

# MAGIC AND THE DRAMATURGY OF ESIABA IROBI: A STUDY OF THE FRONDED CIRCLE

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## Introduction

The playwright hardly avoids implicating his environment in his dramaturgy. Whether he seeks to promote, challenge, or inaugurate entirely new idea, he frequently uses a familiar world as his point of departure. This seems to be the reason Abanuka posits that:

Literature is undertaken in the general background of a people's culture to interpret the culture and emphasize some aspects of it which should be studied or promoted, or to satirize some other aspects in order to point them up for correction or abandonment. Works of literature whether they uphold the culture or are critical of it, subsequently become part of the culture in so far as, in some sense, they interpret the culture (*Myth and the African Universe* 27).

The Igbo playwright, Esiaba Irobi who died in a German hospital in 2010, is one writer whose plays typify the above proposition in a promising degree. His *Nwokedi* for example, explores the dangerous trends in Nigerian democratic practice, while *Hangmen Also Die* focuses on the problems of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta and its attendant youth restiveness. *The Cemetery Road* is profoundly encyclopedic in its exploration of colonial and mostly postcolonial Nigerian problems. *The Fronded Circle*, which this study examines, demonstrates that magic, which Robert .S. Ellwood describes as "the art of attaining objectives, acquiring knowledge or performing works of wonder through supernatural and non rational means" (Encarta Reference 2005), is alive and well in his Igbo society of Eastern Nigerian.

The Igbo interest in magic lies heavily on the production and usage of charms. In terms of objectives, magic is used ostensibly in Igbo society to achieve both positive and negative ends. It is deployed positively to secure good luck in business enterprises, cure unnatural ailments, and to ward off evil spirits and untoward destinies. In terms of its negative usage, magic is utilized to cause harm to people by rendering businesses useless and dysfunctional, poisoning and inducing mental derangement in normal people, as well as cutting marriages asunder or unworkable.

Masquerades use charms to determine strength and to entertain spectators through the performance of extraordinary feats, which puncture natural laws and bewilder normal sensibilities. According to Ossie Enekwe:

Masking is usually conceived as an ordeal, a challenge to others. The man in the mask seems to be calling attention to himself, causing others to find out whether he has the wherewithal to perform a mask (*Igbo Masks ...* 78).

This wherewithal of demonstrating the ability of masquerades in this regard, is through enormous exhibition of magical challenges and attacks. In addition to the fact that charms help the masquerades to perform awe-inspiring feats, which violate natural laws and, which as Gassner says, free them "from the temporality of the flux of realistic theatre" (*Form and idea in Modern Theatre* 168), Nnabuenyi Ugonna stresses that the masquerade is a forum for the spectator to indulge his primordial cravings for conflict and excursions into the land of romance denied them by everyday life" (*Mmonwu ...* 158). Whenever masquerades especially from different areas meet in a ceremony, there is always an extensive and unrestrained display of magical challenges, in order to determine their strength, thrill the spectators, and satisfy their yearning for conflictual engagements. This paper attempts to explain the uses and implications of magic and supernatural power in *The Fronded Circle*.

### Synopsis

In *The Fronded Circle*, magic is oriented towards the extension of earthly life. In the play, Onwutuebe prepares a protective charm that enables him to extend his life on earth. With the charm, which he buried in an earthenware pot in his yam barn, he is able to swap the life of his male children seven times that death knocked at his door. Each of the male children disappears whenever their father is sick and calls them to his sick bed with some weird words. However, with the death of his last son, Ndubuisi, one of his relations, Onwudinulo in sympathy with Nwannediya, whom Onwutuebe has mysteriously killed her five sons, connived with Diegwu and secretly they dug up and destroyed the charm. With no other son to swap his life with, death surfaces and reduces him to a living dead, by paralyzing him from the waist downwards. The inability of Ikenga the native doctor to locate and destroy the pot of charm, which he prepared, causes the already decomposing Onwutuebe to be thrown into the state of continuous dying and waking up. In order to protect the family name from such a shame, Onwudinulo decides to use spell to compel the American trained musicologist and Onwutuebe's younger brother, Gilbert Afonne, whom he bears much hatred, to step into a ritual that makes him to confess Onwutuebe's crimes on his behalf, thereby ending his own life and that of Onwutuebe simultaneously.

### The Essence of Life

*The Fronded Circle* is awash with ideas. It 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.

The sweet value of earthly life beclouds Onwutuebe to the point of seeking to extend his life on earth by means of magic. In phase one of the play termed, "What a Beautiful Coffin! the fear of death is given enough weight in the discussion between Okwu and Uka, the apprentices of Ikenga, the witch doctor. Uka sees the idea of their master asking them to go and unearth a pot of charm buried years before he was born, as an errand of death, and if he has a choice, he will not execute such an errand. His view is emphatic.

I don't want to die.

I am my mother's only son (p.4)

The fear of death equally causes the young man to abhor the sight of coffin and to regard Okwu's joke that the coffin in the carpenter's workshop is exactly his measurement, as expensive and an unacceptable death wish.

