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A dance on contrasting platforms: African tradition and revolutionary aesthetics in Esiaba Irobi's plays

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Igbo African tradition, characterised mainly by rituals and myths, has often been regarded as too codified and therefore a dead end of sorts, as M.J.C. Echeruo observes in his article "The dramatic limits of Igbo ritual" (1981). But Esiaba Irobi, in his plays of revolutionary aesthetics, decodes this and has practically given it limbs, sinews and all, breathing into it a Marxist revolutionary life. The result of this miscegenation of forms is a dramaturgy that is rich both in the African tradition and culture of songs, dirges, anecdotes, and the age grade system-propelled communal festivals of ritual sacrifice, on one hand, and the Marxist Brechtian revolutionary aesthetics, characterised by a dramatisation of what Frantz Fanon (1963: 255) sees as "the blood-thirsty tension fed by classes", dialectics, and the alienation techniques on the other. In Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) and *Nwokedi* (1991), we see this "blood thirsty tension" fully and boisterously, if psychoanalytically, dramatised. For what he presents in these plays is a psycho-dramatic portraiture of characters, especially disenchanted characters, bitterly going against their oppressors. These model "victims of the system", as Francois Maspéro (1980: viii) would say, have been driven to the fringes of reason by vicious and blindfolding oppression and they fight back sporadically and blindly at whoever they stumble on especially in *Hangmen*. But in *Nwokedi* they have matured into a visionary vanguard force, having realized the collective nature of the struggle to dislodge their oppressors. In the end, Irobi has literarily responded to Fanon's (1963: 255) clarion call that "we must invent", that "we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man", while recognizing (and creatively appropriating) "the sometimes prodigious thesis which Europe has put forward." **Key words:** Esiaba Irobi; Nigerian theatre; revolutionary aesthetics; revolutionary violence.

Introduction

Modern African writers have always fallen back on their different people's traditional, religious and cultural myths as a reliable source of inspiration for literary expression, even while plying their trade in the received Western literary tradition and mainly in Western European languages. But rarely has any African writer since Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o so employed African tradition to make such far-reaching revolutionary statements in his literary art as Esiaba Irobi has done.

The revolutionary impetus usually has its origin first in one's natural inclination and upbringing, and then in the influence of both one's society and his intellectual

exposures. In interviews, Irobi has made statements that portray him as being totally intolerant of orthodoxies and the gradualist avenue to social change – not for his taste any situation that begs government’s responsiveness to the people’s plight. Therefore, to him if, for example, the Power Holding Company of Nigeria, formerly, National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), subjects the people to days and weeks of unmitigated power outage without any reasonable explanation, and it is not regarded as violence against the people, if the people, on the other hand, mobilise and take the Power Holding Company’s personnel hostage until electric power is restored, “it is no violence,” either. Rather it is some form of “revolution” (Irobi 2007: 32), some form of justice. He also makes reference to the “intrinsically rebellious” culture that he was exposed to both in his paternal and maternal homes. In his maternal village especially, his maternal uncles who fought in the First and Second World Wars would exhort him, “*Da-aka anya! Da-aka anya! Onye O Obu Onye? Hie ga-eme echi ya mee taa.*” That is Ngwa Igbo dialect for “Stand your ground and express yourself! Don’t let anyone psyche you down. The thing that may happen tomorrow let it happen today, instead” (Irobi 2007: 29). That, according to him, means that no structure is fixed forever. Hence “anything can be changed, and that it is your agency that changes things” (Irobi 2007: 29).

No less contributing to his revolutionary formative life is his early exposure to the *ekpe* masquerade cult, which in some parts of Igboland is a masquerade cult recognised and empowered by the folk community with, among other functions, the role of enacting the *ala* propitiation rites, when the earth goddess is perceived to have been offended or when an *ochu* (murder) abomination has been committed by anyone or any group. The propitiation rites, which in former times often involved human sacrifices, are naturally violent in enactment. Thus, in his own words still, the masquerade performance enactments are “not a matter of entertainment only” and although “you do the dancing and all [...] they are not ordinary. They become part of your psyche.” (Irobi 2007: 29).

No doubt the violent revolutionary tendencies in the Amapu Igbengwo village masquerade in Umuopara Obioma Ngwa, of Esiaba Irobis Origin, did get into his psyche all right. That is why when he looks at the perceived contradictions in the Nigerian society of his time, he is filled with revolutionary revulsion. We first have a feel of this in the interview he granted Nengi Ilegha of *Newslink* magazine in 1989, where he makes clear his strong belief in the violent revolutionary alternative whenever the forces of oppression have failed to yield to the people’s yearning for socialist change. Casting a thoughtful glance at the Nigerian society of the 1970s and 1980s, he observed that all government had been preoccupied with was employing some diversionary economic policies and inventing some bogus and unrealistic social programme to stupefy the gullible public (Irobi 1989b:12). Charging further against the state of neglect for the plight of the youth, he warned, “the unemployment factor will determine the shape and content of the revolution that is brewing, because

revolutions do not start in the head but from the stomach. And SAP [Structural Adjustment Programme, one of the bogus economic programmes] will not be an answer to a grumbling stomach or a jobless hand wielding a gun" (Irobi 1989b:12). Perhaps that can only be corroborated by his postulation that "fiction – the creative imagination [especially of the revolutionary aesthetics parlance] is more powerful [and of course more socially utilitarian] than politics" (Irobi 2007: 4).

