

Death and the Paradox of Rebirth in Esiaba Irobi's Theatre: *The Fronded Circle* as Paradigm

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Abstract

Despite the intense feeling of aversion which the mere portrait of death perhaps invokes on most living, the truism that death is a necessary end remains, nevertheless, immutable. Irobi was never pretentious about his understanding of this timeless truth. Through the aesthetics of his art he had always reinforced his belief in the ineluctable link between life and death and also drawn his audiences' attention and consciousness to the grim reality of this seeming fatalistic phenomenon. Beyond mere cessation of life, however, Irobi's portrait of death as a necessary end in his theatre reaches a transcendental dimension. This transcendence is realized in *The Fronded Circle* in the manner in which the tragic atmosphere that dominates the play from the opening scene, and culminates in a lethal ritual transition, is eventually mitigated with the birth of a new male child, in whom the future is symbolically embodied, thus evincing Irobi's conscious exploration of the ritual performance tradition as a process of regeneration of society as highlighted in this study. The paper therefore reinforces Irobi's indisputable belief in the importance of ritual as an integral part of the African theatre.

Keywords

Death, Ritual Performance Tradition, Society, Societal Regeneration, African Theatre

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1. Introduction

In spite of Esiaba Irobi's manifest status as a "consummate theatre practitioner and astute scholar" (Diala, 2010), whose corpus of creative/artistic and intellectual output speak for themselves, it is only unimaginable that his works have received less attention compared to works of those that emerged before him either by literary critics or the media. In trying to find an explanation to this rather saddening development, Ewuzie (2010) has identified the possibility of both the literary academia and media to have only been selective in their choice of front burner artists, rather than for Irobi's cerebral paucity or literary impotence, especially in the light of the foregoing observation. Nwankwo (2008) sees this development as partly a result of the generational gap between Irobi and his predecessors, in the likes of Soyinka, Osofisan and Rotimi, as well as to ethnic or geographical

disparity between them; since Irobi's descent is from a region previously known for fiction than dramatic output. He further notes also that the Nigerian society in which Irobi developed as an artist differs from those of his predecessors mentioned above. It is perhaps on the strength of the consciousness of the reality of the foregoing, that Irobi's quest for such dramatic form that would therefore set him apart was predicated; although (Nwankwo, 2008, quoting Duruaku) "the restive spirits of contemporary African societies have manifested themselves in the approach" (26) he adopted, as reflected in works like *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* among others. However, time they say, changes all things. In the manner of *Hangmen Also Die*, which Irobi in an e-conversation with Azuonye informed, is the most prophetic of all of his works – a picture of the future, his play,

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Cemetery Road, not so long ago has emerged as the winner of the 2010 edition of the Nigerian Prize for Literature (though posthumously), perhaps symbolizing the further attentions that will yet attend his works, and consequently fill the vacuum of the paucity of attention they have hitherto received. This study, therefore, is a response to the clarion call in this futuristic vision.

2. *The Fronded Circle: A Synopsis*

The Fronded Circle by Esiaba Irobi encapsulates the ineluctable link between life and death. Yet, man's intense aversion to death is evidently portrayed in the play right from the opening nay expository scene in the dialogue between Okwu and Uka. However, the height of this intense aversion to death by man is captured through the character of Onwutuebe in his wanton attempt at self-perpetuity on earth by trying to insulate himself from death; such that whenever death beckons on him he quickly exchanges his life with that of any of his male children. This he achieves by causing the disappearance of the person whenever he falls sick and calls him (the child) to his sick bed with some weird words. Deeply traumatized by this rather mysterious development which has constantly robbed her of the full joy of motherhood, especially with the loss/death of her last son, Ndubuisi, Nwannediya, Onwutuebe's wife quickly draws Onwudinulo's sympathy. Onwudinulo is a relative of Onwutuebe. In concert, therefore, they wish him dead in order to make way for the desired peace in the family. Desperate in this bid and overtly ambitious too to take over Onwutuebe's estate, Onwudinulo connives with Diegwu to facilitate the death of Gilbert, Onwutuebe's younger brother, an American trained scholar whom he hates so much. His ambition however turns futile when Kelechi, Onwutuebe's daughter eventually puts to bed a new (male) child at the brink of Gilbert and Onwutuebe's simultaneous death. The play, however, accentuates the fact that though death may signify an immediate secession of life and the end of a cycle, yet it ushers in with it the beginning of a new cycle of life which is essentially embedded in the future.

