narrator in presenting this otherwise historical account. As he says in his interview with *Words*, "*The Trials of Obiamaka Elema* as you would find it, is based on the history of a living person who is a king, the ruler of a kingdom. So it is not a folktale" (8). What the playwright has done successfully is to clothe a historical event with the format of the folktale which we have identified in creating his illusion.

Obiamaka confronts many gullies, which symbolise the man-made obstacles put in his way to the Elemaship and those that he interestingly contends with after his coronation. He successfully scales through all the obstacles during his coronation, and even the ones after. In his trials, Obiamaka displays a calm of temper. This is made easy for him because of the support he receives from the people who stand by him at every point in his trial. In the end, even his enemies see the futility of their actions and the justness of the Elema's cause.

*Break a Boil*, which is a blend of the structure of the folktale with the modern stage technique is concerned with intrigue. The king of Gidiland, Oba Gidi, has gone to settle things with the king of Ugbon. While he is away on the mission, his elder half-brother, Uwa, is making love to the same woman, Uki, in the king's palace. They are caught by Eririnma, the king's war minister who is sent by the king to get Uwa for the journey to Ugbon. The king's first wife, Ison, and Nkanka, the "yaw-infested weaver" who does not miss anything of importance in the kingdom are, however, aware that Uwa and Uki are not first timers in their tryst. Uwa and Uki plead with Eririnma not to disclose to the king what he has seen. However, the plot takes a complete turnaround when the guilty accuse Eririnma of attempting to rape Uki. Uwa kills Nkanka in order to hide his guilt, and forces Ison to bear false witness against Eririnma. Hunted by the blood of Nkanka which she licked from the machete while swearing to protect Uwa and Uki; she tells the truth and confesses that this was not the first time they were at it. She says with determination: "Eririnma caught Uwa yesterday. But Nkanka and I knew that Uwa and Uki had polluted the king again and again" (47). They knew the truth all the while, but were unable to tell the king because of the hold Uki has over him.

Eririnma impales Uwa with the royal sword for his crime of killing Nkanka. The people abandon feuding royal brothers of Gidiand and decide to break tradition by making Eririnma, a stranger to Gidiland, the new king. Eririnma's crowning challenges the African tradition of succession to a vacant throne, which is, in most cases, traditionally patrilineal, hence from father to son or to a male member of the ruling house. What Ukala is advocating, it seems, is that rulership should not be determined by birth alone. He believes Eririnma's valour and sense of justice make him more qualified for the throne than any other person in Gidiland. In his hands, therefore, the gods cannot have their say outside of what the people decide. They, like Olokun in Osofisan's *No More The Wasted Breed*, believe in justice. The gods, we are told, upheld the decision of the people to "break a boil full of puss" (51).

Ukala fuses the traditional story-telling technique and the Western dramatic form in the construction of his plays. As Biodun Jeyifo advocates, "...the union of Western-oriented textual dramaturgical modes with our vital indigenous theatrical techniques must become a conscious attempt to achieve greater directness, greater clarity, greater popularity" (419). Yemi Ogunbiyi also advocates for a "...conscious merging of the best traditions of Western oriented textual dramaturgy and the vibrantly contemporary indigenous theatrical techniques" (48). Ukala has consciously worked into this theatre the aesthetics of both dramatic traditions, that is, the Western proscenium stage and the traditional African form of incorporating folklore and the oral narrative.

A distinct feature of Ukala's dramatic technique is the trial scene. This is dramatized in all the plays under study. In the plays, the trial scenes are interwoven with the search for truth; they represent a traditional (customary) justice system, except in *The Trials*, wherein the modern form of dispensation of justice inherited from the colonial encounter is used. Ronald Gaskell observes that a trial scene "... challenges the audience to assessment and decision. At the same time... it provides that clash of opposites that is the simplest and most primitive source of excitement in the theatre" (141).

## **Mode of Characterization**

In Ukala's plays, there is an intermingling of characters of different social-economic classes. There is interaction between the nobles and the masses, and at every point, the playwright's sentiment is unmistakably with the common people. In *Akpakaland*, there is an attempt by Akpaka to subvert justice in favour of the rich and powerful which leads to the revolt in the play. The masses in the play are not passive; they revolt against their suppression and thus, confront the ruling class. The audience can easily identify with the masses in the play, because it is a realistic presentation of the problems that possibly confronts all societies.