The foundations of Irobi's literary art

Irobi's attachment to folk tradition

However, the true foundations of his literary art are his said maternal and paternal inheritances: a "masquerade-active" father's lineage and a "raconteur" mother's lineage. These are important traditional African performative art forms. They are what Irobi has imbibed from very early in life and which he tries to trans-represent in his dramatic art, referring to the spirit behind those art forms as "the luminal spirit" and the "power of phenomenology behind creativity" (Irobi 2007: 71), and which "Spirit" and "Power" he tries to appropriate in his creative endeavours. That is also what Isidore Diala (2005: 87) has referred to as "his audacious innovativeness" in "Igbo theatre/tragedy". It has been noted that a strong attachment to folk tradition implies a kind of religious zeal. And, as said earlier on, ritual sacrifice which involves the spilling of animal, and sometimes human, blood to appease the gods of the land when certain serious sacrileges are perceived to have been committed or during important annual festivals, are characteristic of African religion. Such is the case in *Nwokedi* (1991) where the occasion of the Ekpe festival, a festival of the Ngwa Igbo people of Nigeria, which marks the end of one farming year and the beginning of a new one, is also used by Nwokedi and his Ekumeku age grade to purge the land of the many political and social sacrileges the corrupt old politicians, like Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr, are perceived to have committed against the people. Usually a ram is used for this *ekpe* festival ritual sacrifice of cleansing the land. The young man whose role it is to symbolically dispatch the old year and usher in a new one of yield, by a sharp stroke of the machete, slits off the head of the ram and spills its blood at the shrine of the god of the land. Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi inherited the role from his father and has performed it for six consecutive years now. But for this year's festival, he thinks that he wants to go for something higher, something more potent, human blood, instead of animal blood, and most preferably a politician's blood. That to him is the only form of sacrifice that could really transform the society and usher in a new generation founded on equity and social welfare: "it is the sacrifice the future demands" (*Nwokedi*, 73). Incidentally too, the politicians nearest to him are his father and his brother-in-law. And he does not flinch at using either of them for the sacrifice. As the fateful moment arrives, and Nwokedi is transformed into the spirit behind the

mask, and thus masked and bearing the glintingly sharp machete, it is Senator Arikpo that the Ekumeku presents to him, bound hands and feet and neck placed on the special sacrificial log. Unfortunately too, his father rushes in to intervene just as Nwokedi's incensed hand descends and dispatches first, Nwokedi Snr, and second, Arikpo. As the Ufo Bearer says: "The hungry earth is gorged with blood" and "blood is the rain that falls upon the land" (*Nwokedi*, 93). This is the image of blood and violence, borne by both the traditional ritual festivals of Nwokedi and the anarchic revolutionary festivals of *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) and which gives the plays their unique accelerated revolutionary tempo.¹

Irobi's adaptation of revolutionary thought

During the formative years of their communist ideology, Friedrich Engels wrote to Karl Marx, noting:

The workers have during the past few years reached the final stage of the old civilization, the rapid increase in crimes, robberies and murders is their protest against the old social organization. At night the streets are not safe, the bourgeois are beaten up, knifed and robbed; if the local proletarians develop according to the same laws as the English proletarians, they will soon realise that it is useless to protest against the social system in this manner, as individuals and by force and will protest in their general capacity as human beings, by means of communism. (Marx and Engels 1975: 18–19).

In the plays, *Nwokedi* and especially *Hangmen*, we notice such wanton and brazenly violent statements and actions by characters that suggest the kind of individuated and uncoordinated protests against an unjust social order that Engels repudiated in his letter to Marx. In the play, *Nwokedi*, when Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi is not postulating: "there is a joy in breaking the law which only the true rebel knows [...] A triumph in hurling stones at the throne of tyrants (and an ecstasy) in spilling the blood of the ancient serpent" (*Nwokedi*, 79); he is throwing up images of violence such as "sword and scabbard" (*Nwokedi*, 52); or worse still he is screaming "spill his blood! Murder the bum!" (*Nwokedi*, 43); and feeling so fulfilled that "the sun goes down in blood" (*Nwokedi*, 71).² This is paralleled in *Hangmen* where the Suicide Squad's Acid says: "terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all downtrodden people seeking to combat oppressive governments", hence "revolutions are always based on violence" (Irobi 1989: 25–26).

