

SEMIOTICS OF THE MASK IN THE DRAMA OF ESIABA IROBI

BY

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research, and that no part of it has been represented elsewhere with all references duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

The mask in African cultural tradition is a significant element of ritual and festival performances, which ethnographic, political and religious functions transcend to the modern stage. Using the drama of the Nigerian, Esiaba Irobi, my study explores the Igbo mask and masking tradition as a heuristic model for African performance. In this study, I demonstrate that the African masking tradition constitutes an embodiment of deictic and iconographic realities that are syncretised to modern post-colonial drama. My study examines the semiotic processes through which Irobi's postcolonial dramas absorb the cultural codes and symbols inherent in the Igbo mask tradition. While providing an alternative paradigm to the usual recourse to western aesthetic and theoretical models, this study also foregrounds Irobi's drama, significantly a representative of the third-generation of Nigerian writing, as distinctive in its own right. Consequently, the study interrogates previous studies which investigate Irobi's drama solely from the prism of Soyinka's influence. My study concludes that through the appropriation of Igbo mask idiom, Irobi's drama interrogates rather than acquiesce with Soyinka's tragic vision. Analysing the three selected plays; *Nwokedi*, *The Other side of the Mask* and *Cemetery Road*, I argue that Irobi's drama represents demonstrable recuperation of an endangered masquerade tradition in a postcolonial milieu.

DEDICATION

To my elder brother:

AUGUSTINE UCHECHUKWUKA AJUMEZE

Who died before the finish-line of this study

Who faded homeward with the thick swirl of smokes from a reckless hemp!

But who left behind a loud raucous echo of a generation's laughter

Memory is a bitter, tortuous road to travel.

Now you have become my ancestor. *Ko me sia!*



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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The motivation to pursue this research was stimulated by the idea proposed by the Nigerian structuralist, Sunday Anozie, on the possibility of the poetics of the mask (1981:117). Arguing that all fields of social and cultural life of a people have implicit theoretical model developed to elaborate their worldviews, Anozie identified the mask as constitutive of one such model. Thus, after analyzing the aesthetic potential and properties of African masks, Anozie suggests that:

another important study and classification of the African masks has yet to be undertaken, namely, that which would envisage the mask as an iconographic compendium or as a constitutive semiotic system....By referring to the mask as an icon, we mean therefore that the tradition, specially religious, which produced the mask is also replete with hieroglyphic symbols... (115-117)

The argument that every culture has an underlying potential to develop a theoretical model is not exclusive to Anozie. Leela Ghandi (1998) uses the term “theoretical self-sufficiency” to reference the tendency of developing cultures to produce theories from within their cultural inheritance. In the growing discourse of imperial containment, it is an argument that recognizes and acknowledges the equality of every human culture. Irobi adds a performative perspective to this view:

theory exists in all cultures of the world in the culture’s own language. Each culture’s theoretical constructs can best be appreciated by first studying the cultures own languages and metalanguages and by placing them side by side with the literary or performative art form or genre... (2008:59)

It is therefore against the backdrop of this assumption that African indigenous performance cultures may be explored for enabling theoretical paradigms. Ascribing the penchant for western theoretical models in African performance discourse to the influence of colonial education, Awo Asiedu writes that:

often, Africans look to the west for examples and models which they may apply to their own contexts and rarely do we look within our own cultures for models which we also might contribute to other cultures. The need to theorise our own experience and clearly articulate these and document them in permanent ways for future generations is evident. (2006:368).

This view also presupposes that African cultural traditions are not only theoretically self-sufficient, but also vastly endowed with rich cultural resources. Arguing that African culture “is prodigiously rich in rituals of all kinds (1997:18), Ousmane Diakhate contends that its theatre “is very ancient, its origins lost in prehistory” (17). The heuristic potential of African cultural tradition is therefore prodigious. Esiaba Irobi puts it in a comparative context when he asks “Are we suggesting that African communities whose theatrical creations equal the Greeks in their mythopoeic complexity and polysemic sophistication are incapable of theorizing their own performances?” (55) My thesis is informed by the need to explore the recesses of African cultural traditions for an enabling theoretical paradigm.

