

AFRICANNESS IN MEDIA THEORIZING AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF FOLKISM IN NIGERIAN DRAMA

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Abstract

This paper examines the propensity for African nations to rely on Western theoretical frameworks in conceptualising and evaluating their artistic productions, despite efforts to develop indigenous theories. The phenomenon is particularly evident in the realms of live performance and filmmaking, where African creators and scholars often fall back on Western paradigms to legitimise their work. Drawing upon the phenomenological perspectives of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, this study employs a qualitative methodology to analyze Sam Ukala's play, Iredi War, with a view to interrogating the phenomenological dimensions of folkism as a viable theoretical model for African cultural production. The research reveals that Africanness is rooted in the indigenous aesthetic codes embedded in folklore, while phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the essential characteristics of folkism and its potential for transcultural applicability. The study argues that a theory, no matter how well-grounded, risks losing its critical purchase if it is not continually engaged in scholarly discourses. The paper concludes that folkism, as a phenomenological category, offers a valid theoretical framework for understanding African cultural production; and its features can be leveraged to promote a more nuanced understanding of African traditions and their global relevance.

Keywords: Africanness, Folkism, Media, Phenomenology, Theorising.

Introduction

Scholarly works on the development trajectories in media theorising continue to focus on the identifiable components of a theory which transcend the mind, people and culture that adopt it to impart knowledge. These identifiable components are viewed to exist as the inalienable features that occur in the mind when the theory is mentioned. This is what Martin Heidegger calls the 'whatness' of a theory. According to Francis Etim, "whatness is that which makes it possible for a thing to be as it is ... Heidegger calls it *ermoglichung*: it is the constitution power, which... makes a being capable of becoming" (30). The whatness of a theory is the phenomenology of the theory. This must be identifiable in a theory to avoid ambiguity in adopting the model for a media project.

Another significant aspect of a theory is the extent its claim encompasses views which are held alike across nations. This aspect makes theorisation more scientific or sequitur to the laws of probability and reasoning operating alike everywhere on the same circumstance. Thus, an absolute referent that embodies a *definuendum* retaining a specific signified other than an intractable array of forms is easily established. This brings Jacques Derrida's notion of the transcendental signified to mind which elicits a substantial sameness in a claim that enjoys the same recognition and enforcement across the globe

(Habib 422). It is acknowledged as the ultimate reality or centre of truth (Bressler 104). This implies, the component of a theory should be able to transcend culture, retaining the original flair in situations it is engaged.

In the same vein, media theories are Europe and America based. Each theory possesses, first, the innate cosmic view of the locale that it sprouts from and the active ingredients that delineate it from another. Such view is what Andrew Uduigwomen and Chris Akpan call a “systematised body of knowledge with public, impersonal characteristics” (301). Theories such as Structuralism, phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Narratology, Deconstruction, Marxism, Semiotics, Media Responsibility Theory, or Agenda Setting, are from the West. They showcase cultural views that inspire their speculations. Western theorisation is (Plato) metaphysics-centred; they are basically science oriented. According to Jean-Louis Comollu and Jean Narboni, a science-based theory will “define its field and methods... awareness of its own historical and social situation, the conditions which make it necessary and... possible and the special function it intends to fulfill” (43). The science-centredness is the “Westernness” of those theories because their world is predominantly concerned with the sequitur of nature from the rigidity of science as proven in the laboratory. Therefore, theories from Africa should reflect Africanness in thought and in practice to show her nature. Thus, Africanness is the cosmic configuration of the African man. It does not actual imply a revolt from truth or scientific facts per se; it is what Anietie Udofia describes as “a detour from a primordial precinct... of claims that filter through social and cultural facts” (205), which are strange to Africa.