All the same, Tamara's admonition to the Suicide Squad, the potential revolutionary vanguard force in *Hangmen*, goes in the same direction with Engels' position in the very last line of the above quotation, to the effect that the Suicide Squad should direct their radical energies towards the popular and communist cause of liberating the people from the poverty engendered on them by the Erekosimas in their midst. Earlier in October 1844, Engels had also written to Marx warning:

The people are very active but the lack of a reliable prop (a well-articulated, rallying document of the procedure for mass action) is rather noticeable. Until the principles are set forth in a few publications where they are shown to have been logically and historically evolved from hitherto existing mode of thinking and from history as it has been up to now and shown to be their necessary corollary, everything will remain rather hazy and most people will be groping in the dark. (Marx and Engels 1975: 17).

That was the suggestion that led to their formulating the communist manifesto, a document of the main ideological framework of the communist movement which also became the constitutional framework for all communist states, in addition to the fact that the communist movement had now gained widespread popularity and so the major adherents from the influential countries of Europe needed to meet to formerly launch the movement as a political party, as well as to formulate and publish the tenets of their belief. And I would think that the mass of the people in Irobi's Izon state of *Hangmen* would do with such a "prop" on which to anchor the revolutionary zeal generated by the Suicide Squad. This is necessary if they must overthrow the corrupt regime of the Erekosimas and Daminagbos and then harness the oil wealth of the state for the general good of the people, for redistribution. That is also Irobi's way of subtly asking the pockets of revolutionaries in the Nigerian society to come together and find a common front through which a communist or at least a socialist order could be installed to better the lot of the people. He reasons, as it were, that the people's plight has really become so pathetic and practically leading up to that final stage of the old civilisation that Engels talked about.

In the later play, *Nwokedi*, however, the dominant revolutionary atmosphere is that of a people who have transcended the realm of the old civilisation. This signifies some Marxist ideological progression in Esiaba Irobi. All through *Nwokedi*'s rampaging and bloodthirsty campaign of cleansing the society, the people stood solidly by him and the Ekumeku cult of young revolutionaries. They sang and cheered him to apparent triumph over injustice until the point where he murdered his father and his brother-in-law for the ultimate purification of the land. The people must obviously have realized at that point that their hero was no more normal. From the African point of view, he had become paranoid. That is the import of the Ufo-Bearer's dirge over Nwakerendu Nwokedi's death, when he says, "The axe man has felled the tree we climbed to touch the sun" and that the "fiery-blooded panthers, desperate in pounce and paw, have torn to pieces the carcass of the tiger" (*Nwokedi*, 93). This shows that the act is abominable in the Igbo society of the play's setting. It is *ochu*, indeed fratricide, which ironically pollutes the land, even though it was intended for a revolutionary propitiation of the same land. It is also this kind of neurotic scenario that would make Jean Paul Sartre's European critics of African culture to conclude, rather hastily: "Those people kill each other, that isn't normal" (Sartre 1963: 24)

Irobi, in some unique ways, has also initiated some peculiar adaptation of Marxist thought. In *Nwokedi*, he demonstrates his belief in the virility of the peasants, led by the literate and some semi-literate Ekumeku vanguard force, as an effective proletariat, capable of ridding the African society of the oppressive bourgeois elements. Hence, the Ufo-Bearer says: "We are a peasant people. We live by the strength of our hand and the sweat on our backs [...] if now the festival of a peasant god is threatened by a dearth of yams; if at this moment the dry earth pants like a tired dog, what it wants on its parched tongue is a spill of blood." (*Nwokedi*, 39). This Fanonian belief in the revolutionary strength of the peasants combined with the deep traditional connotations in the plays shows a peculiar Irobian approach to Marxist revolutionary aesthetics. And in *Hangmen*, the orthodox, narcissist Marxist ideologue, Ogbansiegbe, is killed in order to make way for a more communalist and peasant-oriented Marxist ideology that is more germane to their peculiar cause. That cause is redistributing the wealth of Izon State. In the same way, Animalu, the Marxist character in *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), has to be murdered by Jamike when the former becomes a clog in the wheel of the later's progressive artistic pursuit. Irobi must be making an ideological point with the incidents of the two identical characters, Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe and Animalu in *Hangmen* and *The Other Side* respectively, who are self-serving and narcissistic Marxist intellectuals and whose lives end in an equally identical tragic way: murdered by the positive heroes in the two plays.