3. *Irobi's Philosophy of Death in The Fronded Circle*

Although death is commonly considered as the cessation or permanent termination of all biological functions that sustain a living organism, yet any variant understanding and leaning regarding the concept becomes only central to whatsoever reaction that is directed toward the phenomenon. Besides individual ideologies regarding death, the philosophy of

death is at the very centre of many traditions and cultures the world over, which explains Byock's (2002) statement that every ethnic and regional culture, encompasses traditions, customs, and rituals in response to death (286). Any inquiry into the meaning and value of death, therefore, can actually be approached from a range of perspectives which may include cultural, individual as well as communal perspectives (Byock: 279). For Irobi, his agreement with Grof (n/d: 10) that death is not the ultimate defeat and end of everything, but rather an important process of transition, cannot be gainsaid in relation to *The Fronded Circle*. Irobi's philosophy of death as exemplified in *The Fronded Circle*, therefore, Nwankwo (2008: 33) infers, is in consonance with Igbo metaphysics which sees death as a transition into a higher realm of existence. This, he emphasizes, explains why Onwudinulo implores Onwutuebe through his surrogate, Gilbert, to confess his sins so that he can gain entrance into the spirit world at death in *The Fronded Circle*. The foregoing is only a clear pointer to the fact that individual ideology is not altogether insulated from the communal ideology of the larger society.

4. *The Fronded Circle and the Terror of Death*

The terror of death is described as a specific human grief. Despite the intense feeling of fear and aversion which the mere portrait of death invokes on most living, the truism that death is a necessary end remains, nevertheless, immutable. Irobi's *The Fronded Circle* encapsulates the ineluctable link between life and death. Nwankwo (2008: 35) notes that every action, name, intention and motivation in *The Fronded Circle* is couched in death, and opines that due to this over-bearing symbol of death, the play could aptly be subtitled, "A Play of Death". However, man's intense fear and aversion to death is evidently portrayed in the play right from the opening scene in the dialogue between Okwu and Uka who are apprentices to Ikenga, the medicine man – apprentices on a search mission for a lethal charm. Though medicine men in the making, they see their master's instruction to go and unearth a pot of charm that was buried years before they were born as nothing but an errand of death which is made worst by the fact that they do not have a choice about it. Okwu wishes otherwise, however. He says, "I wish I had a choice..." (1). In fact, "I don't want to die. I am my mother's only son" (4), justifying the reason why he need not even attempt the errand of death in the first place; but Uka reemphasizes the reality of their situation.

But we have no choice... (Irobi, 1)

Uka is even ready to denounce his apprenticeship to Ikenga to make emphatic his fear of death and its aversion by not

going on the errand of death. He tells Okwu defiantly:

If you think I am going with you to an evil place
like that you are wasting your time. (4)

More specifically, he declares:

I am no longer in his service...
I am no longer his apprentice (5)

However, Uka's quandary is heightened by his inability to understand why a man has to bury his head in an earthen ware pot in his yam barn in the first place, and still lives, as captured in this enlightening dialogue between him and Okwu:

Okwu: Do you understand what it means when a man buries his head?

Uka: I don't...

Okwu: Listen, a man buries his head as a protective charm against death. It lets a man swop his age(sic) life with the lives of other men especially... his kith and kin...

Uka: Okwu, can that happen...?

(4 – 5)

The answer to Uka's quandary above is rooted in the height of man's intense fear and aversion to death as captured through the character of Onwutuebe in his wanton attempt at self-perpetuation on earth by trying to insulate himself from death. Eze (2010) attributes Onwutuebe's attitude here to his negative perception of the value of earthly life which beclouds him to the point of seeking to extend his life on earth. (4) Otherwise, what would make a man to readily exchange his life with that of his male children whenever death beckons on him. Nwannediya reveals:

How he used my sons to exchange his own head when
Death came to take his toll. How he swindled their lives
for his own. (22)

This he achieves by causing their disappearance whenever he falls sick and calls any of them to his sick bed. To the extent that a whole lot of:

Five! Five men! Five young men. Five able-bodied young men. Carried in this wonb. Suckled with these breasts. Five young men ... But now they are gone gone like early morning dreams. Oh how they disappeared, each without trace. How they left and left me childless. (13)

It is Onwutuebe's warped perception of the essence of life as lying in living that makes him to unremorsefully tell Nwannediya, his wife:

I will sacrifice everything I have to live. (42)

It has been observed that a society's and culture's orientation

toward the meaning or essence of life and death underpin moral values and ethical norms of behavior (Byock, 2002); it suffices, therefore, to add that such is attributive to an individual's orientation too, which invariably influences such individual's positive or negative attitude in that regard. The above (utterance by Onwutuebe), Eze (2010) observes, "underscores Onwutuebe's moral depravity and his desperate quest to shortchange death" (5). Little wonder why Nwannediya queries him, perhaps in consternation:

Onwutuebe, is that the purpose of life...? (43)

However, Eze surmises on the background of the foregoing that *The Fronded Circle*:

Captures the imponderable possibilities of the human imagination and action, in order to reveal the paucity of the world of reason, the overweening influence of inhumanity and irrationality, as well as to show how the exigencies of earthly life frequently result to stunning and incredible experiences. (4).

