Continuity and Change in Traditional Nigerian Theater Among the Igbo in the Era of Colonial Politics

by
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Facts about pre-colonial Igboland are available in a number of scholarly works and publications.[1] We shall simply select a number of outstanding details for mention here. Before the advent of colonialism, the geo-political entity now called Nigeria, was governed like most other African countries, by indigenous rulers who controlled a variety of political structures such as kingdoms, empires, states and clans. The political structure of some of the ethnic groups, such as the Igbo, which could not fit into any recognized pattern in the West African region was merely described as "stateless". It has been recognized today however, that the Igbo operated a complex system of government which involved the elders, ritual authority holders, title societies, pressure groups and village groups.[2] Matters involving individual villages were settled at their village group or clan level while those involving individuals were adjudicated within their village and lineage units. Whenever necessary, the settling of disputes also involved such organizations as the men's title societies as *Ekpe* or *Okonko*, age groups, and the association of women born in the area *(the umuada)*.

The nature of pre-colonial Igbo world-view made it possible for authority to be shared. It was a world-view which recognized the existence of both a supreme God and minor Deities which functioned to regulate the relationship between man, the ancestors and spirits of deities. The deities controlled such natural phenomena as the earth, rainfall, sunlight and occupations such as farming, blacksmithing and fishing. In a nutshell, the world-view of the Igbo accommodated the facts of birth, death, and reincarnation - a cyclical world-view in which a person's activities here on earth have repercussions for him in the world of the spirits and in the world again when he is reborn.

Igbo society is egalitarian. The implication of this is that individuals within the group are given full and fair chances of making progress in their chosen fields of endeavor to the extent that pertinent opinions of young men and women may be preferred to that of the elders. Moreover, through occupational pursuits, industry and thrift a young person could be allowed to take a title normally taken by people older than himself. Egalitarianism is also achieved through personal physical prowess and through the arts and crafts. It is recognized that the individual's personal god *(chi)* may be so auspicious as to elevate him even so early in life. Igbo economy principally depended on

agriculture. A son could succeed where his father failed. Such a son would be allowed to associate with people of his father's age in spite of his father's personal failure. Okonkwo's phenomenal success in farming against the background of his father's indolence aptly illustrates this even though Achebe's intention in the novel, Things Fall Apart, may also be to show us how this success gets into Okonkwo's head, rendering him haughty and intolerant of other people's views and woes.[3]

Arts and crafts were considered special endowments in Igboland. Not everybody could be an artist because artists are people of special calling. Like the *dibia* (traditional diviners and healers), the artist's calling could be suggested by certain physical or psychological problems including deformities and neurosis. In Things Fall Apart, Unoka's incurable laziness in farm work may be diagnosed as symptomatic of his musical calling. His musical talent excelled that of any other in his Umuofia, thereby partially compensating for his failure as a farmer. The special calling of artists often bound them to a deity who was their patron and the supreme over-seer of their artistic and ritualistic activities. In Mbari art among the Owerri-Igbo, the artists are sequestered from the rest of the community during the period of their production of their famous figures, and their personal welfare is collectively assumed by the rest of the people for whose communal interest they work.[4]

In spite of the fact that the artist in pre-colonial Igboland was an individual whose talents were special to him, he nevertheless functioned invariably to serve the spiritual and aesthetic interests of the people. The contexts of the use of his art or craft were by and large much bigger than any individual could carry and required communal inputs. Thus, although the sculptor has carved a mask, his production became communal when it was adopted by his people and consecrated for use at their festivals or ceremonies. The appreciation of an art form was guided by conventions which arose out of its collective use, treatment and the people's world-view. We can, therefore, appreciate why the masquerade as a dramatic art medium cannot be appreciated in and of itself alone without reference to all its contexts: the festival during which it features, the religious nature of the festival, the political, cultural and even economic decisions or other conditions surrounding its production. Pre-colonial Igbo art aptly reflected the people's culture, its joys and woes, its hopes and fears.

Dramatic art was the most holistic of traditional Igbo arts. It combined the best there were in the other traditional arts whether visual, auditory, or kinetic within the context of communal festival. Such a holistic aggregation of other arts in the dramatic performance has been recognized by contemporary theoreticians of the drama as "total theater."