The message that can be derived from their fates in the plays is that the presence of a Marxist intellectual is not absolutely a *sine qua non* for an effective revolution, especially a peasant revolution. All that is required is for the people to collectively come to a full realization of their deprived and oppressed state and to be ready to change their situation at all cost. The other message is that revolutionary terror and violence must be directed towards a general or popular cause, and not towards a personal vendetta, as was the case with the Suicide Squad in the hands of Ogbansiegbe, before they were redirected, by the French student ideologue and later by Tamara, also. Otherwise, terror and violence would be purposeless – a "meaningless anarchy" (*Hangmen*, 28). This point is what is expatiated upon in the French student's speech, as rehashed by the character Moshe Dayan, in the play:

A revolution is always organized, its strategies planned out, its aims and objectives mapped out. A revolution is always planned and executed by a generation. In doing this, they have no need for an ideological mentor or an ideological Methuselah. We are just tools in Dr. Ogbansiegbe's hands, spanners and hammers in the hands of a political mechanic. We have allowed him to sell to us an insane philosophy. Terrorism! Comrades, terrorism is useless if we are not organized. (*Hangmen*, 28).

The above position further reinforces the fact of the unorthodox or peripheral nature of Irobi's Marxism, that is, the philosophy that a revolution (albeit communist) must not necessarily obey all the rules and procedures of Marxist revolution, including the mandatory presence of an intellectual ideologue. That is also the point in his saying that "revolutions do not start in the head but from the stomach." (*Hangmen*, 12).

The structure of *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen*

The structure of the plays, *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen*, has relevance for the use Irobi makes of the foreshadowing and flashback techniques as means of evoking revolutionary tension. In both plays you can smell blood and violence. This tension, and the paradoxical posture of "destroying in order to build," runs unrestrained to the end where events are resolved, no less in violence. Expectedly, therefore, the heroic characters take the shape of people who have no respect for human life in their bid to accomplish their revolutionary objectives.

Thus, in *Hangmen*, we are first presented with the awful scene where life is about to be snuffed out of some seven young men by means of the guillotine, for their murder of one Chief Erekosima, in cold blood. The revolutionary disobedience of Yekini, the prison hangman, in refusing to hang the condemned young men reveals to us the events leading to their action and their being sentenced to death by hanging. It also sparks off a stream of flashback telling the story of the genesis of the Suicide Squad, a revolutionary gang of disinherited and dislocated young men, very well educated, and so determined to hit back at the society which has denied them the right to live life and live it well, even though the material and natural resources are in super-abundance. Therefore, the positive heroes, the Suicide Squad, led by Tarila Iganima alias R. I. P., cannot be anything but violent if they must change anything in a society where the leaders embezzle public funds and employ state security organs to silence the people. So, to R. I. P. and his colleagues, now is the time for chaos, for the destruction of anything and anybody that they come in contact with, at least to register their grievance to whoever cares to listen. They proclaim their violent vocation in this way:

We are the Suicide Squad [...] We have been terrorizing Izon State for the past two months [...] We have kept the Police on tender hooks. We can demolish any institution [...] We can murder anybody and get away with it. We have the license to kill. We are outlaws. We live dangerously. We can disrupt the Remembrance Day celebrations. Even the Independence Day celebrations. (*Hangmen*, 64).

However, it is their contact with Tamara, the priestess of a goddess of the same name (Tamara), that helps them find a revolutionary popular cause instead: the disruption of Chief Erekosima's coronation ceremony which he is executing with the people's

oil spillage compensation money from the federal government, and the recovery of whatever amount of the money he still has left. The significance of this initiative by Tamara is that, if successful, it represents a triumph of the people's will. Therefore, when the members of the Suicide Squad are arrested and sentenced to die by hanging, it is easy for Yekini, himself a peasant, to identify with that cause, that revolutionary conviction shown in their defiant remorselessness that Yekini could not mistake because it is unique and enduring.

Nwokedi opens with a village procession, which the playwright describes as "a violence of villagers" wielding "blood smeared machetes" and led by three Ekumeku cult members making "cannibalistic grimaces" at the audience (*Nwokedi*, 1). This prepares ample ground for the eventual entry of the hero, Nwokedi Jnr, as well as foreshadows his reign of blood that does not abate until the end of the play. At home, the Ekumeku eagerly and desperately awaits the return of Nwokedi from the National Youths Service Corps camp to perform his hereditary function of sacrificing the Ekpe festival ram in order to dispatch the old year, as it were, and usher in a new one. Meanwhile, at the NYSC camp, we see Nwokedi defying the military authorities and putting his life on the line to make a point of his revolutionary distaste for official corruption in the system. It is from Habiba, his fellow Corps member and silent admirer that we get an apt insight into the revolutionary stuff that the hero is made of. According to Habiba, in her glowing tribute to Nwokedi's unique radical qualities, "He was defying the old order. He had seen beyond the façade of anthems and pledges. He understood the foolery that inspires the annual independence circus show. That is why he defied the anthem. Nwokedi! The defiant one! Defiance! And that again is why I admire him." (*Nwokedi*, 48–49). Also, in another instance, she concludes that the popular spirit of this her ideal man is such that "there are very few men in this wide world who can forget about themselves and think always about their society..." (*Nwokedi*, 50).