If my thesis advocates exploration of African cultural tradition for a home-grown model, then the semiotic approach, which purportedly originated from the structuralist theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, could be argued to represent a western theoretical model. Then, it is important to clarify that what is African is no longer a purist state of being insulated from external influences. Ousmane Diakhate reinforces this view when he argues that Africa and its cultural tradition is a product of accretion that continually assimilates external adjuncts (17).

Very importantly, however, my adoption of semiotics is more methodological than theoretical. In Daniel Lafferier's words "semiotics studies a wide variety of things, but only insofar as they enter into a relationship of standing for something else" (1979:434). The primacy of my thesis, therefore, is the African mask tradition. I have adopted semiotics as the basic process of decoding the historical and religious implications of African mask as appropriated in the drama of Esiaba Irobi. Following Daniel Lafferier, I have sought to locate the far-reaching implications of what the mask stands for in Irobi's drama.

Furthermore, Sunday Anozie is not the only study to identify African masks as an aesthetic vocabulary. Emerging discourses on the mask tradition have begun to appraise its paradigmatic potential in the appreciation of African theatre and performance. Esiaba Irobi refers to the mask as "the pivotal and prismatic metalanguage" of indigenous African performance (2005:223). Osita Okagbua emphasizes this view, and more aptly I think, when he states that "Igbo masking is very rich and diverse and so can be reliably used as a heuristic model for meaningful discourse on this unique African performance style and form" (1997:89). Anozie's novelty, however, is in setting the pace for the expanding body of discourse which perceives the African mask as possessing inherent iconographic and semiotic possibilities. However, most of these works remain trapped within the religious and traditional universe in which the mask originates. Consequently, the mask tradition is caught in the argument which tenor of purpose is the validation of its theatrical qualities. The advantage, though, is enormous production of fundamental semiotic resources. While reinforcing these semiotic resources, my thesis appraises the processes through which these attributes are filtered as they cross over to the inevitable framework of the modern drama. My approach to this semiotic process, therefore, is how the mask, extracted from its religious and ritual background, is applied to modern drama.

Anozie's structural approach remains fundamentally problematic. Although Anozie admitted that African mask is capable of accommodating synchronic and diachronic inquiry (116), the conclusions of structuralism are often in disregard of historical and social concerns. Anthony Appiah's (1981) review of Sunday Anozie's deployment of structural models to African literary texts reinforces this shortcoming. Stating that the "failure is not, fundamentally, Anozie's fault", Appiah nonetheless ascribes the failure to Anozie's association with structuralist approach. According to Appiah the "terrible failings that lie scattered on the surface of his text lie often, I believe, at the heart of the project with which he wishes to be allied" (165). In "The problem of Literary Structuralism" Van Laere has argued that structuralism belongs to the large number of emerging modes of criticism that lie outside the discipline of literature (1970:61). This view may also have been supported by Abiola Irele's assertion that the linguistic procedure of structuralism is prone to mere simplification of textual investigation and hence inadequate (1986:13). Although semiotics originated from linguistic science, its evolution into inter-disciplinary discourses has expanded the scope of its methodological application to other areas of studies in the humanities.

Thus, though stimulated by Anozie's supposition, my approach is more diachronic than synchronic, and more historical than structural. Although the mask has its equivalents in western theatre, its prevalence in indigenous African performance projects it as a hegemonic sign of African culture and history. In most parts of African social history, mask practices remain primarily covert. This is because the masking practice belongs collectively to cult and secret societies with sacred responsibilities. In Igbo cosmology, the mask expresses the Igbo desire to mediate and commune with the tripartite worlds of the living, the unborn and dead. The mask is

indeed a "highly complex system of signs"¹ as most masks have carved images depicting stories, myth, and other forms of narratives. This is what Sunday Anozie referred to above as "hieroglyphic symbols". However, masks are characterised beyond the snapshot of images etched on its surface. For, in mediating the worlds of the Igbo Universe, the masks characteristically negotiate myth, history, metalanguages and other cultural realities. While not discounting the significance of the "hieroglyphic symbols", my study is more interested in examining the cultural realities of the mask tradition and its mode of appropriation into the modern post-colonial drama.