Africanness is the conceptualization of media theorising in the nature of the Africa’s cosmic view. It is the activation of activities within scope of African philosophy. In performance, Africanness is the grounding of performances on the “philosophical status of Africa traditional thoughts as found in pre-colonial African culture” (Ekanem 269). According to Ekaette Edem, it is a situation African theory “connects individuals and society to each other in language, norms, beliefs, arts, lifestyle, ways of living together and value system” (64). This interconnectedness stimulates beauty from moral speculation which theorization is prominent. Along the line, theorising for African performances should mirror African values and reality of life within which beauty in media discourse abound. In media theorizing, “beauty lies in maintaining and nurturing an aspect along its tenets to the height” (Udofia 53).

In Africa, theorising is also going on and the most identifiable substance to draw from is usually the moonlight experience which the orb of ‘folklore’ in media discourse is fashioned. Prominently, folkism is a trending media theory from this circle, making the moon a symbolic factor in African’s conception of performance aesthetics. According to Amy Ronnberg and Frankleen Martin, it is “the moon presides over learning, wisdom and writing as well as magic and spell. The moon is the mystic vessel containing the milky soma of immortality, the ship of souls that transports the dead to heaven..., (and) the circle without blemish (26). Thus, the ascendance of folkism to the limelight of literary theory is a remarkable in Sam Ukala’s plays. This paper uses *Iredi War* to examine the ‘whatness’ of folkism and its transcendental features as a media theory from Africa.

Theoretical Framework

According to Edmund Husserl cited in Allan Casebier, for any exiting thing such as a theory, “there exist universals that the spectators apprehend and utilize in recognizing” (9). Theorising differs from ordinary writing because a theory projects a life span with steps to practice it. Within a theory, identifiable features that define it are earmarked. These features are necessary substances of the theory, which makes it a self-contained speculation that spells out its operational boundaries that can be

deployed to experiment on other similar courses within the scope of its projection. It is then expected that each part fits into a cleft in the body as a system, which as Aristotle intones, “the structural union of the parts being such that, if anyone of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjoined and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole” (39). Against this backdrop, the theoretical framework of this paper is phenomenology.

The theory was propounded by Edmund Husserl his *Logical Investigations* which was published in 1900 posthumously. In the view of Geoffrey Ozumba, Husserl’s conception of phenomenology was basically on transcendentalism. That is, a thing we come across and still recall as it appeared to us, and which the outlook and appeal appear same across persons, minds and culture. Another idea of the theory is Martin Heidegger’s, which seeks the ‘whatness’ of a thing. Thus, phenomenology of a theory is the active consciousness in a speculation which maintains the component across spheres of application (114-115). The views of these two scholars shape the constituent and universality of a thing as its essence.

Phenomenology suggests the way a thing occurs. To Peter Widdowson and Selden Raman, the word ‘phenomena’ itself is a Greek word suggesting ‘things appearing (51). That means, “objects exist if, and only if, we gather them into our consciousness” (Bressler 65). To this effect, phenomenology of a theory will suggest “a rock-solid foundation of knowledge... sustained even in the face of the paradigm-shift from nature to man” (Ibrahim 217). As Widdowson and Raman put:

A modern philosophical tendency which stresses the perceiver’s central role is phenomenology. According to Edmund Husserl, the proper object of philosophical investigation is the content of our consciousness and not objects in the world. Consciousness is always of something which appears to our consciousness which is truly real to us... We discover in the things which appear in consciousness their universal or essential qualities. Phenomenology claims to show us the underlying nature both of human nature and underlying phenomena (51).

Phenomenology directs our minds to the essentials substance of a theory. It is like “asking about the essential features of what appears to us in those acts in which we recognise... as depicted objects” (Casebier 25). It seeks to situate what-is not what-ought-to-be, and it presupposes a centre within which the workability and result of a theory can be drawn.