At home again, his brother-in-law, Senator Arikpo, and Mrs. Nwokedi are praying that Nwokedi, Jnr. does not return before his father, otherwise Senator Arikpo's life may be in danger. For Arikpo came with the sad news that his wife, Ezimma, who is Nwokedi's beloved twin sister, and her three children, perished in a riot fire which also razed Arikpo's home in Ugep. But there are subtle indications that Arikpo has not told the whole truth about the incident. The suspicion that he has, in fact, used them, his wife and children, for ritual sacrifice to enhance his electoral chances in the elections just concluded, is strong. A flashback to Nwokedi's university days recalls his murder of a fellow cult member for the mere offence of his looting their "stockade" (*Nwokedi*, 40). When, therefore, on the spur of the festival drumming and chanting by the Ekumeku and the entire village, he slashes off the heads of his father and his brother-in-law, senator Arikpo, with one stroke of the machet each, we now know for sure that we have a rampaging revolutionary in our hands. He has no scruples using

them as sacrificial “animals” for the ekpe festival! The crowd’s song, “Nwokedi, Onye O huru Ogbuo” (“Nwokedi, whoever he sees, he kills”) clearly speaks of their hero’s blind thirst for blood. Nwokedi has already boasted of his strong belief in the revolutionary use of violence when he says, “A man must dare. He must go on daring until he dies” (*Nwokedi*, 29); and that, “it is blood that renews the earth” (*Nwokedi*, 45). Obidike, a leader of the Ekumeku, in a rather desperate search for an excuse for Nwokedi’s patricide, says, after all “senators and members of parliament are part of the rotten system we are purging away with the old year.” (*Nwokedi*, 30).

That distinctly points to the deep gulf that exists between the bourgeois and the proletariat or “the people” in any work of revolutionary aesthetics. Senator Arikpo, Nwokedi Snr, the NYSC commandant here represent the bourgeois or the oppressor class, while Nwokedi Jnr, the Ekumeku and the other villagers fall into the proletariat and the mass of the people. *Hangmen* has Chief Erekosima, Superintendent Daminagbo, the Rev. Father, Doctor, Chief Ogbunabali, etc as the bourgeois class, while Yekini, Tamara, Ibiaye, the other lower citizens of Izon State belong, with the Suicide Squad, to the oppressed class. Thus Senator Arikpo, in *Nwokedi*, can describe the new generation politicians and the Ekumeku, who represent the people, as “a disco-going, hemp-smoking, beer-guzzling generation [...] Touts loitering the streets like lost souls in search of financial salvation. Jobless vagabonds. An irresponsible generation. A brigade of unemployed devils.” (*Nwokedi*, 15). And for their future which, according to Obidike, the “full-fed beasts” in the persons of Arikpo and his political colleagues have “ravaged”, Arikpo can only impudently tell Nwokedi, “This is a cheque for N50,000.00. With it you can buy yourself a future.” (*Nwokedi*, 30, 80). This shows the paltry regard the bourgeois has for the life of the ordinary people in a class society.

Perhaps the origin and consequence of the unequal social relations, which Irobi dramatises here is made most vivid by Robert Nisbet’s (1982) critique of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s discourse *On the Origins of Inequality*. According to Nisbet, “inequality is the source of both social instability and cultural decay”; he restates Rousseau’s view that originally, “mankind lived in a condition of natural simplicity, one in which human relationships were unforced and uncoercive, in which morality sprang from what is ingrained in us by nature” but for “the discovery of the idea of private property” (Nisbet 1982: 38). Furthermore, he traces this inequality to the time “when a single man first laid claim to a portion of the earth declaring ‘This is mine’ and thus driving other men to like behaviour”. Since then he says, “the world has been filled with strife, envy, jealousy, conflict and exploitation [...] The malaise “from which our society today suffers.” (Nisbet 1982: 38).

We do observe here also what Fanon somewhat sees as typical of the African proletariat, the principle of making sure not to elevate any of their revolutionaries to the position of a hero of the libero status, to be worshipped, after the people have

struggled together to liberate themselves from their oppressors. "They show themselves to be jealous of the result of their action and take good care not to place their future, their destiny [...] in the hands of a living god" (Fanon 1963: 74). He is inevitably, dramatically subsumed in the collective image of the suicide Squad, which ultimately becomes a champion of the people's cause. Perhaps it becomes even clearer when we listen to the revolutionary echoes in the speeches of some major positive characters in the two plays, as in these excerpts, with special attention to their dominant use of the first person plural pronoun (we) and the pronominal adjective (our) to drive home this feeling of collective heroism. In *Hangmen*, the Suicide Squad illustrates in unison and makes a rhythmic boast of the procedure for its violent practices in the following manner:

We maim. We murder. We massacre [...] We are the Suicide Squad. We are the Kamikazee [...] we sway. We prowl! And pounce like apes. And roll like dogs and stand like snakes. We strike like mambas and leave on your flesh the marks of our fangs, the sign of our venom, the insignia of our grief. We leave on your skin, in the language of your blood, the anthem of our fury [...] And we do what we do because we have no future, because we know that no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how high we aspire, there is something waiting in the atmosphere to destroy us. (*Hangmen*, 65–66).