Traditional Igbo drama and theater, before the coming of the Europeans, featured within the context of the traditional communal festival which required preparation and participation by the community. The preparations included the artistic and the economic. Artistic preparations included the making of masks, costumes, drums, props and rehearsals for the actors, musicians, and dancers while the economic preparations included financial and trade activities designed to equip individuals and groups with resources to execute the demands of the festival and offer hospitality to guests -- humans and spirits alike.

Pre-colonial traditional dramatic art featured primarily as visual and performing art relying on other forms of communication than verbal language. The five senses of sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing were thoroughly harnessed for the purpose of effective communication. In some performances that feature fearful and hostile masquerades, the psychological "sixth sense" was called into activity as the spectators devised mental calculations to enable them escape from impending harm. Such conventional reaction is still common in the traditional African Theater with similar performance conventions. This is especially true of those performances controlled by men's title societies where the secrets of the mask are not revealed to women and non-initiates. Verbal dialogue was not pervasive in pre-colonial Igbo theater; where it was employed it lasted only for a short while. The actors, masks, costumes, make-up, songs, dances, ululations, and even the booming of the cannons and guns afforded the spectators vibrant signals for symbolic and contextual understanding of a performance.

Festivals, as we have seen, provided, and still provide, the context for traditional Igbo dramatic performances.[5] Some of these festivals were periodic large-scale communal events within the ritual calender, while others featured as small-scale or mini-festivals. Festivals and ceremonies as cultural contexts for traditional dramatic performances of the Igbo were linked inextricably with their world-view. And as we have observed, these festivals and ceremonies were organized around the major events and occupations affecting the life cycle of the Igbo people from birth to death and rebirth.

Let us discuss the implications of the Igbo world-view raised earlier. The concept of traditional humane living which informed the life-style of pre-colonial Igbo society arose from their world-view. Chieka Ifemesia has defined traditional humane living as "a way of life emphatically centered upon human interests and values: a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy and by consideration and compassion for human beings."[6] Ifemesia's definition is arrived at from a historical perspective but, it can be broadened to include the ultimate purpose of this humane living which was to accommodate the demands of the traditional Igbo world-view. Thus the desire to live as

best as one could in this world, so as to satisfy one's passage into the spirit world and the ultimate return to the human world free of blemishes and curses, dominated the concept of traditional humane living among the Igbo. In dramatic terms, this point can be seen clearly in the *Odo* performance among the Nsukka and Udi people of Igboland. The range of characters who return as spirits of the dead include all souls, good and bad. The bad souls, wicked and malevolent in their life time, return as such. They are a terror to other performers and the spectators unlike the good souls, for whom there is much love and friendliness.[7] The essence of the performances is to expose, through the myths and socio-cultural practices, the ultimate desires of the people. More often than not the plays extoll such positive qualities as bravery, morality, kindness and so on while they discourage indolence, immorality, wickedness and other negative attributes of human behavior. They are usually a combination of morality and heroic plays which aim at preserving the corporate existence of the group.

The *Ijele* performance, for example, featured as its principal character, *Ijele*, who is the sum total of exquisite beauty and wondrous mythology of the Igbo world-view. Appearing with it are minor characters who dramatize socio-cultural virtues and vices. In the Uzoiyi festival drama of Umuoji, Akuezuozo, the ancestral hero, is given a place of honor which he shares with his wife and son. He is on an elevated scaffold placed prominently in the arena. The maiden spirit, Agboghomuo, and her admirer flirt endlessly below. The necessity for human survival is dramatized in the *Owu* performance of the Ngwa where a combination of land and water creatures are hunted for seven days but victory comes on the eighth when the most dangerous of them is killed. In the struggle, there are forces for and against the collective will of the people but they succeed against all odds. Similar examples of such traditional plays abound in other traditional Nigerian Cultures such as the *Ekpo* among the Ibibio, the *Egungun* among the Yoruba, the *Owu* among the Ijo, and the *Anakpe* among the Gbari people, to mention but a few examples.