Terry Eagleton has been able to link phenomenology to Saussure’s structuralism since both presuppose a centre of meaning and recognition. In his word, phenomenology is the “bracketing of the real object in order to get closer grips with the way the mind experiences it. Structuralism and phenomenology, dissimilar though: they are in central way, both spring out from the ironic act of shutting out the material world in order to illuminate our consciousness of it” (95). As Aristotle puts, phenomenology discusses “what is possible in accordance with probability of or necessity” (16). Such appearance retains its outlook alike in many minds, across landmark and across epochs of human history. Relating the theory to this paper, this essay seeks to identify the essential components in Ukala’s propounded folkism which can make it fit into the committee of the trending media theory from Africa, using one of his plays, *Iredi War*.

A Brief Review of *Iredi War*

Ukala comes from Delta State. He is a professor of Theatre Arts, and has published many plays. Some of his plays are *The Slave Wife*, *The Leg in your Eye*, *the Placenta of Death*, *The Last Heroes*, *Break a Boil*, *Odour of Justice*, *Fumes of Fuel* and *Akpakaland*. He is also a renown poet, and a novelist. In

my Hermitage is his anthology, while *Skeletons* showcases his mastery of prose genre. *Iredi War* is one of his famous plays. It is a historical piece, dramatizing the encounters of the European administrators with the Owa People of the present Delta State of Nigeria in 1906.

The meeting of young Crewe-Read, a 24-year-old boy, acting as the ADC (Assistant District Commissioner) to Chichester for the Agbor sub-District, ended in an unprecedented feud. In Crewe-Read's irksomeness to wield absolute power, he orders for the shrine of the Owa people to be set ablaze, thereby desecrating their gods. This abuse stirs the Owa people to reinforce their army to fight him. The encounter results in many deaths of Crewe-Read and many others. Consequence, more arms are raised from the British administrators to suppress Owa kingdom. However, unlike other African tribes, which kowtow before the European administrators, Igoba, the King of Owa, confronts Chichester to set the tone of indifference in winning or losing a communal fight in *Iredi War*.

Folkism Reviewed

Folkism is a media theory propounded by Ukala, which Emmanuel Eregare conceives as the literariness of folklore (149) according to Patrick Ebewo:

The term folklore is a compound word that is made up of two words – 'folk' and 'lore'. Folk means an ethnic group of people sharing common knowledge gained through communal education and experience... dealing with superstition, myths and rituals, legendary stories, fairy tales, antiquities, history, or even language.... Folklore is a term for the body of traditional literature of a people that deals with customs and traditions of the people. This includes superstitions, stories, dances, songs, legends, riddles, jokes, proverbs, games, charms, spell, and ritual. The term is always used to signify a literature, a mode of expression of the traditional people. It is oral in nature (7).

Folklore is a congruence of activities of a people, while folkism is set of rules speculated to guide the operation of the 'lore' by the 'folk'. These in Sam Ukala's theorisation are: "the law of opening, the law of joint performance, the law of creativity, free enactment and responsibility, the law of judgment, the law of protest against suspense, the law of expression of the emotions, the law of ego projection, and the law of closing" (Ukala cited in Eregare 144).

Looking closely to what constitute folkism, there is a tale to tell; there is a collection of traditional media such as idioms, riddles, proverbs and adages, the town crier, and other symbols like the palm-frond and dance; there is masquerading, stunts, ululation and song; and there is the invocation of the supra-mundane - all these factors are traditional practices of imparting knowledge in Africa. "It is the bedrock for the literary theatre created by Sam Ukala called *Folkism*" (Eregare 149). Linking folkism to the contemporary media, Kalu Uka writes that "we of a certain age nurtured before this internet age of computers embrace a continuum of traditions in a fusion of pure, pristine traditionalism through tradition into modernism and now into post modernism (8). Nonetheless, contextualizing folkism to the contemporary media theorising is sealed in "Sam Ukala's effort in moving the story of *Akpakaland* from its stage orientation to a screen version" (Inyang 184).