Akpaka is inconsistent in his dealings with the people. The blood of the rich and powerful is superior in his eyes to that of the poor. The poor cannot, therefore, contend with the rich in Akpaka's court. The revolution in *Akpakaland* is the people's revolution. According to Inih Ebong, this kind of revolution is "a revolution that will initiate and promote pragmatic solutions to practical problems" (71). This is because it makes the rulers become conscious of the potentials of the masses to confront them when they take wrong decisions. Here, Ukala again skillfully interweaves the past with the present as we operate in the world of the folktale, and the African oral narrative where the jealous housewife is presented as she schemes and plots the downfall of her co-wife. At the same time, we operate in the modern state and witness the attempt by the rich to subvert justice and the response of the masses to the attempt. Ukala, in doing this, must have listened to the voice of Akomaye Oko when he advises that "playwrights must realize that they are writing for present society and not for the ancestors or the gods" (69). Yet, Ukala does not concern himself with the past for its sake, as he draws useful lessons from it, which he blends with the present to make valid comments on modern social realities.

Next, Fulama sets out to destroy Unata for the sexual favours she gets from their husband. Unata's crime is that she has appropriated their husband's bedtime for herself. She contrasts sharply with Unata, both in status and in character. And in Fulama's desire to hurt, she does not look behind her back and, therefore, she is consumed in her own intrigue. Conversely, the same trend runs through *The Slave Wife*. Ogiso, the Oba of Idu, is pained that he does not have a son who would succeed him. In his quest, the gods through Obu make him marry one of his slaves, and after the slave wife does not give birth, he accuses Obu of falsehood; but as H.D.F. Kitto says, the prophecy of the gods "... is not a special and arbitrary decree ... it is a prediction made by a god who, unlike men, knows all the facts and can therefore see in advance how the situation must necessarily work out" (76).

In essence, the prophecy of the gods, if we interpret Kitto correctly, is not what humans can decipher with precision as to when it will happen; it will come to pass because the gods have knowledge which we as humans cannot immediately comprehend. Then, at last, the much wanted son is born; Alahin throws him into the river out of jealousy. She is angry at not being the fortunate woman to give birth to him. Thus, she does not wish to compromise her position in the palace, because she knows that the mother of the heir apparently is next in line to be the Queen Mother.

In addition, Oba Ogiso, unlike Akpaka, is consistent in his dealings and in the execution of his judgment. He is forthright in dealing with the jealous wife, and does not hesitate in condemning her when her guilt is established. He tells Alahin: "Shut up, you devil! You regret nothing! I have always told you that your bad heart will be your doom. You were the greatest olomiogho biting our toe. Yes, you were! And I almost pounded my life out making this son..." (51). Ogiso and the chiefs are unanimous in their decision. Even though the judgment on the other wives is not dramatized on the stage, the audience leaves satisfied that they will not go unpunished. Ogiso tells them: "As for these other women, they will reap what they sowed. Suffice it to say now, that it is not the day an infant breaks a gourd of oil that he is called to question" (52). By Oba Ogiso's pronouncement, their fate is in the balance, and thus, the audience's sympathy for Alahin is effectively killed because of her evil actions, and as such, all readily applauds the decision of the chiefs.

*The Trials* is the story of Obiamaka Elema, a king desirous of change. It is his quest for positive change and development that pitches him against forces represented by Owodo II, who insist on maintaining the status quo. As an educated and fairly travelled man, Obiamaka maps out a plan for the development of Oki. He wants modernity brought to Oki through a planned development of the infrastructure of the community, which he believes can be done through a transparent and judicious use of a development fund.