II

The culture of pre-colonial Igboland, as indeed that of Nigeria as a whole, was massively eroded and even destroyed by the British colonial assault. The Christian religion was the lethal weapon for this destruction just as the Muslim faith was used by the Arabs and their local adherents to destroy much of the traditional cultures in the northern and western parts of the country. Although the British colonial adventurers put forward their trump card of peaceful trade with the

people of Nigeria, it soon became evident that they had to control their host's minds, bodies and souls. Religion, which the colonialists appeared to regard as a secondary function of their mission, soon became an undisguised political weapon because so long as the traditional religions of the people were undisturbed they remained masters of their own collective psyche. However as soon as the ancestors and their pantheon were discredited and their shrines wantonly destroyed, things fell apart in the Igbo culture; so much so that they may never be put together again. Indeed the worst thing that happened to colonial Igboland, and Africa, was not the colonial governments themselves but the foreign religions which they introduced and which spiritually colonized the African and made him incapable of unadulterated reasoning. It is not surprising that education, that essential ingredient of character formation and socio-cultural awareness, was left largely in the hands of the missionaries. Today, Africans are left holding the Bible and singing a strange song in their ancestral land while the colonialists have gone with everything else including relics of the ancestral shrines. It is not uncommon for Western analysts of the contemporary African condition to blame the social, cultural, economic and political backwardness on everything else but colonialism. Robert July in his Precolonial Africa laments the paradoxical harshness of the African environment, the cradle of life and the abundant source of its support. Yet this same environment tends to kill all it gives. Even in the modern era of science and technology, the African environment "still grants its produce but grudgingly."[8]. July carefully excludes colonialism, their incurable disease, the painful effects of which have killed the continent. It must be admitted that missionaries probably more than any other single group, according to Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin, kept the myth of savagery alive [9] in order to achieve their personal goals and ambitions.

The early part of the nineteenth century was an era of organized and persistent penetration into Nigeria by both Christian and Muslim invaders who already had footholds in parts of the country. Both invaders sought to have permanent authority in Nigeria and therefore discouraged the rivalry of indigenous religion and culture. The British attack and the resistance of Igbo people was not a uniform phenomenon. In some areas, such as Arochukwu, Ngwa, Udi and parts of Western Igboland, there were direct military confrontations between the British and the Igbo. The defeat at Arochukwu helped to cow other towns which would have resisted the British. This is illustrated by the story of Eze Kalu, who, on learning that the British were to attack Ohafia, hurried home from Calabar to wisely dissuade his people from what he knew to be a useless struggle, and using his meager resources of English to explain to the British that Ohafia favored peace.[10] In some

places, the British administration, commerce and Bible, 'entered' quietly and peacefully before the Igbo realized their ulterior motives.[11] The case of the trade negotiations with the king of Abor will serve as an example. The British commissioners "requested Mr. Schon, the respected missionary, to state to King Obi, in a concise manner, the difference between the Christian religion and heathenism,"...Will the king make a law that no human sacrifices shall be made, no murders committed and that the treaty be properly observed?"[12] This was the beginning of a permanent post which had an untold effect on the Abor society.

With the wars and treaties, the British established themselves permanently in Igboland and appointed their own Warrant Chiefs irrespective of the customs and traditions of the land. The appointment of the Warrant Chiefs, and the establishment of the colonial Native courts led to the decline of the Igbo political system because law and order were no longer in the hands of those recognized by tradition. Moreover, the law was then based on a culture which was alien to the people. In a letter to the D.O. of Arochukwu (5th October, 1914), King Kanu Oji complained about the exigencies of the new system such as the way the colonial police seized things in the market instead of buying them; and the rising number of broken homes since women ran to colonial courts at the least provocation.[13] What the Eze Aro was complaining about was actually the introduction of a system which bastardized the culture and tradition of the land. There was an attempt by the British consulate to preserve African customs where possible but even this was not successful. According to G.T. Basden who had worked in colonial service in Igboland "The heart of native law and custom had been pierced by the impact of British authority and what was left is largely a corpse."[14]

Basden's study of the sociology of pre-colonial Igboland had perhaps influenced his notion about the death of the Igbo culture. He was able to reconstruct the immediate past and compare it with Igbo culture of the 1920s, before he came to that sad conclusion. Perhaps, the Igbo had been psychologically conditioned to associate everything British with 'civilization' and everything Igbo as 'bush', and this partly accounted for the zest with which they embraced Western education. In spite of this psychological assault on the Igbo mind, the Igbo tradition which had long thrived and sustained its culture could not easily release its hold on the people.[15]