A. B. C Duruaku (2000: 157) sums up well Irobi's use of collective heroes in *Hangmen* when he says, "Irobi does not have one character battling to even things out; he presents a bunch of wild, educated young men." However, this "bunch of wild educated young men," when they find the right anchor for their revolutionary zeal in Tamara's challenging assignment to them, bring their actions into proper perspective and are able to chart a more reasonable revolutionary course that we can only hope will be carried onto its logical conclusion by such a character as Yekini, of course with the people behind him. In the same vein, in *Nwokedi*, Ozemena Nwakamma, addressing the Ekumeku, the people's revolutionary army, on the relevance of time to their cause, says:

Our time has come. And time is not the tick tock of your wrist watches. Neither is time the rising and setting of the sun [...] time is when young men flex the muscles of a new resolve and decide to change their fate [...] change the cause of history. Create a new order. That my generation is how time is made. And that, Mr. Nwakerendu Nwokedi, is how time trips the tyrants. (*Nwokedi*, ??).

And, on another occasion, Obidike asks: "Where is our destiny? My generation, what are we now but beggars groveling, fawning, scrounging with supple knees for the husks of life from the hand of full fed beasts who ravaged our future. We are beggars, and what is the beggar's license? Revolt!" (*Nwokedi*, 30). Therefore, Nwokedi Nwa

Nwokedi can then say ecstatically, "This is our moment. Our moment – when we must gather our strengths and energies into the demands of a revolution. We must cross the threshold now. All of us." (*Nwokedi*, 28).

To demonstrate the fact that his said Marxist revolutionary thought aligns with the people's life and aspirations, Irobi employs traditional symbols to make vital revolutionary statement. For instance, in this excerpt that echoes Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, with regard to the cyclical nature of life in the African traditional worldview, the Ufo-Bearer captures both the people's yearning in Nwokedi and the revolutionary essence of Nwokedi's role in that continuum: "Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi: you are a spirit. We made you a spirit. But at this hour as you cross that spill of blood, you will become a god. And like a god you will walk the earth. With your naked feet you will stomp the barren soil until it stirs with the freshness of a new life." (*Nwokedi*, 91). Further on, he urges this "ancient spirit" never to forget, so to say, that:

The seed is the seedling, the seedling is the plant, the plant is the tree, the tree is its branches, its branches are its leaves, its leaves bear the flowers, the flowers blossom into fruits, the fruits ripen and fall, they fall and rot into seeds, the seeds grow into seedling, and the seedling into trees. This is the cycle of our life. This is the journey of our soul; the road from life to death and from death to life again. (*Nwokedi*, 92).

The import of this is that, just like the soil cannot receive new seedling and, therefore, cannot guarantee good yield for the people unless the ashes and the iniquities of the old year, or the old season, are cleansed, by Nwokedi slaughtering the sacrificial ram (funeral ram) at the shrine of the "peasant god", "the god whose ram" he "has slaughtered this six seasons" (*Nwokedi*, 39, 38), the society cannot experience any new lease of life and the younger generation cannot have opportunities for creating a new order except the old generation of the Arikpo's and Nwokedi's is overthrown, and violently too, if necessary. To validate this position, Nwokedi himself says of his important traditional role, "I am the spirit within the mask [...] the hand that wields the glinting Knife [...] And slashes at the heels of an inclement season. I am time. Time that trips tyrants [...] mine is the hand that murders the old year" (*Nwokedi*, 39).

Also, in *Hangmen*, the character of Yekini further portrays Irobi's identification with the pathetic life of the peasants. The peasants are the vibrant labour force of the traditional society. And in the industrialised capitalist society, they are the most exploited. This usually fires their revolutionary zeal when they are sufficiently aware and are mobilised. Yekini tells the story of his humble but glorious life as a fisherman, before he was roguishly recruited by Superintendent Daminagbo to become a prison warder and hangman:

You see Doctor, I was once a fisherman. A fisherman living by the power of my paddle and the weight of my net [...] sometimes I paddled to the horizon where the sky merges with the sea and everything is blue. There I saw the navel of the

rainbow. There I saw the ceiling of heaven! There [...] I saw the face of God! And Doc, I was happy. A contented man. (*Hangmen*, 8).