5. Bearing the Brunt of Terror of Death: Nwannediya, a Woman More Sinned Against

When Eze refers to *The Fronded Circle* as capturing the imponderable possibilities of the human imagination and action and revealing the paucity of the world of reason, and the overweening influence of inhumanity and irrationality, and portraying how the exigencies of earthly life frequently result to stunning and incredible experiences, he touches most affectively on Nwannediya's predicament. "The burden of Onwutuebe's atrocities weighs heavily on the shoulders of this woman yet there is no evidence in the play that the woman deserves the kind of agony she passes through" (5). Diala (2006) describes Nwannediya as the "anguished, archetypal mother of bereavement and sorrows" (105). The depravity of Onwutuebe's action against his family amounts to the action of "the sow that repeatedly devours her own piglets" (Morosetti, n/d: 1), a villain of most extreme order. Nwannediya laments her ordeal in the hands of her husband with regards to her five late sons, whose death were caused by no less a man than her own husband, Onwutuebe:

Where are the men? Where are they? Tell me... All my life has been one long process of yearly suffering. All my dreams are endless stretchers of corpses. My thoughts are blurred by pictures of graves. Life! This motion of pains. Life! This wheel of torture. Life! This bowl of anguish. Nights and nights and nights I have moaned under a man. I moan and moan into morning, into the day. Days and days and endless days I have writhed in labour giving birth to children. But what now is left? (13)

The sow that is her husband has repeatedly devoured all of the men she seeks for, without pity; having used them to exchange for his own head when death came knocking on his door; having swindled their lives for his own.

Five! Five men! Five young men! Five able-bodied young men. Carried in this womb. Suckled with these breasts. Five young men... All my sons are gone, gone like eggs in the mouth of a serpent. Gone like fishes in the beaks of a kingfisher. They are gone, eyes, heads, fins and all... gone! (13)

Nwannediya cuts the picture of a woman more sinned against; and truly she is. "Days and days and endless days I have writhed in labour giving birth to children. But what now is left? (13) She is deeply traumatized by her ordeal which has constantly robbed her of the full joy of motherhood. She laments pathetically:

All my life,
I have been the unlucky hen
hatching chicks for a greedy python. (11)

Yet her husband, Onwutuebe, is not perturbed about her predicament; neither does she understand why a man should "torment his family in this way" (28). He simply "has no shame" (15). Nwannediya is also exasperated by the indifference of those around her:

A deaf world (that) blinds its eyes and watches as a greedy python uncoils and swallows the eggs of a mother hen, swallows her golden eggs in turns, swallows the eggs, shell and all. (15)

To the extent that nothing again is left. Onwutuebe has sacrificed all just to live. He unashamedly boasts:

I am the python that sucked a million eggs. I am the bitch that devoured her puppies. The tree that eats her fruits, I am the plant with iron roots that strangles her seedlings, I am Onwutuebe the defiant one, defiant t Death. (42)

He however, forgets the fact that, as the saying goes, as far as death is concerned, we men live in a city without walls. For instance, despite the fear of death which causes Uka to abhor the sight of coffin and to regard Okwu's joke in the play that the coffin in the carpenter's workshop is exactly his measurement as "expensive and an unacceptable death wish" (Eze, 2010: 8), it is only ironic and symbolic too that coffins should still provide him and his mate cover when they hide to avert the wrath of their master. This is indicative of the fact that in the final analysis, the end of the race of man on earth remains death (8). The depravity of Onwutuebe action, therefore, only reveals the paucity of the world of reason, and the overweening influence of inhumanity and irrationality as earlier indicated by Eze. Nwannediya, however, in all of

these is able to attract the sympathy of Okwu and Uka, besides that of Onwudinulo, who both console her in her undeserving grief.

Okwu: Mother take heart.