The early part of the twentieth century was a period of organized and systematic disruption of African culture and tradition. The theater of the Northern Yoruba which was struggling to free itself from the suppression of the Muslim invaders from the north was also assaulted by the Christian and British insurgency. The *Epke* society of Calabar,

the mainstay of traditional Efik culture, was desecrated in 1852 by Edgerly, a missionary who went into the *Ekpe* shrine and broke the sacred drum.[16] This religious exuberance erupted again in Igboland around 1915 when Garrick Braid and the followers of his church started their nefarious campaign, which was notoriously referred to as "the killing of the spirits"[17] (destruction of shrines and oracles). This religious campaign was approved by the British authority which had destroyed the famous Ibin Ukpabi shrine of Arochukwu in 1902 and thus shook the base of Igbo religion and culture. Igbo title societies and festivals were also assaulted because they were regarded as heathen practices.

Both the *Ekpe* of Arochukwu and the *Okonko* of Ngwa and her southern neighbors are in essence, the same. *Okonko* is derived from *Ekpe* and both perform judicial functions and use the same Nsibidi signs for communication. The name *Okonko* is probably derived from Ekpe masquerade which is called *"Okonko"*. Nevertheless, both societies are indebted to the title societies of the Efik and Ibibio. According to the District Officer who investigated *Okonko* society in 1922,

> The Society is said to be of Aro origin i.e. Aros introduced it to the Ibos of Aba by instituting it in the villages on payment of fees. Igbo slaves in turn introduced it further down the creeks in places to which they had been sold. All the evidence collected seems to point that the *Okonko* is a copy of the 'Egbo society of the Efiks.[18]

This affinity between *Ekpe* and *Okonko* was the raison d' etre of the socio-economic bond between their members. Being viable institutions of authority, their contact with the West undermined their influence. A new organ of colonial government performed judicial functions but to date, people still have recourse to the 'Ekpe' when all other authority fails.

The undermining of the influence of *Ekpe* and *Okonko* also affected the plays associated with them. *"Ekpe"* has seven stages, each of which has its own masked plays. Their performances are mostly during initiations and at the burial of members. At these occasions the masquerades entertain, both member and non-members, with exquisite theatrical displays. Their performances are now rare because many would-be members are Christians and therefore get Christian burials. When a man has imbibed both Christian and *Ekpe* societies, the conflict also shows at his burial where each group claims the rights of a last office.

This conflict in the individual is a product of a larger conflict between British and Christian authority on one hand, and the *Ekpe* and

Okonko societies on the other. It calls to mind the conflict between Yoruba secret societies and the Christian missions in which "a Yoruba convert to the Christian faith was expected to renounce his participation in all forms of traditional rituals."[19] According to a report on the conflict between *Okonko* and Christians,

> The Missions have made it a rule that no one can attain full membership of their respective churches and at the same time belong to *Okonko*. [20]

The *Okonko* members distrusted their members who had accepted the Christian faith. The banning of Igbo members of Niger Delta Mission from attending *Okonko* activities further incensed *Okonko* society because, this did not only drain the *Okonko* theater of its virile actors, musicians and other artists but it angered and demoralized the remaining members. Consequently, the *Okonko* applied sanctions against its members who went to the missions. A letter from the Resident's office in 1920 highlights the cold war between *Okonko* and the missions:

> "It is alleged by the C.M.S. that *Okonko* club is persecuting the churches, and the C.M.S. have forbidden their members to belong to it."[21]

This rivalry drew the attention of the colonial office.

The *Okonko* managed to survive the colonial assault through compromise. It adopted certain changes in order to survive the new system. A record of an application to the District Officer of Aba in 1920 for the formation of an "Amozu Ihe *Okonko* Society"[22] shows the extent to which the *Okonko* would go in order to legitimize its activities.