1:2 OBJECTIVES:

The significant point has been made several times that masks in African tradition epitomise power (Tonkin, 1979; Mark, 1988; Diakparomre; 2010), paradoxes (Tonkin,1979; de Jong, 1988; Bantor, 2002), magic (Jedrej,1991) and other metaphysical attributes. Most of these attributes necessitate discourses which reinforce the mask as demonstrative of iconographic and symbolic potentials (Anozie, 1981; Irobi, 2005). The objectives in this project may therefore be outlined as follows.

1. To appraise the diverse religious and metaphysical attributes of the mask in the Igbo tradition and how these attributes negotiate the history and social reality of the Igbo people which, in turn, shape the Igbo arts and theatre culture.

¹ Laferriere, Daniel. "Making Room for Semiotics" (Academe, November, (1979).I drew significant influence from Laferreira's essay particularly its definition of semiotics which reduces the notion to what signs "stand for or represent than with what they are in themselves"

2. To show how Esiaba Irobi filtered these attributes of the mask idiom into his modern post-colonial drama.
3. To highlight the distinctive contribution of Esiaba Irobi to African theatre through the exploration of the mask motif.

1:3 RESEARCH QUESTION:

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives of this research, the following questions were investigated.

1. What are the symbolic, deictic and iconographic properties of African and Igbo masking traditions?
2. How has Esiaba Irobi used and filtered these semiotic properties into his drama?
3. What distinctive contribution has Esiaba Irobi made to African drama and theatre through the exploration of the resources of the Igbo masquerade tradition?

1:4 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Before and after his death of cancer on the 29th of April, 2010, Esiaba Irobi's works attracted a number of critical studies. However, most of these studies tended to interpret Irobi's works through the prism of Soyinka's influence. Exploring Irobi's adaptation of the Igbo masking tradition and idiom into his drama, this study seeks to reread and reassess Irobi's works as possessing distinct dramatic and aesthetic vision. In this study, I argue that in the instances of perceptible intertextual references to Soyinka and other sources of influence, Irobi engages in

dialogue that interrogates rather than acquiesce with these sources. Thus, the greater significance of this study is the begging need for continued scholarly attention to the works of the third-generation Nigerian writers to which Irobi belongs, and whose works have either not been given enough critical attention or are misread from what has been termed the anxiety of influence.

1: 5 METHODOLOGY:

Esiaba Irobi wrote and produced well over a dozen plays. This study focuses on three of his plays; namely, *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of The Mask* and *Cemetery Road*. I analysed the three plays through interpretation of the semiotic properties of the mask appropriated in the plays' dramatic and theatrical compositions. These semiotic properties are mostly embodied in the myth, history and the ontology of the Igbo world-view against which the plays are contextualized. I investigated these myths, histories and worldviews as providing enabling insights into the mask idiom.

I have also relied on ethnographic and anthropological revelations of the mask tradition against which Irobi's drama is exercised. Where the iconographic properties are adapted from sources outside of the Igbo provenance, I have extrapolated the source culture with an insight into a rather discursive and intertextual investigation. The methodology of my study is analysis of the selected plays.

The plays selected represent Irobi's dramatic career at the cross-roads of history. *Nwokedi* (1991) in his early career, *The Other Side of The mask* (1999) in his midlife while *Cemetery Road*

(2009) was published the year before his death. The implication is the persistence of a sustained fascination with the masquerade culture.

I have also used diagrams to illustrate my arguments. This approach graphically clarifies some technical and theoretical assumptions thereby making it easily comprehensible. I have used a total of three graphic illustrations.