However, this joy and contentment is short lived as he soon becomes constantly haunted by the ghost of those he officially “murdered” as a prison hangman. And yet, as he complains to the prison doctor, he is paid only “N198.00 a month. For a man with seven children and all of them in school.” (*Hangmen*, 14). Elsewhere, in a later scene, the Suicide Squad’s Dimeari, in speaking for himself, also speaks for the entire underprivileged youths of Izon State, when he says: “I have no job. Therefore, I have no money. Which means I cannot marry. And consequently cannot have children [...] I want to do something that will shock the world. Something that will make the world realize that I exist. And also make me feel I am somebody. Something challenging. Something violent!” (*Hangmen*, 51).

Here, though, one may wonder, as Duruaku does over the erratic and initial rudderless nature of the Suicide Squad’s actions, if Irobi, in *Hangmen*, does not simply want to present us with a “bunch of anarchists, who are thrown up by an unjust and uncaring society, in order to demonstrate the resurgence of atavistic violence and the evocation of the modern malaise of meaningless violence and the diminution of human life.” (Duruaku 2000: 159). But again Tamara saves us from this wondering, and saves the boys from ideological wandering, when she points out the way, challenging them in a way that is reminiscent of Bode Sowande’s play, *Flamingo*, to show their “humanness” their “compassion,” their “sympathy for the poor and how tough they really are by fighting on the side of the dispossessed” (*Hangmen*, 85). Pressing it further home, she proclaims, “here is a battle. A battle of the dispossessed versus the self-possessed. Between the haves and the have-nots. Between the landless and the landlords. Prove your mettle, prove to me you are the warriors you claim to be.” (*Hangmen*, 85). And in answer to the question, “Is there no vision to your rebellion?” (*Hangmen*, 64) which she posed to them, she provides them with the vision for a really popular revolutionary cause. We must note that Irobi thus, in fact, substitutes Dr. Ahitophel Ogbansiegbe, the self-indulgent Marxist, with Tamara, the peasant Marxist revolutionary visionary.

Socio-politically speaking, Irobi’s partisanship to the radical socialist school is so obvious in the plays as we have observed above. Even though his Marxist ideology is largely peripheral, we still see a strong Marxist bent on the diatribes and satirical criticisms he makes of the establishment and the bourgeois society, in both the plays and in the interviews available. For instance, Yekini’s dialectical exchange with Doctor in *Hangmen*, on the moral basis or lack of it for executing the condemned Suicide Squad, demonstrates government’s prejudice against the poor and, therefore, Irobi’s alliance with that class of society:

- Doctor: You are in the civil service. A servant of the government. Government will protect you. The government is your shield.
- Yekini: Which government? Which useless government are you talking about?
- Doctor: Yekini, don't talk like that about the government...
- Yekini: Why hasn't the government protected me from poverty all these years? Why hasn't the government, your useless government, increased my salary all these years? Why hasn't your government transferred me from here to the V. I. P section of the prison where nobody is ever hanged? Doc, don't tell me anything good about your useless government unless you want me to damage your life. (*Hangmen*, 16).

Nwokedi makes an even much more interesting reading in Marxist slogans. The Marxists generally believe in the transformation of society from a decadent capitalist form to a more equitable and communist one. And so when Nwokedi nwa Nwokedi, the people's hero, is not urging and mobilizing the people to get ready to "cross the threshold" (*Nwokedi*, 28), to attain that magic moment of revolutionary transformation, he is talking tough about revolutionary or violent change – as is the case in this poetic rendition with the Ekumeku:

- Nwokedi: There is a place in the sun.
- Ekumeku: For everyone with a gun.
- Nwokedi: At the outskirts of our vision.
- Ekumeku: Lies the carcass of our nation.
- Nwokedi: Every generation comes and goes.
- Ekumeku: But each must leave changes. (*Nwokedi*, 84).

As a non-orthodox Marxist writer, as I have indicated, and also in the mode of Brecht's epic theatre, Irobi experiments with some special alienation effects. Principally, he makes his exhortations for revolutionary change by means of confrontational dialectics and strong exercise of wit borne by his deft proverbs, allusions, songs and dirges, humour and symbolism. Shortly before Nwokedi beheads his father and Senator Arikpo, father and son are enmeshed in an eerie riddle about the "bull" and the "matador" during which Nwokedi prefigures his father's death through his (Nwokedi Jnr's) own hands in the process of the Ekpe festival rituals. This riddle with its premonition of the spilling of human blood runs from page 81 to page 86, where Mrs. Nwokedi forewarns her husband that she perceives the "smell of blood" and the "stench of graves" (*Nwokedi*, 86). But, in the manner of the male chauvinist in Okonkwo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and also reminiscent of the warning to Caesar by his wife, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, about the "Ides of March," the man dismisses her as a prophetess of doom who cannot dissuade him from attending the all important

Ekpe festival ritual ceremony, especially where his own son is the “matador” that will behead the “bull”. (Actually, in traditional Igbo society, men who pander to their wives’ views at such occasions are looked upon as weak.)