Uka: Take heart. (13)

6. Death and the Paradox of Rebirth in *the Fronded Circle*

Beyond mere cessation of life, Irobi's portrait of death as a necessary end in his theatre reaches a transcendental dimension in *The Fronded Circle*. This transcendence is realized in the manner in which the tragic atmosphere that dominates the play from the opening scene is eventually mitigated with the birth of a new child. Death in Irobi's theatre, as Nwankwo notes, therefore, is a process of regeneration and immortalization of hero or heroine realized by two major ways: the first is the *recreation* of the hero or heroine through reincarnation or the birth of a new child; while the other is by the *creation* of the hero or heroine. The concern of this study, however, is the first which borders on *recreation* through the birth of a new child as represented in Kelechi (Onwutuebe's daughter)'s pregnancy.

Onwutuebe has hatched a wicked plan with his wanton attempt at self-perpetuation on earth by trying to insulate himself from death. He prepares a protective charm, which Eze (2010) categorically calls "magic" that enables him to extend his life on earth. With this charm, which he buried in an earthenware pot in his yam barn, he is able to swap the live of his male children whenever death knocked at his door. Each of the male children disappears whenever he is sick and calls the person to his sick bed with some weird words. Having sacrificed all his five sons to his despicable intention, with no other son to swap for his life, and the deadly charm he prepared already secretly dug up and destroyed by Onwudinulo, one of his relations (in collusion with Diegwu), in sympathy with Nwannediya and to avert the curse on the entire family, death really comes to take his toll on him by reducing him to "a living dead" (Eze, 3). Onwutuebe's condition is made worst by the native doctor's inability to locate and destroy the pot of charm in question which thus thrusts him on the crossroad between life and death and a state of continuous dying and waking.

Meanwhile, Kelechi, Onwutuebe's daughter lies in labor pains, and unless Onwutuebe dies, "Kelechi can not give birth to a child" (21). This is the recurrent declaration of those who are aware of his evil machination. Why does Onwutuebe still cling to life when he knows he has exhausted the source of his existence? Why does he still "struggle within the gulf of (this) existence(?)" (Okeke,

2011: 784). Why does he "torment his family in this way?" Why should he continue to "torture the lives" (28) of so many in his compound?

Why should a wasted sun.....

Why should a wicked sun that has

scotched the land until

grains of sand scald the souls

of men's feet refuse to set.

Why should an ill-fated tree

Strangle itself with its roots and trap

The little seedlings that want to sprout.

Why? (10)

It is Onwutuebe's unwillingness to make way for the smooth sprouting of Kelechi's seedling with his continuous dying and waking that makes Nwannediya's mission of "Life and Death" at the carpenter's workshop: to "buy a coffin for a man who is not yet dead... and a cot for an unborn child" (12) an indecisive one. However, "until Onwutuebe dies, the child will never see the light of day" (14). Besides being in sympathy with Nwannediya in her ordeals in the hands of her husband, Onwudinulo, her 'brother-in-law', also recognizes the curse and shame which Onwutuebe's action poses for the entire family, and decides to take steps to avert it. He connives with Diegwu and secretly they dig up and destroy the charm which Ikenga prepared for Onwutuebe, and which has been responsible for the calamity in the family.

Yet to perfect this aversion of looming curse and shame, as well as the easy sprouting of Kelechi's seedling, a vital confession of Onwutuebe's crimes has to be made, without which "death will continue to torment him" (22). Therefore, since Onwutuebe is quite aware of the implications of such confession and would not attempt it, someone of "Onwutuebe's blood" (47) has to do it for him. So, out of the grudge he bears for Gilbert, Onwutuebe's younger brother, who he believes has influenced his American wife's long and deep hatred against him, tainted also with an overt ambition to take over Onwutuebe's estate, Onwudinulo lures him into "the dance of dignity" (63) in which he uses spell to compel him "to step into a ritual that makes him confess Onwutuebe's crimes on his behalf, thereby ending his own life and that of Onwutuebe simultaneously" (Eze, 3). This also makes it possible for Kelechi, who all the while has been "gasping in the pain of labour" (14), to eventually put to bed a male child, thus validating the constant declaration of those who are aware of Onwutuebe's evil machination, and the thwarting of Onwudinulo's ambition. Diala (2006) surmises, therefore, that in the wake of Gilbert's and Onwutuebe's death, that future which is embodied in Kelechi's baby boy, is

born (109), as symbolized in the sudden cry of the baby that pierces the dominant tragic air.