My trip to Imo State University, Owerri, to see the production of *Nwokedi* by the Theatre Department of the University proved very significant. The performance provides an opportunity for the analysis of the mask motif in performance. Hence historical and textual propositions of the significance of the knife in Igbo masquerade theatre, for instance, are evidenced by the *mis-en-scene* of the performance. Photographs of the production are included in the study to further illustrate related views and arguments.

This study is divided into five chapters: chapter one contains the introduction, justification, research questions, objectives and methodology of the study; while chapter two is the review of related literature which traces the evolution of semiotics from structuralism to post-semiotics as backdrop to my study. Chapter three and four are made up of comprehensive analysis of the selected plays with focus on iconographic and symbolic properties of the mask. The concluding chapter five reinforces the need for the study of the Igbo mask tradition as revealing Irobi's desire to recuperate an endangered cultural tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 INTRODUCTION

For convenience, I have subdivided the literature review into three distinct sections, namely; “Semiotics of the Mask”, “The mask as Theoretical paradigm” and “Esiaba Irobi and the emergent generation of Nigerian writers”. While the first section will explore existing works on the relationship between African mask and semiotics-especially highlighting the alternative nature of what is now referred to as post-Saussurean semiotics; the second section shall justify the mask as constitutive of socio-cultural, spiritual and political potential in the abiding appreciation of African performance. The last section shall put the research in perspective and provide a distinct focus for the critically neglected third-generation of Nigerian writers to which Irobi belongs.

2.2 SEMIOTICS OF THE MASK

A significant body of works linking Semiotics and African mask already exists (Anozie, 1981; Mark, 1988; Irobi, 2005; Diakporomre, 2010). Most of these studies embody historical and ethnographic interpretations to examine the symbolic and iconographic properties of the mask. They are thus not circumscribed by the signifier-signified binary structure characteristic of Ferdinand de Saussure’s model of semiotics. Rather, these studies follow a trend in opposition to structural semiotics and have come to be classified as social semiotics (Rochberg-Halton,1982; Hodge and Kress, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

In the *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure conceives of language as a system of signs which has to be studied synchronically (systematically) rather than diachronically (historically). This notion has since assumed seminal dimension as the defining factor for semiotic studies. In the book *Language of The Stage* (1993), Patrice Pavis appraises the Saussurean occlusion of history from the scope of semiotic discourse:

The advent of structuralism has confirmed the tendency to dismiss research into the origins and historical developments of theatrical forms, in order to concentrate on the internal and synchronic functioning of the system of the performance. Biographical anecdotes about authors...and the isolated historical facts yielded by the text have all definitely been excluded from the semiological method. (1993:26)

This exclusion stimulated a lot of discontent against Saussure's structuralist foundation of semiotics (Barthes, 1974; Pavis, 1993). Studies after Saussure tend to reflect the need to accommodate both synchronic and historical perspectives in semiotic investigations. The history of post-Saussure's semiology is very easily traced to Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1974). Arguing against Saussure's signifier-signified structure, Barthes states that "to interpret a text is not to give it...meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it...this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified" (5). Over sixty years after Saussure, Pavis' revelation of the tendency to return structural linguistics to history (26) may have stimulated Robert Hodge and Gunter Kess's *Social Semiotics* (1988). Interrogating the structuralist foundation of Saussure's semiotics, Hodge and Kess highlight the importance of social and historical contexts in the production of meaning. According to Hodge and Kess, structuralist semiotics:

emphasizes structures and codes, at the expense of functions and social uses of semiotic systems, the complex interrelations of

semiotic systems in social practice, all of the factors which provide their motivation, their origins and destinations, their form and substance. It stresses system and product rather than speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity as connected and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts. It attributes power to meaning, instead of meaning to power. It dissolves boundaries within the field of semiotics, but tacitly accepts an impenetrable wall cutting off semiosis from society, and semiotics from social and political thought. (Hodge and Kress 1988:1-2)