"Africanness" of Folkism in Media Theorising

Theorising is the forming of moral speculation about something. As Louis Fischer acknowledges that a theorizing can function as the generating mechanism to set some assumptions rolling towards human development (15). According to Stephen Littlejohn and Karen Foss:

A theory offers one way to capture the truth of a phenomenon; it is not the only way to view it... Theories are intimately tied to action. How we think, - our theories-guide how we act; and how we act-our theories-guide, how we think. In the world of scholarship, formal theories and intellectual practices are inseparable (15).

Apart from truth in theorizing, Nick Couldry further observes theorizing as an avenue to ask an open question about life in a constructive way, meant to use as a tool for assessing activities within the orb of the speculation (45).

Media theorizing, on the other hand, is the speculation of constructive thoughts on the activation, practice and reward of a medium in the society. Through effective theorizing, the foundation of an idea is properly burrowed. According to Udofia:

A theory is the base of academic discourse. Stage and film productions in Nigerian university are reflections of discourses emerging various disciplines of the world... A theory is a capsule of procedure in any modern media activity. It forms the backdrop for the user to fall back to shape operation. It acts as a radiance shielding practices off the contamination from baseless assumptions (259).

From the atom of a theory, theorising can be inferred to be the task of formulating a theory in order to define the span and process of a situation. This is a global practice which, as different culture conceives differently about life, each community attempts to colour its theorising with the undertone of its philosophy.

To this effect, African scholars have surged forth in many ways to establish the way Africa conceives of a specific subject matter in diverse fields. Prominent among African theories are in humanities. Thus, Africanness is the fusion of African philosophy in the media speculation. One of such is Ibn Batoutah's averment cited in Bakary Traore that African "artistic achievements find their main expression in an abundant oral literature consisting of myths, legends, stories, short pieces of prose verse, rhymed or free, and finally satire... exhibition of conjurers, magicians and animal charmers, as is found in certain part of Africa" (7). Drawing from Batoutah's position, it is obvious that Africans have a way of imparting information in the media. This way is its nature and the nature is the Africanness in a theory. As Samuel Ekanem intones, "African philosophy is that body of literature whose existence is... culture specific shaped by social factors such as beliefs, values and norms" (270). Along the lines, another aspect of Africanness is "human transformation in rituals... transformation by spirit possession, which is significantly more complex than the illusionism that comprises most European drama tradition" (Gilbert and Tomkins 62). Therefore, theorizing to portray Africanness is steeped in ritualised activities which are different from the illusion or make-belief outlook of the Western Theatre.

Phenomenology of Folkism in *Iredi War*

Phenomenology is the active consciousness or identifiable substance acknowledged in a particular thing. Phenomenology suggests that two things make a thing to exist: the material or substance which Heidegger calls the "Whatness" of the thing and the transcending capacity of the substance which makes it universal and same to many who are conscious of its existence; which is what Husserl calls "transcendentalism" (Udofia 27-28). Thus, the whatness and transcendentalism of folkism are analysed in *Iredi War* under subheadings.

Narrative Consciousness

There is a substance of narration in *Iredi War*. The story can be boldly told to another person, and the story maintains its components in characters, states, scenarios, conflict and resolution which transcend Nigeria and Africa down to other continents. This consciousness is presented thus:

Narrator II: Tonight tale is not a happy tale.

Narrator I: A tale is a tale, my brother. Now that the people have sung and danced, thing have been activated in their minds and bodies to get the best out of our story (*Iredi War* 12).

Narrative consciousness is an aspect of folkism established in the play.

Traditional Media Consciousness

Another substance of folkism is the use of traditional media in the dialogue of the text. These media are specifically appropriated into riddles, idioms, proverbs and adages. They are further itemized in subheadings below:

Riddle: This is a statement embodying two sides which the listener is expected to unravel. It comes as a mild question that suggests: “which is better?” as presented in the lines below:

Igboba: *If a stranger entered your house, would your children adopt him as their father and throw you out of the house? (Iredi War 16).*

The expression is quite as saying: A powerful man and a weak one dwell in a home. The child runs to hug the weak one. Which is the true father of the child?