Just like the *Okonko*, the *Ekpe* also had its own wave of hostilities with the British administration. King Kanu Oji of Arochukwu articulated his concern for *Ekpe* and pleaded with the District Officer to curb excesses of his officers:

> I also beseech your honor to look after the *Ekpe* well; they are trying to spoil it...when we used to play anyone who does not join it can come out, but now they are doing whatever they like on account of Government.[23]

Both *Ekpe* and *Okonko* societies still exist and the conflict with non-members is somewhat controlled. The conflict is not as unfavorable as it was seen in the twenties when the result of the struggle would be told with a fair degree of certainty. The *Okonko* like other pagan institutions will succumb.[24] Today, there is a compromise

between the opposing groups. The secret societies and the missions have relaxed their rules to accommodate each other. Church members, elders, and even knights of the Church take *Okonko* and *Ekpe* titles and still retain their positions in the Church.. *Okonko* and *Ekpe* societies, like the *"Ekpo"* and *"Mmonwu"* societies which had confrontations with the Missions, now accept Church members. The insecurity of the old system of confrontations led to the formation of new secret societies such as the "Order of Bloodmen" which operated around 1940 in Calabar and the Ekumeku (1898 - 1910) of the Western Igbo which like the 'Mau Mau' of Kenya, carried out guerilla warfare against the foreign oppressors.

Adaptation to the new socio-political atmosphere became the key to the survival of traditional drama. This adaptation was not only at the level of membership but permeated all activities of the title societies. Just as the churches relaxed and accepted elements of Igbo language and music in their ceremonies so did the title societies incorporate aspects of westernization, thereby widening the scope of their drama. In costuming for example, brass buttons have replaced the *udala* seeds as leopard spots for the *Omabe* masked-player in Nsukka area. Black stockings are sometimes used by the masked actors of *Ekpo* theater instead of the traditional blackening of the eyes with charcoal. The 'white-man' face-mask can be seen on a *Ijele* mask just as his figures feature in the *Mbari* houses. In characterization, masked actors depicting different Western types such as the policeman, gentleman in helmet and lady with high-heeled shoes and handbag became novelties in the ensemble of Okumkpa theater of Afikpo.[25] The radio-cassette now complements traditional music in enhancing the festival atmosphere. The songs also incorporate images drawn from modern life. For example, 'eletrik' (electricity) refers to the bright and agile, and "uzo waya" (tarred road) connotes the wayward woman.

Perhaps the most striking examples of the theater's dynamism in the new socio-cultural situation can best be appreciated from the creation of whole new sets of characters, situations, and plays based on aspects of the new system which have become part of the reality of Igbo people. The colonial policeman has become part of the ensemble of a domestic episode in Igbo traditional drama, where he keeps the audience in check and also arrests the miscreant masked-actor 'Onuku', who lusts after young women members in the audience. He also woos the spirit daughter character, *"Agboghu mmowu"* whose beauty is mythical.

An episode from the *Aba Ugwu*[26] theater of Okpatu further illustrates how the traditional theater tries to overcome the contradictions of the new administration. According to Christiana Eneh, the play is based on the activities of E.R.Chadwick, a District Officer of Udi Division who was a terror in the villages because of his notoriety for

forced labor.[27] Chadwick is represented by an actor costumed in "baggy khaki shorts, big long sleeve shirt, hose and canvas shoes,"[28] typical of colonial officers. He is followed by a masked actor representing a policeman carrying a notebook and pen. Chadwick bombards a perplexed villager with such question and orders as:

> "What is you name?
> Are you married?
> How many children have you?
> ...You must be washing your clothes
> You must send your children to school
> Your wife has to stop child-bearing
> Prepare now and follow us to Udi for some jobs.[29]

The conclusion of the play shows a resentment of Chadwick's action by villagers who abuse him in Okpatu dialect and wives who are sad because their husbands have been conscripted into Chadwick's labor force.

A partial analysis of the above episode shows that the colonial experience had added a new dimension to traditional theater. The characters are differentiated and recognized by their customs, manners and language. While the local interpreter interprets for Chadwick he "nods his head in the manner of whites" and the policeman "is busy jotting down what nobody knows."[30] Chadwick's language is an imitation of the white man's nasal speech and the interpreter's language portrays his lack of competence in English.

The villagers abuse Chadwick in Okpatu dialect of Igbo and this raises the satiric and comic tone of the play. This play follows the basic satiric pattern which tries to ridicule by imitation. But unlike the *"agbogho mmowu"* play in which the social deviant is ridiculed, exposed and punished, the Chadwick play paints the picture of a tyrant despised by a people who do not have any answer to his excesses. They are satisfied in abusing him in a language he does not understand.