Social Semiotics therefore represents a major paradigm shift from structuralism. John Stewart (1995) introduced the term *post-semiotics* to express his discontent with structuralist semiotics which, in his view, is crippled by the challenges of plausibility, coherence and applicability (1995: xii). Arguing that “Saussure inherited a discipline without principles (2001: 71), Niall Lucy’s *Beyond Semiotics: Text, Culture, and Technology* (2001) contends that “something has been lost to semiotics that semiotics exists today as something less than it might have been” (25). This sense of loss resonates in Pavice’s assertion that it “would, however, be to the detriment of theatrical semiology to deprive it of historical apparatus, even at the level of synchronical analysis of performance” (26). There are, however, other studies which have contributed in different ways to making semiotics a more socially inclusive field of theatre investigation. These include: *The semiotics of Theatre and drama* (Keir Elam, 1982), *Theatre as a Sign-system* (Aston and Savona, 1991) and, recently, *The Semiotics of Beckett’s Theatre* (Khaled Besbes, 2007). Studies within this conviction now constitute what is referred to as rethinking or rehabilitation of received notions of theory (Khaled Besbes, 2011). Although these studies are concerned with the project of expanding the scope of semiotics, they are unable to disconnect with the linguistic foundation of semiotics. The studies seem mostly haunted by the ghost of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce even as they try to react against the received notions of these

founding fathers. However, it is significant to note that the studies represent the emergence of discourses that accommodate both systematic and historical perspectives of semiotics.

The above overview is an important background to the trend of studies on African mask and semiotics. Although studies on the symbols and iconography of African mask do not directly engage the received notions of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural semiotics, they share ethnographic and historical approach with social semiotics. It is interesting to note that these historical, anthropological, and iconographic discourses on African mask started emerging at the same time as *social semiotics* and *post-semiotics*. Peter Mark's study of "Ejumba: The Iconography of the Diola Initiation Mask" (1988) is very significant in this regard. While informing that meaning in African masks consists mostly of iconographic analysis and contextual interpretation of symbolic form, Peter Mark's roadmap to the understanding of the iconography of African mask is based mainly on the diachronic elements of African traditional culture and ritual:

The social function of the masks and their symbolic meaning reveal themselves only if the art historian understands the Diolas' ritual world. This world includes important metaphysical concepts and linguistic metaphors that are part of peoples' lives in the Lower Casamance. Again, one has to know the cultural context. Diola culture, which was nonliterate, is recorded in spoken language, in song, and in ritual. (1988: 139)

Abel Mac Diakparomre's study of symbolism in Urhobo masks and mask performances interrogates the range of symbolism readable from Urhobo mask tradition. Like Peter Mark, Diakparomre privileges the cultural tradition of Urhobo nation as providing the enabling context to the understanding of symbolism of the mask. In Diakparomre's view, these codes and symbols

are embedded in the history and topography of Urhoboland. Thus, after a detail study of the cosmology of Urhobo people in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, Diapkaromre concludes that:

The symbolism in Urhobo masking events are given expression in the mask form, in songs rendered during the various activities leading up to, and during the public displays, in the theatrical performances, and in the structure of the performance arena. An examination of all these facets of the masking events make possible a better understanding of the verbal and non-verbal statements about the Urhobo world-view which are encoded in the performance events. (2010:469)

These studies have largely explored African mask mostly from the perspective of visual and plastic arts. However, there is a difference between the mask and the masquerade. This is why Dennis Duerden states that the mask is “an object that has been torn away from its context in the masquerade. ‘The mask’ was that part of the masquerade costume that covered the face. Its appearance should be considered in relation to the whole costume.” (2000:29). Thus the difference between the mask and masquerade is the context of performance. Therefore, Diapkaromre’s assertion that meaning resides in the abstract rather than literal properties of iconic representations of the mask and masquerade (469) falls short of recognition of the fundamental difference between mask and masking. This accounts for studies that specifically explore the dynamics of mask and masking as distinct modes of negotiating meaning and symbolic interpretations (Blier, 1993; Jong, 1993). Ferdinand de Jong has argued extensively that “in order to understand the meaning of masks in their original cultural context it is essential to analyse mask performances, not masks as objects.”(49). This view which sees the performance medium as key to the understanding of the mask codes and ritual symbols is also at the heart of Simon Ottenberg’s (1973) study of Afrikpo masquerade theatre in the South-East of Nigeria. Contending that, *inter alia*, Afikpo masquerade is “a congruence of cultural, social, and