However, the subsequent hiding of the young men inside the coffins to avert the wrath of their approaching master is symbolic. It indicates that in the final analysis, the end of the race of man on earth is death. The text suggests that Onwutuebe's unwillingness to die and his resolve to clench his "tightened fist" against death is hinged on his love for the necessities of life. When Pastor Akwarandu seeks to bind him with the blood of Jesus so that he can die, Onwutuebe tells him:

How can I leave my land, my farms, wives and my daughters... (p.42)

Onwutuebe will want to remain perpetually like "a new born baby" in order not to let the reigns of life hang loose like tendril of a famished yam seed" (p.42). His perception of the essence of life as lying in living forces him to tell Nwannediya, his wife:

I will sacrifice everything

I have to live (p.42)

The above underscores Onwutuebe's moral depravity and his desperate quest to shortchange death. The pleasure of life constrains him like Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine the great, to seek to confront death even by physical means. With his double-barreled gun and a load of cartridges, he seeks to grip death, twists its torturing hands and finally bursts its bowel. His very first statement in the play exemplifies this:

Onwu leeeee...

Death is the giant spider weaving a web across my window.

Death wants to trap my life

Like a mere butterfly? Death do you know

I am a carrion fly that drags the spider's web down with its weight? (p.28).

One of the irrationalities of life as shown in Onwutuebe's personality is the attempt at self – perpetuity on earth. His conception of his power over life and death by means of magic, does not give him the chance to recognize his limitation as man, as well as to understand the cycle of life. His perception of himself as a defiant one

causes him to suffer “elephantiasis of the ego” (*Our Daily Manna* 114) and this pitches him against the Igbo world view on the essence of life, which Nwannediya captures as follows:

That a man should let his seeds sprout after him  
To live after him so that the world can go on (p.43).

According to Damian Opata, “The ultimate in Igbo person’s prayer is that his ‘present’ be good but that his ‘back’ be better. (*Essays on Igbo World View* 22). It is pertinent to note here that “the ‘back’ being better reflects what the person wishes his family to be when he is dead and gone” (23). Most Igbo societies are patriarchal and as such, the concern for succession and inheritance forces the Igbo man to place high premium on male children. As Opata puts it, “No person wants his name to go into extinction and the surest way to preserve name in traditional society was for the person to have male children who would continue the family name and the sense of tradition” (16). This is why in phase one of the play, Uka as the only son of his mother, would not want to gamble with his life. He knows that his family line will close if he dies in the process of trying to unearth the potent medicine, without producing a male child to succeed him. Onwutuebe’s love of life and pleasure does not allow him to recognize this and to project into the future. But the need and value of male children become apparent to him in his dying moment. When through expanded consciousness he comes to grips with death’s invincibility in his final stage of existence, he requests Nwannediya in connection to his sons to:

tell them to come and help their father fight this war. Tell them that there are too many spirits in the graveyard, some armed with spears, some with axes, and others with cutlasses (p.43).

The above suggests that in addition to ensuring that the family name does not go into extinction, male children are needed for the purposes of warding off external aggression. The necessity of having a male child to keep the family of Onwutuebe going, leads to his daughter Kelechi giving birth to a baby boy immediately Onwutuebe dies. Onwutuebe’s death marks the end of a life cycle, while the birth of the new baby boy signifies the commencement of another cycle.

### **The Incomprehensibility of the World**

We perceive the incomprehensibility of the world written in capital letters, when the happenings in the play are looked at from the perspective of Nwannediya, Onwutuebe’s wife. 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. Her case reminds us of the suffering of the innocent or the question of blind fate which no adequate explanation of its cause has been given by any thinker. She is addressed as the mother of men in the text, but her thought is constantly “blurred by the picture of graves” (p.13) because the five able-bodied men who sucked her breasts are caused by the their own father to disappear

from earth like “eggs in the mouth of a serpent” or “fish” in the beaks of a kingfisher” (p.13). This woman does not understand why:  
a deaf world blinds its eyes and watch a greedy python  
uncoils and swallows the eggs of a mother hen,  
swallows her golden eggs in turn,  
swallows the eggs shell and all (p.15).

The fact that all the male children of this woman of sorrow did not die as a result of their confronting the precarious nature of earthly life but in the hands of their own father, makes their death most incredible and reveals the absurdity of human existence. Nwannediya tells us that her sons:

Went to war and returned.

The war did not eat them.

They traveled and returned ...

The road did not swallow them...

They climbed palm trees and came down.

Their bones were not broken (p.13).

If the above unpredictable conditions of life that make human existence to be precarious, spared her sons, the woman could not comprehend why it was the father of her sons that would make her childless.

Onwutuebe's installmental death is, however, an adequate retribution for living a life that is bereft of moral certitude, wanting to live and enjoy the pleasures of life, which he denies others consciously. His selfishness does not allow him to seek for the good of others, the good he desires for himself but, which an unrestrained passion for life does not permit him to accord others. His tortuous death points to the danger inherent in unconscionable use of supernatural power and to the fact that the law of karma is unavoidable.