Obiamaka has the trust of the people of Oki. He is forthright in his dealings with them and he is a peaceful man. He is undaunted by the obstacles put in his way by Owodo and his Oki renegades. He is almost broken when he loses his case and is committed to prison; but this is only momentary. At this point of breakdown, his wife, Okwunne, and his uncle, Nwokunbo, give him courage and bring him words of encouragement from the people. In his second imprisonment, therefore, it is he who gives the Defence Counsel hope to go on appeal. He tells him when he is reluctant to appeal:

... I came to you in the first instance because of the high reputation you have established. You may not win all the cases you ought to win. But there are always two judgments to a case - one from the Bench, the other from the lay man who witnessed the proceedings. Sometimes, the second judgment confirms the first. Sometimes, it doesn't. But the laymen hold in higher esteem their own judgment. When their judgment opposes the judge's judgment against you, you have won even when you weep that you have lost... We have lost together. We shall win together. Appeal. If you want to taste of the salt in utazi, the bitter creeping stem, then you must first chew and chew its bitterness. Somewhere in the bitterness of the Bench there must be salt. Appeal. (74-75)

The Defence Counsel's reluctance is borne out of the corrupt nature of the courts at awarding judgment to the highest bidder. The court, which is supposed to be the upholder of justice, has become a weapon of suppression in the hands of the privileged. Konyehi aptly captures this for us when he says: "The way to infinitely ride the law like an ass is to pretend to respect it. That way, others would continue to prostrate before it while it tramples upon them in accordance with your dictates" (40).

The demise of Owodo II, which is attributable to the gods' execution of justice on him, is a natural follow-up to his intrusion, albeit unjustifiably, into the internal affairs of the people of Oki. He is presented by the playwright as greedy and promiscuous. He is a bad influence on his court and those around him. Like Oje, the audience does not feel any sympathy for him because he is consumed in his own web. As Oje tells him on his dying bed: "... Ogboju the modern logic, may blind the eyes of the law courts; it does not annul the wisdom of our ancestors. He who stands on the ground and spits at one on a tree-top, spits on himself. (Rising) My Lord, may you survive to learn your lesson" (45-6). He, indeed, deserves his fate. But, of course, he does not survive to learn any lesson from life, and neither do those who follow his example blindly learn from his demise.

In *Break a Boil*, Gidi is a character the audience denounces for his treachery against his elder half-brother. Also, as he does not have control over his libido, he snatches the wife of his fellow traditional ruler, the King of Ugbon. This is what leads to his doom. Like Odosun in Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked*, who sets out to destroy her step son and disguises her daughter for the throne, Gidi's mother connives with her son to make Uwa mad so Gidi can ascend the throne. The audience is ignorant of this treachery until the revelation scene where Gidi threatens to unlock the key to Uwa's sanity. Gidi's desire for the throne and the privileges that derive from it is interestingly fuelled by his mother. Yet, in the grandeur of kingship, he is kind and considerate; he treats Nkanka with kindness and makes his burden bearable (no wonder Nkanka plays the watch dog for him and sacrifices his life for truth).

Gidi holds his subjects in suspicion where Uki is concerned. And she knows how to keep him aflame with desire. When it is established that Gidi has polluted the customs and traditions of Gidiland, the people decide to break tradition by making Eririnma, a stranger in Gidiland, who has distinguished himself, their king. Uwa is also consumed by his evil deed. However, according to Eririnma, he does not kill Uwa because Gidi commands him to do so, but instead, for his callous and mindless killing of Nkanka.



Undoubtedly, Eririnma can also be indecisive when confronted with a grave situation. His indecision and delay in telling Gidi of his pollution almost costs him his own life. His indecision probably roots from his ignorance of Uwa's hidden desire for vengeance on Gidi for the manner they took his inheritance from him. Thus, when the people of Gidiland decide to make him the new king, they are only acknowledging his leadership qualities. As a man faithful to tradition, even though he is a stranger in Gidiland, he refuses to ascend the throne and accuses the people by saying: "Mischief! That's what you're up to. Your king lives. Even if he were dead, you have a tradition of hereditary kingship. I am but a stranger. Not a drop of Gidi blood flows in my veins" (57). But, is this not belated? Eririnma's rejection comes after he has virtually performed all the rites of ascension. It is at the last minute that he reluctantly rejects the offer, and he only needed the simple prompting of his mother to change his mind and accept the crown.