psychological symbols or metaphors” (33), Ottenberg suggests that meaning is only perceptible through a systematic observation of the participating audience. The basic difference, therefore, is that of the mask as a static object, cut off from the performance context of the masquerade.

Regardless of the differences, African mask as visual culture and masquerade have a common denominator as aesthetic expressions of African thought and mind. In the wake of the colonial experience, both, too, have been subjected to the same history of reductive western images and denigration (Irobi, 2009). This is perhaps one of the reasons studies on African masquerade have been largely historical. The knowledge systems of African masquerades are deeply rooted in the diachronic universe of African history and religious rituals. This is not to indicate that African masks and masquerades are not susceptible to both modes of investigation. Frank Uche Mowah has indicated that “meaning and significance of an African [literary] text can be reached not only by synchronic analysis but also through a thorough examination of historical and cultural contingencies” (1997: 23). However, it could be argued that the predominance of history in African cultural traditions may have circumscribed African texts by a largely diachronic interpretation. As appropriate as Mowah’s assertion may seem, the immediacy of history compels a more demanding perspective.

African masquerade (as a mode of performance) also shares the same function with the mask (as plastic and visual art). In Irobi’s view, both demonstrate the same “artistic logic of seeing art as an expiatory process” (2009: 269). Studies of the mask in movement explore the mask as a distinct African performance idiom. These studies demonstrate the tendency to assert the otherness of African performance. Ousmane Diakhate’s (1997) essay “Of Inner Roots and External Adjuncts” captures this otherness quite succinctly in his observation that “one must banish all notions of theatre as it is thought of today” (17) in order to understand African

dramatic tradition. Arguing that the “term ‘theatre’ itself has diverse, and complex, contradictory and even antagonistic connotation in Africa” (18), Diakhate concludes by privileging the mask ahead of other elements of African performance like poetry, songs and dance as an embodiment of sign and symbol:

the mask is considered the material representation of a spiritual presence assuring the presence of the dead among the living. It can symbolize animals as well as humans. The mask therefore is an emblem, a sign that not only obliterates the personality of the wearer, but also identifies that person with a mythical ancestor or supernatural being. (1997: 18).

The mask is a significant element of African festival and ritual enactment. Some studies on the mask tradition foreground the otherness of African performance while insisting on the performativity of the mask. These studies explore the mask idiom as constitutive of metalanguages distinct from Western conventional theatre which are obsessed with verbal communication. In an essay on “Masks as Instruments for Dramatic Characterization in Traditional Igbo Society”, J. N. Amankulor writes that:

Non-verbal or symbolic language is far more applied in masked dramas in Igboland than the verbal. Non-verbal language is transmitted through the senses-sight, smell, hearing, feeling and sometimes taste. The spectators watch the movement of the masked actors carefully. Movement is a pointer to their disposition. Running movement such as those of *Ogbanchakpe* in *Okonko*² indicate ferocity and agility while slow movements are associated with age, infirmity or sorrow, measured, dignified movements are linked with wealth and grandeur whereas shy and inconsistent movements are symbolic of trickery and treachery. It is easy to predict what a mask can do by looking at the mask and watching its movements. (1982:61).

² Ogbanchakpe is a type of Okonko masquerade which, according to J. N Amankulor, is also called Ekpe in many parts of Igboland (1981:113). See Ekpe in footnote 4.