Apart from the stunning experience of having her sons killed by her own husband, Nwannediya is required by tradition to cater for Onwutuebe in his loathsome state of neither dying nor living. She is worn out by frequent buying and returning of coffins, and of explaining to the bewildering public the state of affairs in her family. She is further tortured by Onwutuebe's unwillingness to die, which is purported to be the factor that keeps her only daughter Kelechi in a condition of perpetual labour. Nwannediya tells Gilbert:

That those who know say that unless Onwutuebe your elder brother dies, Kelechi can not give birth to a child... (p.21).

Gilbert's intellectual accomplishment does not allow him to accept the possibility of the claim, but to regard it as a tall tale by people burdened by heavy baggage of primitivism. His view in this matter reminds one of the empiricists' erroneous notion that anything which cannot be explained by reason or science is simply a fiction, having nothing to do with plausibility. Thus for the young

musicologist, the only explanation for Kelechi's protracted labour, is her refusal to take the medicine prescribed by the doctor. He speaks plainly to Nwannediya:

I have enough problem with her.

She refused to take any medicine (p.22).

For Gilbert, the idea of linking the young woman's problem to her father's bewitching activities is a hare-brained superstition, an unacceptable arrant nonsense. His inclination to scientific thinking makes him sound so egoistic like someone who knows it all; but as Henry Ford tells his skeptics when he eventually realized the mass production of his Ford cars hitherto deemed impossible, "I cannot discover that anyone knows enough about anything on this earth definitely to say what is and what is not possible" (121). This is a way of saying, in other words, that reason is not comprehensive enough a means of explaining the events of life. Gilbert's coming to terms with primitive rituals at the end of the play, in spite of his earlier condemnation, demonstrates the partiality of the world of reason. When Onwudinulo wants to revenge his perceived hatred by Gilbert and his wife, Gwendolyn, by trying to get Gilbert involved in a ritual dance that he might not survive, in order to cause Onwutuebe to die finally, the young musicologist bluffs:

I am sorry, I can't help you.

I am not interested in primitive rituals (p.49).

Though his scientific approach to issues appears to make him sound reasonable, he nevertheless falls into the traps set for him by Onwudinulo and Diegwu, who use the pretext of teaching him traditional dance to get hold of him, and teach him "what spirits do with human skulls" (p.56). This happens in spite of his premonition and that of his black American wife. Firmly secured in their grips, Gilbert becomes warped of reason as they lead him deeper and deeper into the diabolical ritual, first through chanting:

Diegwu: You are the ram whose blood will soften the tautness of this Ése drum. Is it not so?

Gilbert: It is so (p.64)

Onwudinulo: When a man wanders away from his roots, he becomes a ghost. The blind bat that flies into a witch's pot has sealed its fate. The tortoise carries a world of wisdom in its shell, yet it does not know how to climb a tree. Afonnc Onwutuebe, the crab may wade the mighty ocean but it ends in the soup pot of a woman.

Is it not so?

Gilbert: It is so (p.65)

By concurring to their incantations, Gilbert unwittingly seals his fate and this facilitates the smooth movement of the ritual processes. The spitting of gin in his eyes and the subsequent removal of his shirt without him complaining or knowing that he is no longer in a dance practice, indicates that we are now in the presence of a primitive Gilbert, not the intellectual we know all along. In fact, at this moment, his

behaviour is no more dictated by rational thinking but is ultimately controlled by the whims and caprices of magic. He is, therefore, used in the idiom of the play, to confirm the potency of magic and supernatural influences even in a scientific age, to demonstrate that scientific thinking may never undermine the power of magic, and that both will continue to exist side by side. The play is palpable evidence that existence is not structured by reason alone.

## CONCLUSION

The play, *The Fronded Circle*, revolves around a pertinent question posed by Onwudinulo to Diegwu in the play: Is there any other end to the race of life? (p.37). The play seeks to address this question from the context of magic. It acknowledges the hypnotizing and diabolical effects of black magic, its potent power; but it also highlights its limitation as a product of human imagination and action. The text demonstrates that in spite of the great possibilities of magic, man is incapable of attaining the objective of self-perpetuity on earth by its means. Although Onwutuebe succeeds in using his protective charm to swap his life with those of his male children seven times, death shows itself to be invincible by thrusting him into a loathsome state before finally eclipsing him notwithstanding his struggle and unwillingness of heart. Onwutuebe's demise indicates that life on earth is a journey that must end someday in death. It shows that death is an inevitable end of the race of life; the only road on earth, which every one must pass through, no matter how strong and powerful, and irrespective of man's depth or proficiency in magic. This impels Onwudinulo to refer to it in the text as:

a starving python looking in the coop.

It devours the aged cock, it devours the withered hen.

It eats the little twittering chick, it swallows whole the bristle egg (p.38).

Nwannediya's unmerited pains and agonies in the play, her bearing of the burden of her husband's crimes irrespective of her uprightness, indicate that the world is incomprehensible, and that injustice is part of the make-up of earthly life; while the eventual partaking and subsequent death of Gilbert in a primitive ritual, which he scorns at initially, shows up the world of reason as a partial reality.

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