In the plays, there is a juxtaposition of good and bad characters: Fulama against Unata in *Akpakaland*, In *The Slave Wife*, it is Alahin against Igbon; Uwa and Uki against Nkanka and Ison in *Break a Boil*; and in *The Trials*, it is Owodo II, and the renegades that square up against Elema Obiamaka. This is a plausible means of characterization as observed by Marjorie Boulton in her assertion that "... if ... drama is to bear any resemblance to life it must contain both good and bad characters" (91). We can, therefore, safely conclude that the plays under study here (like others) clearly present the realities of life through a selective choice of characters.

## **Opening Formula: The Oral Narrative**

We have observed that *Akpakaland* and *The Slave Wife* are developed from oral narrative materials, and thus it is not surprising that the story-teller would open with narratives in the plays. In *Akpakaland*, the narrator performs the role of the story-teller, hence the play opens with: "I give you white chalk!" and the audience responds with: "If you concoct, may it be efficacious!" (3) (this is repeated a second time before the narrator begins the story):

### **Narrator:**

...There was Akpaka, the president of Akpakaland (enter Akpaka in an agbada, he is escorted by two guards in army uniform, one carrying a sword, the other a bottle of gin and a glass. Akpaka sits in the living room and begins to drink). There are also his wives: Fulama, Yeiyeye, Seotu, Unata and Iyebi (they enter as they are called, genuflect and pass to the back-stage), they were married in that order, the first three from the province of the rich, the last two from the province of the poor. Akpaka's choice of wives was a way of distributing national resources, for a man was obliged to look after his in-laws. But the resources steadily dwindled until there was a feeling of insecurity. And as the president was trying to knock out of his bottle of gin a way on how to solve that problem, Fulama enters (*Akpakaland*3-4)

The story, at this point, moves from the narrator to the presentation of the characters on the stage. But, before then, the tone of the play has been set, that is, there is a dramatization of the actions of an incompetent ruler at the helm of affairs of the state. His ambition, it seems, is the acquisition of women and, thereby, not a good way to use national energy or resources.

In *The Slave Wife*, the director acts as the narrator or story-teller. In the opening scene, he tells the audience: "... I'm the Producer/Director of the play you will be seeing soon. The man who wrote it is my.... You see his mother told him a folktale; and he went on and made it a play. But the way he couched it shows that he wanted to deceive you, the audience... (3). Hence, the fact of the play as a folktale is established; he tells us we should not bother as to the truthfulness of the play, the narrator-director subsequently doubles as Praise Singer who comments on the direction of the play as does the narrator in *Akpakaland*. At the end of the play, he employs the typical closing formula in traditional story telling when he says: "... so ends this folktale ... Don't start asking whether it is all true. What is true in oral tradition is what a child was told by his parents ..." (52).

The same motif runs through *Break a Boil*. The setting is that of a story-teller and his audience or listeners gathered to enjoy a folk performance. In the excerpt below, the setting for a folk performance where the audience gathers around the narrator, usually before dusk, to hear a tale, is clearly prepared;

Nkanka: (*listens*) Can you hear that song?

M.O.A.: Yes

Nkanka: You're particularly lucky tonight. When such a song begins the morning of a story, then your ears are in for a sumptuous meal. And tonight's story is about one great kingdom called Gidiland.

M.O.A.: Hann?

NKANKA: Gidiland! So, take your seats quickly and let's take off. (The M.O.A. move into the public audience, greeting people as they go along; and they soon settle down.) Are you all seated now?

M.O.A.: Yes, we are! (1-2)

This clearly sets the tone for a performance in a typical African context (greetings, engaging the audience) as explained above. Nkanka typifies the storyteller or narrator in a traditional folk performance. He continues in this role until he meets with violent death from the hands of Uwa, and the role is thereafter taken over by Ison, who continues the story to the end.

The place of folktale in African theatre is clearly identified by Oyekan Owomoyela when he observes that "The cornerstone of Yoruba theater [and one may add most of Africa] is story, and ... folklore has been and remains the most important quarry of the dramatists" (39). The form of Ukala's plays, as we have shown, derives from the African experience of an oral narrative which he has transported to the modern stage in his attempt to portray new realities that confront Nigeria.