It can be observed through Amankulor's study of the Igbo mask tradition that the movement of a mask constitutes a non-verbal means of identifying the character of the mask. Describing the mask "as a covering over the face or indeed the whole body which is aimed at achieving a disguise", Amankulor contends that "mask may be worn for religious and ritual acts, for political and corporate authority, or for entertainment" (53). Indeed Amankulor's description of the mask echoes Walter Sorell's assertion that there "was no disguise without a mask, which, always played the most important role as the counterpart of man's face, mirroring his soul" (1973:10). Listing some typical Igbo masks which objectify communal ancestors like *Ijele*³, *Ekpe*⁴ and *Odo*⁵, Amankulor speaks about the fear of the mask induced by the mystery of the Igbo universe. (1982:60).

Highlighting the "divergence between traditional African approach to drama and the European" in his essay "Drama and The African World-view", Soyinka draws on traditional mask idiom as "a symbolic struggle with the chthonic presences, the goal of the conflict being a harmonious resolution for plenitude and the well-being of a community" (1976:38). Hence a notable significance of the mask is the capacity to function as a symbolic agent of resolution in dramatic conflicts. These conflicts can be either human or metaphysical; or one transcending the other. Amankulor puts this more clearly when he informs that "an entire performance is thus wrapped

³ Regarded as the leading Igbo masquerade in terms of size and status. Chike Aniakor describes Ijele as "by far the most monumental of all Igbo masks, dominating them in the same way that the elephant physically dominates the animal world" (1978: 47). Since Ijele appears every 25 years, Aniakor discerns that rarity in masking is an attribute of greatness (48)

⁴ A headpiece mask that originates from Bende and Ngwa district of Igboland. Mainly typified in Ekpe ritual drama as purgative character. In Ekpe performance, it assumes the heroic act of cutting off a goat's head from its trunk which successful execution is heralded by gun shots (1982:62)

⁵ A traditional festival in Enugu and Nsukka district in the South-East of Nigeria that marks the mass return of the dead to their ancestral homes in masked form. Amankulor informs that Odo is happy but affective as the dead returnee departs the living in a process that involves blessing to family members and request for favours. 1982:46b). Bess Reed and Benjamin Hufbauer assert that Odo masquerade is an honour but awakens grief (2005:135)

in a mask metaphor” (60). In a different vein, Onuora Nzekwu foregrounds the traditional mask carver as a communicator inventing signs and iconographic constructions on the woodwork. In an essay which appraises the evolution of mask in Eastern Nigeria from the secret rituals of the traditional societies to “a social appendage” of the modern day celebrations, Nzekwu writes that:

The masks he produces are such that they are essentially communicative and symbolic of them, for his intention is not to represent but to communicate. His efforts have resulted in distortions, strange compositions and unexpected symmetry as he introduces and accentuates some feature of an animal or thing endowed with these qualities. For example, large pointed teeth represent the jaws of a leopard and therefore strength, a long pointed nose represents a European signifying knowledge and wisdom (1981: 135).

Closely related to Nzekwu’s appraisal of the carver as symbolic communicator is William Bascom’s (1981) reflection on the visual component of African mask as a signification of the ontology of African social and religious universe. Contending that the mask’s cultural codes and symbols can only be appropriately appreciated within the context of its native and socio-religious reality, Bascom asks:

Why carve a janus-faced mask and figure? Do these represent the known and unknown worlds, or the ancestors and the living, or the present and the future? And the masks with three or four faces, and figures with multiple heads? What do these signify? What did the sculptures really mean to the people who owned and used them? (cited in Anozie, 1981: 114).

Reviewing a classification of Igbo mask in Simon Ottenberg’s book, *Masked Ritual of Afikpo*, Sunday Anozie (1981) argues that the mask is “a sign system of iconographic symbol” (118). Interrogating the ideomorphics of the classification, however, Anozie wonders “where, in the traditional African mask, does the consideration of pure aesthetics or stylistics end, and where

semiotics take over” (120). Though Diapkaromre has argued that the mask provides a vital opportunity for man to express “his experiences and expectations in static (visual) and dramatic (performance) forms” (467), Anozie warns that it is important “to distinguish between the mask as static element and the mask as ritual drama and festival” (113), reaffirming Frank Willet’s (1971) view that “to appreciate the carving as it was conceived by the artist, we need to see it in movement...” (Willet, 173).