Like the Chadwick play, the *Ikoro* festival drama of the Ngwa also illustrates how Igbo drama adapted to the new colonial system. Ikoro is a mighty slit wooden drum which had assumed a position of great importance in Igboland before colonization. It was so important that it generated stories about human sacrifice. The most striking is that which recalls how Ufuma people waylaid and killed the great artist who fashioned their beautiful *Ikoro* drum so that he would not replicate such a wonder for another town.[31]

During the *Ikoro* festivals in pre-colonial Ngwa clan, brave men enacted their heroic adventures before the drum. Like the *'Aba Ugwu'* theater, however, the colonial experience widened the scope of the *Ikoro*

theater. The "sadistic pleasures of a certain colonial administrator nicknamed Bekee Ogba Ajiaka (white man with hairy hands), who used to commit people to the torture rooms,"[32] were added to the *Ikoro* play. Also, it incorporated a complete pageant of colonial characters in their hierarchy ranging from the king, queen, governors and commissioners, military and para-military characters. Despite the accuracy of the costumes which led to the arrest of a troupe returning from Umuahia on charges of impersonation, the colonial government tolerated the performance which they saw as "childlike imitation of civilized behavior."[33]

The *Aba Ugwu* and other examples already discussed illustrate how the Igbo drama continued to respond to the changing socio-political pressures in the society. These pressures like the military expeditions discussed earlier, were not uniform all over Igboland or uniform as they apply to various aspects of the social institutions which sponsored the theater. Just as the political stability of Queen Elizabeth's court was advantageous to the Elizabethan drama, and the disruption of court life by the Fulani invaders of early nineteenth century led to the proliferation of free troupes which Islam tried to suppress, so did the colonial political intervention in Igbo society affect drama, both positively and negatively. While the colonists tolerated the *Ikoro* and the secret societies managed to succumb to missionary pressures, the religious base of the artistic festivals were seriously undermined. The festivals were directly and indirectly affected by colonial presence because while some festivals were completely banned by the administration, others simply modified their performance in order not to displease the colonial masters.

Just as the collaboration between church and state led to the closure of British theaters by Parliament in 1642 after a long drawn conflict between the theaters and the puritans, and in the manner of the Muslim invaders who banned theatrical activities in Fulani occupied areas of Hausaland and Yorubaland,[34] in 1944 a Native Authority ordinance forbade "the worship and invocation of the *Chikelagulu* and *Iyiakpu* oracles of Nze and Akapakume." Consequently, these oracles' festivals were stopped and their aesthetic institutions died. In 1946, the *Ofufe* oracle of Obinagu was also revoked by the colonial administration. The *Aba Ugwu* festival of Okpatu was threatened by Chadwick's administration, but fortunately no revocation was effected and the theater was saved. The theater's triumph can be seen in the already discussed burlesque of the District Officer, E.R. Chadwick, the colonial representative and exploiter of the people's religion, culture and economy.

III

We have seen how the British authority dealt a shocking blow to Igbo culture through the new British system which, as we have seen, persistently tried to destroy indigenous cultures. In spite of the theater's attempt to adapt to the new situation the blow left permanent scars. According to G.T. Basden:

> Again what is not realized as it should be is that Native law and custom received its death-blow when a British administration became operative in the Ibo country.[35]

A sequel to Basden's study would reveal that the carcass of African culture was also threatened by British authority. The recommendation of the black separatist, Delany, is revealing. Having imprisoned the mind and soul of African Christians, Missionaries should see that Africans

> eat at table instead of on the ground, eat with knife and fork (or begin with a spoon) instead of with fingers,eat in the house instead of going out in the yard, garden or somewhere else under a tree or shed.[36]

We have seen how Igbo theater illustrates the idea of theater as an institution which keeps on 'trucking' despite mutilations and dismemberments of its frame. The mimes and jongleurs survived the dark ages and the Christian persecutions and later added vitality to Medieval drama. The theater survived the excommunication of actors in France where Moliere was at first refused Christian burial.