Argumentative dialogue manifests in the scene involving the youth corps members Fingsi, Habiba, Nwokedi and another unnamed corps member, as well as between Nwokedi and the Adjutant, in the second cycle of the play. In *Hangmen*, the philosophical disputations between Yekini and Doctor as well as between the Suicide Squad and Tamara represent not only an expose of the conflict in the play but also its vehicle of revolutionary persuasion. Mime and chant are more manifest, especially as seen in the Suicide Squad’s display of their operational mode, as earlier referred to. In *Nwokedi* there is a moving, macabre dance and chant prodigiously executed by Nwokedi and his father. It is to heighten revolutionary tension. Therefore, his bias for songs that bear violent messages and dirges that celebrate his bloody accomplishments in the plays is perfectly understandable. Often in African speech, anecdotes and idioms are used to add lyrical beauty to formal and serious discussion. For instance, the anecdotic and idiomatic exchange between Nwakerendu Nwokedi and his son in-law, Senator Arikpo, in which the former bemoans his bad political fate, enhances the foreboding atmosphere in the play, *Nwokedi*:

- Arikpo: I heard the hunter has been devoured by his hunting dogs.
Nwokedi Snr: Yes, in-law. It is always a man’s dog that bites him to death
Arikpo: How did it happen?
Nwokedi Snr: The rabbits set a trap for the tiger, crippled the tiger, and then came to collect their debts. (*Nwokedi*, 65).

And in telling Arikpo of the unfortunate part played by his own wife, Mrs. Nwokedi, Nwokedi Snr says, “In-law, I haven’t told you, have I? This is the female spider who cuts off the head of the male spider after they have made love [...] She weaves the web and hides behind. She lent the rabbit the iron trap with which it caught the tiger” (*Nwokedi*, 66).

Conclusion

Although Irobi’s religious leaning seems to vacillate between African traditionalism and Christianity, it is obvious that he is not an atheist, unlike many other socialist revolutionaries. For instance, in *Nwokedi*, Nwokedi posits: “When man waits and waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and acts. That is why he created us in his image” (*Nwokedi*, 64). Cynical as it may be, this ironically suggests his belief in the existence of God, at least. It is also repeated in *Hangmen*, this time though to parody religious fanaticism. It comes as the Suicide Squad’s R. I. P.’s response to Tamara’s appeal for the Suicide Squad to spare the life of Chief Erekosima, so that “God will judge him.” (*Hangmen*, 87).

Thus, with the far reaching influence of Frantz Fanon's version of the Marxist ideology which lays emphasis on the indispensability of the zealous peasants, lumpenproletariat, as the main revolutionary force in Africa (in the absence of a well-developed urban proletariat), a good measure of the Brechtian aesthetics and a masterful infusion of African traditional symbols, Irobi has given us some of the best plays of revolutionary aesthetics in Africa, especially in *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*. And it is in consideration of the immense value of the African tradition and culture as media for conveying the radical social message intended in the plays of Esiaba Irobi and the others of his school, that Ezenwa Ohaeto (1994: 208) has observed that "the cultural imperative has contributed towards making Nigeria (and African) drama noteworthy."

Notes

1. In summary the plot of *Hangmen Also Die* entails seven young and well-educated men who are about to die by hanging for the murder of a prominent chieftain of the oil rich Izon State. However, Yekini, the hangman, refuses to do his job for he shares their revolutionary cause. Chief Erekosima has misappropriated the federal government's oil spillage compensation money to the people; Tamara, a visionary priestess of the land goddess, organises the otherwise rudderless gang of jobless graduates to put their heads to more purposeful use; their first task, i.e. to disrupt Chief Erokosima's coronation ceremony and recover from him whatever remains of the money. In the process they kill him and are arrested by the police. As the suicide squad are to be hanged, ultimately, the task of actualizing their revolutionary motives lies in the hands of Yekini and his likes in the society, with Tamara as their light bearer.
2. In *Nwokedi* a vibrant young man, Nwokedi Nwa Nwokehi, who recently graduated from university and completed the mandatory National Youths Service Corps programme for Nigerian graduates, is filled with a burning desire to change the state of drift in his country. He finds his local age grade club, the Ekumeku, a rallying point and the annual community cleansing ritual, Ekpe festival, an ideal occasion to eliminate the people he sees as the main cause of society's problems, i.e. the older generation of politicians, exemplified by his father, Nwokedi Snr, and brother-in-law, Senator Ankpò. His revolutionary intents are deemed to have been realised, symbolically, when he substitutes the two politicians for the festival ram and uses their blood to cleanse the land of the sacrilege of the passed year, letting his generation, the Ekumeku age grade, take charge of things, henceforth.

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