### **The Use of Songs**

Another prominent device used by Ukala is song which gives the plays an authentic form; song being an integral part of the oral narrative. As Meki Nzewi observes, "... the truth remains that stage presentations not structured to, sequenced by, vetted through, or tipped with music and dance or stylized movement is alien to the inherent Nigerian theatre sensibilities" (433). Likewise, Ossie Eneke captures the importance of song in African theatre when he says: "In ... Africa... dance, mime and music are of the essence in the theatre" (152). And thus, Ukala distinctly brings this to bear in his dramatic form (although in *Akpakaland*, it is sparingly used), and in some of his opening scene, music serves as a soothing balm used to welcome the actors to the stage and prepare the audience for the action. For example in *Akpakaland* we find this (the song is in the Ika language and translated to English):

Lu n 'ilu	Tell a tale
Ilu Nwokoro	Tale about Nwokoro
Do n 'udo	Tug at the rope
UdoKpiri-kpiri	Rope Kpiri-kpiri. (3)

In this scene, Akpaka's wives are spurred on by songs that create the mood of accomplishment for the wives who are not guilty of the offence for which they are accused, and it is only Fulama who does not render a song before stripping herself of her clothing to clearly underscores her guilt and shame.

In *The Slave Wife*, the effect of song is noticeable as the Praise Singer drowns his sorrow and pain in his drumming and singing. Thus, he uses his drumming to vent his frustration on his oppressors who bloodied the throne of his ancestors, and carried him into exile and slavery in Idu.

Placed side by side, the plays that rely most on music and song in regards to themes and plot are also with communal actions. Hence, *The Trials* is heavily imbued with songs, and so is *Break a Boil* as both have coronation scenes (Obiamaka Elema, in *The Trials*, is spurred on in his coronation as the Elema of Oki and, of course, in his celebration of the Osezi festiva) which derive from the African ritual, which is normally accompanied with music that is also used to capture the various moods of the play. For example, after the death of Elema Ofume, Ozo sings a dirge to underline the sorrow and tragedy that the loss means for the people. He sings:

Uwankabuafia	This world is a market
Uwankabuafia	This world is a market
Onyexusia	After one has bought and sold
O lama	One departs
Uwankabuafia	This world is a market. (4)

The song aptly captures the ephemeral nature of existence wherein the world is a marketplace where people come to sell and buy their wares, and at the close of the market, they all depart to come another day. Thus, the song communicates a re-incarnation process in that those who die are expected to return to the community (family) in the future.

Immediately after this scene, the audience is presented with the installation of Obiamaka as the new Elema. As E.G. Parrinder says, "When a king dies [in Africa] his death is kept a secret until his successor is installed" (75). This is indeed confirmed in the dialogue below:

Ozo: Obiamaka, I'm still sitting. My waist isn't that strong anymore.

Nwokunbo: Yes, she is still sitting. What Ofume told you, we all know. All that can wait. But the throne cannot wait. Ogele must go tell the people that the Elema has slept.

Ogele: And once I tell them, they'd troupe here to know who the Next Elema is. We cannot present a letter. (8)

Once Obiamaka accepts the Elemaship, we are immediately presented with ritual displays of installation rites spiced with music. Enekwe has observed that "ritual is an integral part of the African theatre" (154). This is aptly displayed in *The Trials* and *Break a Boil*. And in his moment of depression, self-doubt and suspicion of the loyalty and trust of his people; Obiamaka's self-assurance and conviction are sustained after listening to music and enjoying some regal dance steps as music acts as an elixir to prop up characters/actors in the enactment, ethos or general performance of their roles in African performance. Correspondingly, *Break a Boil* opens with music and it reaches a crescendo in the installation scene towards the end of the play, and just like in *The Trials*, the action in *Break a Boil* is sustained with music which gives the play a form of communal celebration of self-discovery. Hence, at the start of the conflict in the play, when Gidi first appears on the stage, he is welcome by the praise singer as it is the tradition in almost all of Africa, as the King hardly moves about without his retinue of praise singers and drummers. So when Gidi brings the news of his settlement of the dispute with the King of Ugbon, he is welcome with music and praise songs.

In all, songs and music play an integral role in indigenous African performances; this has indeed been brought to bear on modern African stage performance or theatre by the African playwright in capturing the African essence and creating for the theatre audience a cultural experience; and for this reason, the audience can identify with the theatre more readily and fortify via Joel Adedeji that "[t]he essence of the play is contained in the song and music" (Ricard 49).