On the whole, the scars of the suppression have not disappeared in Africa because the social system which was the mainstay of the environment which nurtured and sustained traditional drama has either been disorganized or destroyed. Firstly, the introduction of a foreign language was disadvantageous to African language and culture and the mentality of its African users who began to regard it as the language of the literate and the civilized. Consequently, African language 'became uncivilized and illiterate'. Since "theater is a social institution" through which "people meet and interact"[37] through language, both verbal and sensory, the decline of Igbo language was disadvantageous to the theater, because it caused a corresponding decline in understanding the performances. Secondly, the organs of the foreign system imposed a new mentality on Africans. The already cited new imagery, snobbishness and high handedness of the British District Officer expressed in the *Aba Ugwu* play indicates an acceptance of the new

order, even though the resentment of the villagers showed in their anger and abuses. Though this adoption of foreign ideas widens the scope of African theater, the effect of European thought is more alarming in the way educated Africans regard traditional African theater. Some have sought Western individualized drama in a traditional society that is communal and have erroneously declared that there is no drama in traditional African society. In his article "Approaches to Non-Western Art," Roy Sieber clearly indicates that conclusions drawn from the western world are not necessarily universal in their application.[38].

Thirdly, the new system lures the potential actors and other artists of traditional theater thereby depriving Igbo theater of the much needed support of youths. The result is that traditional Igbo theater is not as vigorous as in the past. In order to ensure the participation of youths in schools and in city employment, the Arondizogu community shifted the performance of their annual *Ikeji* festival to the Easter holiday period. The present situation is that, despite all odds, traditional Igbo drama exists in the villages. These villages exist side by side with modern towns and cities with new cultural values. Traditional theater is still alive and practiced during the various festivals which are still "the prime artistic institutions in traditional Africa."[39] In villages that are still remote and set aside from the modern towns, the vestiges of the traditional festival and its accompanying theatrical performances are still found.

Traditional dramatic arenas, as we have seen, suffered terrible disabilities in the wake of the cultural collision between the Christian or Muslim religious beliefs and the indigenous African religious systems. The destruction of many ancestral shrines and proscription of influential communal festivals and ceremonies meant that the roots of many traditional arts, including dramatic art, were mortally wounded. Those that have managed to survive, due to either innate historic sensibilities or artistic diplomacy in the era of colonial politics, still face the danger of extinction from contemporary African religious zealots for whom anything traditional or cultural must be associated with heathenism and devilry. The situation is not helped by successive governments which merely drift aimlessly as far as definite policies on the arts and culture are concerned. Cultural secret societies which specialize in artistic productions are vexatiously antagonized by church members and prosecuted by the police if their members protest to protect their corporate integrity and cultural identity.

There ought to be a national policy aimed at making the traditional arts culturally relevant and meaningful in contemporary Nigeria. If traditional dramatic art and other indigenous performing arts are to be saved, the present practice of using them for window dressing during the visit of government dignitaries and some Christian and

Muslim celebrations, should be discontinued. A positive and enduring proposition lies with the creation of a separate Ministry of Culture by the Federal and State Governments. Such a ministry would be charged with developing a policy for cultural re-education in the country and ensure that a curriculum is run in and out of the educational institutions. The survival and growth of indigenous Nigerian dramatic art cannot happen unless the question of the future of Nigerian culture itself is settled. The present practice whereby cultural practices are extensively used by playwrights is legitimate but it is not a substitute for traditional dramatic art. We have, as Chinweizu aptly remarks, been "very wasteful of our cultural inheritance" and "adopting toward our past and its remnants the automatic contempt the West has taught us towards things African."[40]

There is a way out. We must recognize the bases of our Africanity, the essential things that make us African, cultured Africans for that matter. In this way, contemporary experiments being conducted in traditional dramatic art will have a meaningful future because they would have been founded on a living culture. In the final analysis, traditional dramatic art being a relic of our past can best flourish if its past significance is nurtured on its present meaning. The significance of our past is so crucial to us that without a firm grasp of it, we cannot make progress. As Basil Davidson observes in The African Genius, "the history of the African is nothing if not the 'handing on the torch' from generation to generation. It is quintessentially concerned with the accumulation of ancestral wisdom, with the demonstration of a *tabula piena* of ancestral knowledge."[41] The notion of the ancestor or ancestral wisdom belongs to this past. It is the foundation on which we must build the future for greater stability and security. We must be fully aware that the colonialists, the carriers of Christianity into Africa, were also the carriers of Western secular education.[42] To restore the primacy of traditional arts and culture needs a revolution of the mind, the reintegration of the sacred and secular aspects of the African culture.

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[1] See V.C. Uchendu, The Igbo of Southern Nigeria (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Inc., 1965) D. Forde and G.I.Jones, Igbo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of Southeastern Nigeria(London: International African Institute, 1950)

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[3] Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart (London: Heinemann, 1958).

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