It is instructive, therefore, to highlight Irobi's indisputable belief in the ineluctable link between life and death which is made abundantly manifest through the aesthetics of his art in *The Fronded Circle* by his conscious exploration of the ritual tradition as a process of regeneration of society. Diala (2006), in emphasizing Irobi's abiding theme is the role of ritual in the rebirth of society in *The Fronded Circle*, writes:

Given, however, that Irobi's central preoccupation has been with the ritual expiation of communal guilt for the regeneration of society, the Gilbert/Onwutuebe ritual passage is also presented in part as propitiatory. By the act of the Gilbert/Onwutuebe confession paid for with life itself, the curse of an era is expiated and the future made possible. Thus in the wake of the deaths, that future embodied in Kelechi's baby boy is born: the stage direction reads: Suddenly a baby's cry pierces the tragic air" (FronDED 72). (109)

It would be necessary, therefore, to really understand the concept of ritual in this study in order to appropriately place its importance in theatrical performance platform and why it has found significance in Irobi's theatre. First and foremost, it may be instructive to note that symbolism is at the root of every ritual, always advancing a set of values or significance. Diala has cited Hulkrantz whose perception of ritual reflects a "fixed usually solemn behaviour that is repeated in certain situations". There are also in Hulkrantz's above perception of ritual attributed references to 'certain situations' as either "crisis situations" or "sacred situations" (89). From Hulkrantz's perception above it is apparent that the sacredness and solemnity that bedeck the ritual process is essentially pervasive. It is this pervasive ambiance that actually enthralls us in its awe and wonders and perhaps fears. However, ritual has equally been ascribed as connoting a complex medium of acts, which main purpose is to reaffirm believes and cultures that nourish community, whereas drama can be actually used to refute these believes or reaffirm them. Therefore:

Because of its importance in Africa, ritual is an integral part of the African theatre. Consequently, African traditional dramas are participative and celebrative. It is also total, because it combines many art forms, music, poetry, dance, acting, miming, mask, painting, singing, dialogue, etc. hence, speech is not dominant as in the mainstream European theatre (Enekwe, cited in Diala, 2006: 89)

Irobi indubitably found essence in this robust African performance tradition, as well as in its integral ritual dimension. In his drama, therefore, to recall Hulkrantz above

and still guided by Diala:

Contemporary society is mired in "crisis situations" that recreate the primordial ones in which ritual had evolved and held a promise of resolution. Thus, claiming for ritual an efficacy and a timeless sacred origin going back to ancestral memory, Irobi demonstrably makes the basis of his drama the dramaturgy of identifiable Igbo ritual performances – propitiatory, divinatory, funerary, regenerative rites. (89)

Irobi's fascination to Wole Soyinka no doubt manifests the latter's profound impact on his art. Like Soyinka, his devotion to the ritual purgation and recreation of society cannot be overemphasized, envisioning as Diala notes "a pattern of ritual purgation of communal guilt for the rebirth of society that demands suffering and sacrifice" (93). Diala emphasized, however, that while Soyinka exalts the ideal of martyrdom, Irobi's preoccupation was with the efficacy of ritual human sacrifice for the atonement of communal guilt; and that in transforming ritual into drama, he retained its full religious associations, naturally subjecting his material to a pattern of interpretation that suited his temperament and his aesthetic convictions (111).

7. Conclusion

Irobi's *The Fronded Circle* does not only raise fundamental questions about the role of ritual, it buttresses extensively the imponderable possibilities of human imagination and action as reflected in principal characters in the text, and encapsulated essentially in Onwutuebe. His inordinate and perverted quest to immortalize himself on earth and against death, forces him to sacrifice all his five sons with whom he readily swaps for his own life whenever he falls sick, and death came calling. Eventually, with no other son to sacrifice for his life, Onwutuebe stubbornly clings to life, refusing to die to facilitate the smooth sprouting of Kelechi's seed of womb, in whom the future is embodied. He forgot however, that as far as death is concerned, as the saying goes, we men live in a city without walls, and that he thus cannot actually violate the immutability of the necessity of death.

In this study, attention has focused on Irobi's philosophy of death and its paradox of rebirth, using *The Fronded Circle* as Paradigm, to explore the efficacy of ritual human sacrifice for the regeneration of society; and how he had effectively deployed the aesthetics of his art to reinforce his belief in the ineluctable link between life and death. His portrait of death

as a necessary end in his theater is no doubt taken to a transcendental height in *The Fronded Circle*: a transcendence that is effectively realized in the manner in which the tragic atmosphere that dominated the play from the opening scene, got eventually mitigated with the birth of Kelechi's new child, in whom the future was symbolically embedded; reinvigorating not just individual, but as well communal destinies. Herein lies the paradox.

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