## **Audience Participation**

The participatory role of the audience in traditional African performances is integral. Abubakar tells us that: the African audience is active, resourceful, and uncompromising, especially in the traditional setting. Hence, the African audience's perception of theater is far from escapism or mere entertainment; it conceives of theater as a place for sharing ideas and communing with others, gods, and spirits to all the actors to freely interact with their audience. (177) Accordingly, Ukala, in two of his plays, artistically exploits this interactive role between actor and audience. He woos his audience by creating Members of the Audience (M.O.A.) as characters who sit in the audience, rather than being on the stage, and therefore, actively participates in the dialogue on the stage, a unique feature in his mode of characterization. In *Break a Boil* and *Akpakaland*, M.O.A. is actively involved in the dialogue, for example:

M.O.A.: He's a man indeed!

Ison: But he would implicate Eririnma.

M.O.A.: Let him. Why did Eririnma not report the matter?

Ison: Eririnma is deep. Eririnma is a stranger. Eririnma knows the king he serves. Eririnma...

Well, Eririnma should speak for himself. (*Boil*, 16)

M.O.A.: Foolish people! So you support Fulama?

NAR: (narrator) (re-appearing) What did you expect? When there is a dispute between the influential rich and the unknown poor, who supports the poor?

M.O.A.: (dismally) No one!

NAR: Yes, no one. Several people pay them lip-service ...as soon as they are in the corridors of power, they put the treasury in their pockets, lock the corridors against the poor and ask them to be self-reliant.

M.O.A: Are they, themselves, self-reliant?

NAR: How could they be? Like beasts of burden, the poor masses transport them to power ... (*Akpakaland*, 32)

These two excerpts clearly show the active involvement of the M.O.A. in the dialogue on the stage. This is, indeed, a novel idea in modern African dramaturgy, as the participatory role of the audience in traditional African performances is brought to life in the scenes above. Hence, through the active participation of the M.O.A., the entire audience will find itself taking part in the dialogue. Similarly, M.J.C. Echeruo observes that because of the communal nature of drama, "it requires a group audience at all stages of enactment; quite often, in fact, it demands the participation of the audience in the action of songs" (138), and, indeed, Ukala's audience is not invited to participate in the songs alone, but in the total direction of the play as the action unfolds, fortifying the African essence of the communal involvement in social and cultural activities.

## Conclusion

We have examined the plays of Ukala and discussed the style and form he deploys in the presentation of his plays. Hence, in his plots, we have seen a relevance to the African experience of performance as he explores the oral tradition which his audience can easily identify with, and with the characters, especially those who are wrongly maligned and ill-treated by the privileged. In my assessment, this is a true reflection of reality in the Nigerian society where the masses are constantly denied their humanity by the ruling elite and their acolytes. Consequently, he draws the attention of his audience to the predicament of the defenseless in society, and in a deliberate attempt, at every turn; he shows how the privileged subvert the course of justice in the most populous nation in Africa. Thus, the characters of Fulama, Alahin, Owodo II, Uwa and others like them do not have the sympathy of the audience, because of their irredeemable disposition.

Notwithstanding, one important feature of Ukala's plays is his stage. He moves his characters out of the proscenium stage into the open arena in the enactment of the action. This, admittedly, is not novel to Ukala, as playwrights since Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi, Osofisan and others have also used this to their advantage. And indeed, as Dathorne (1974) observes "...a beginning in the emancipation of African drama will be made when the setting shifts from indoors to, say, the marketplace; it would be more realistic and would suggest all manner of possibilities for character and action" (338). The display of the action and other elements of the folk performance have given a new authenticity which clearly situates Ukala's dramaturgical theory of 'folkism' that Ogude says:

...derives from the total performance apparatus of traditional 'theatre'. (sic) It aims at recreating that ambience, that delicate balance between ritual and inspiration. It seeks to recreate in contemporary performance and written text, the idiom and the nuances of oral performance without losing the immediacy of contemporary frame of reference. (5)

Ukala has skillfully taken theatre from the proscenium stage and imbued it with traditional African standards of beauty and correctness in the composition and enactment of his plays, and most preciously utilized the basic features of performance in African folktale and in other performances to demonstrate how African people and the African experience has effectively created aesthetically relevant entertainment.

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