Idioms: An idiom has a self-contained meaning which delimits its signified to the context it is used. In NWOMA’S speech, the medium is fully situated:

Nwoma: ... You cannot neglect me forever and continue *to pour your treasures* in the lap of one whose waist is already stiff (*Iredi War* 52).

The pour treasure in the lap is a closed referent; it may not suggest the same referent in another usage. The statement suggests “ejaculate your semen...”.

Proverbs: A proverb is different from other traditional media because it is “a generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form... handed down from generation to generation” (Johnson and Ekpenyong 63). The example among many is encoded in this line:

Narrator II: ... *One does not stay in his own home and crush his scrotum in the process... (Iredi War 12).*

Igboba: It’s like the frog distending her belly in order to measure size with the cow. She’ll end up bursting herself to shred (*Iredi War* 36).

These two expressions contain direct and indirect comparisons which are the basic components of a proverb. A proverb is usually assertive. However, in a typical African usage, the second proverb should be: “the frog that measures its size with the cow by distending her belly will burst herself to shreds”.

Adages: An adage is a more logical expression that contains a transcendental fact; that is something that means the same thing everywhere, and are usually presented with the anecdote of antecedence, processes and the likely consequence. It is portrayed thus:

Igboba: ... Our people say that it’s where it pairs one that one shows to the doctor. (Iredi War 22)

...The fact that would disgrace a man doesn’t come through the middle of his arms, it escapes through the side
If the old one stays too long at the latrine, vultures mistake him for a carcass...
(Iredi War 29).

These lines are traditional sayings but they express universal truths. That is, if the same principle is applied elsewhere, the same consequence would be got based on the circumstance.

The Tabor/Town-Crier: Africanness on information dissemination is properly portrayed in *Iredi War*. The traditional/folk way of disseminating information is captured in the town crier. (... *Everyone freezes as Town Criers gong rises afar off, followed by the TOWN CRIER’s voice*):

Owa o Owa!
Open your ears and hear
A rude foot has crushed the adder’s tail...
... Nni Oba sitosamaran
....Open your ears and hear (Iredi War 30-31).

A general message is spread by the town crier. This factor is active as Africanness in people’s consciousness.

Song: Song is used as a means of information impartation. A song can send a message about an achievement, despair, sorrow, or war. One of such signals is portrayed in the lines below:

Crewe-Read: Omozefi!

Omozefi: Sir! (*Hurries and stand before CREWE-READ*)

Crewe-Read: (*Hands over telegrams to him*) Here. Run like a mad dog.

Omozefi: Yes, sir! (*Puts the telegrams in his pocket, switches on his touch and runs on*).

(*Black out, sound of “Iredi do” pronounced “doh” – from afar*)

Iredi do, do do	Iredi greetings
Iredi – o	Iredi
Onyegbunw’eworo	Wait for the mum

Ebelebe Ebelebe (Iredi War 30-31)
(The song is repeated a number of times...)

This is a song of sorrow. It passes a piece of information about the pervading mood in the land, thereby stirring the intent to avenge.

Dance: Another tool of knowledge impartation in the play resplendent of folkism is dance. Through dance, vital information can be disseminated. This is one of the transcendental substances of Ukala's folkism. The lines below showcase this factor:

(... NWOMA casts off her outer attire to reveal her maiden dancer's costume. She takes to the dance, dazzles everyone with her virtuosity and becomes the cynosure of all eyes... Igboba steps down in a loud ovation, dances to meet her... Two maidens dance towards EBIE while some others dance with the maiden, EBIE dances towards the drummers and, with special dance steps, halts the music...) (Iredi War 62).

The dance steps by NWOMA sends a signal, and that of other maidens also send a signal too. However, a remarkable one is the ‘special dance steps’ of EBIE which bring the drumming and dancing to a sudden halt. Such dance is typical of Africans.

Ritual as Active Consciousness

Ritual is not solely an African practice alone. Greece developed their drama through rituals. In Oriental dramaturgy, Sanskrit custom for performance is ritualistic. Therefore, ritual becoming a prominent active consciousness in African dramaturgy is because Africa is a dual-cosmic terrain, believing, they believe that the spiritual controls the physical. Thus, folkism prioritizes rituals as found in *Iredi War*. The consciousness is clarified in these scenes:

Igboba: (*Pouring libation*) God of our land! Wine has come. Our ancestors.

Crewe-Read: (*To IGBOPA*) Excuse me, Chief Igbo, perhaps, you haven't noticed that I didn't chew your cola (*Raise and drops on the table the lobe that was served*).

Igboba: You didn't chew it? Why, Mr. ADC?

Crewe-Read: Because you first offered it to your *jujus* (*Iredi War* 15).

The conversation between Igboba and Crewe-Read indicates the place of rituals in the African society. Africans attach much importance to the potency of the unseen, unknown and the imaginable.

Another instance is established in these dialogues:

Iwekuba: I've come to help. The Obi asked me to.

Ebie: Help me with what, Baba?

Iwekuba: To prepare the unprepared among you. They shot him (*Pointing to Izun's body*)... Just once, with the same gun that went dumb when it was aimed at me! And here he lies lifeless... You see what I mean? People don't win wars with songs and oaths only. I will take these ones along to have them bathed and cooked while you bury the dead. Where will they meet you?

Ebie: The frontage of *ali*, the earth-god (*Iredi War* 42).

Iwekuba is the former war lord of Owa. He is explaining why Lawani shot at him but the gun failed to boom but shooting at Izun, it fired to kill him. He is explaining the basis of rituals to the warriors, and he is commissioned to fortify the warriors through rituals. This is captured his words “to have them cooked and bathed”.

The Supra-mundane Consciousness

There is the stimulation of spiritual manifestation in the text. This is found in the scenes below:

Lawani: Retreat or I shoot! (*Aims at IWEKUBA*)
Ekome: (*Dashes to LAWANI*) Don’t shoot, I beg you.
Iwekuba: Shoot!...

(*As IWEKUBA attempts to snatch his gun, LAWANI pulls back a bit and pulls his trigger. His gone doesn’t explode. IGBOBA and ACHOLEM burst into laughter...*) (*Iredi War*35).

The demonstration in this scene reflects the potency of charm, spirit, magic or the supra-mundane in African drama. Africanness in matters of unseen is made visible through supernatural acts. Lawani shoots at Iwekuba but the gun fails to explode; shooting at IZUN, it explodes. This is because Iwekuba is “bathed and cooked” spiritually. He is half-human and half-spirit.

In another scene, the same spiritual, manifestation occurs, and it is directly before Chichester and Rudkin, the Area Commander of the West African Frontier Force.

Rudkin: (*Impatiently*) No one sent anyone to trick you. My orders to the soldiers were clear: “Go, disarm and arrest Igbooba and everyone else and drag them to Agbor!”
Igbooba: Disarm, arrest and drag!... (*Moves toward the entrance, followed by his people*).
Rudkin: Stop them?

(*Soldier 2, at the entrance, faces them but fires into the air. At once, he begins to scream*)

Soldier 2: My hands! My hands are hanging! (*Iredi War* 93).

The soldier, on the order of Rudkin, shoots at the Owa people but a supernatural force freezes his arm. Supra-mundane consciousness is typical to African drama as a folk content as portrayed in *Iredi War*.

Conclusion

The study of Ukala’s *Iredi War* was meant to flesh out the material and the universal in projected in folkism. Theorising for the media requires an absolute focus, at least, to reassess the fecundity of the speculation in capturing the cosmic essence and cultural focus that set its framework. Folkism embodies the folklore and activities to conceptualise the control of the supernatural over the natural. A theory that fathoms ritualisation and de-ritualisation in practice has captured the cosmic focus of the society. However, the universality of the whatness of folkism depends on the constant engagement of the theory to authenticate the Africanness it is articulated.

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