Emmanual Obiechina discerns the process of mounting a masquerade as communal art. This composite nature of African mask finds further expression in Obiechina’s description of the making and performance of the mask as constitutive of the totality of art. According to Obiechina:

The structure of the mask itself draws on a number of different but coherent artistic activities. The carving of the mask requires the services of a sculptor and of a painter. The costumery (sic) calls for a different skill. Then the actual performance of the mask requires the skills and supporting accompaniment of music and dance and often poetry.(1975: 70).

M. C Jedrej’s submission that masks can only be counted for, and capable of providing meaning when "restricted to the social context from which it has been abstracted" (1991:1) echoes Peter Mark’s warning that “discussions of the symbolic meaning in a group of artworks or ritual symbols must be tied to a carefully and narrowly defined geographical and cultural linguistic area” (1988:139).

However, in *The Use of Masks in Igbo Theatre in Nigeria: The Aesthetic Flexibility of Performance Tradition*, Victor Ukaegbu distances from this view with regard to the Igbo mask to which he ascribes the element of “aesthetic flexibility”. Referring to Ukaegbu’s book in an

incisive review as a “robust and comprehensive study of masking and performance in Igbo culture” (2009: 46), Kene Igweonu recalls Ukaegbu’s argument “that despite the homogeneity of Igbo masking tradition, its ‘aesthetic flexibility’ means that it is open to zonal or regional interpretations as a way of retaining its social relevance and ensuring its continuity” (47). What must be noted in Ukaegbu’s argument about aesthetic flexibility outside the geographical boundary of southeast Igbo is as a result of shared history. Eli Bendor described this phenomenon instead as “spatial continuities” in an essay which appraises the artistic and cultural interactions between the Igbos East of the River Niger and their neighbours in the West of the Niger Delta:

Art objects, including textiles, bronze shrine sculpture, and masks, have been traded between these regions for generations. More than objects alone, numerous masking and figurative traditions have crossed ethnic and regional boundaries and are practiced in both areas. The existence of shared artistic traditions counters a persistent notion in the study of art—that of the continent as a series of discrete ethnic units, each in its hermetically sealed artistic world. (2002: 26).

In *African Theatre and Performances* (2007), Osita Okagbue, while describing the Igbo masking tradition as an essentially “secret act”, insists that it is an embodiment of “religious and theatrical, ritual and entertainment” components of the Igbo world-view that is difficult and almost impossible to separate (2007:18). Using the *Enemma* festival masquerade in Nkpor, South-East of Nigeria, as case-study, Okagbue argues the existence of masquerade theatre premised on simultaneous performance and spatial composition of spectacle as a reflection of the people’s collective spirit and celebratory nature:

The result was that both spectators and performers were constantly on the move, as each masquerade wanted to be seen or to interact with as many spectators and in as many locations as he/she possibly could. The spectators for their part engaged with as many performance and masquerades as they could. The festival is ideal

for the masquerade theatre, by providing a spatial envelope in which independent and unrelated masquerades or other performance activities can take place simultaneously or separately (21).

Esiaba Irobi's description of *Omabe* masquerade performance explains this phenomenon further as a consistent approach that rethinks semiotics from a masquerade performance perspective. According to Irobi "in *Omabe*, the picture of a collective mass yet spatially reverential to the masked figures is an expression of solidarity, of identity, of history..." (2007:902). In analysing the simultaneous enactment of *Omabe* myth, music, costume, mine and dance, Irobi insists that *Omabe* masquerade suggests a semiotics of African masquerade performance. Citing Aston and Savona, Irobi explains that *Omabe* masquerade performance exemplifies "a number of sign-systems which do not operate in a linear mode but in a complex and simultaneously operating network unfolding in time and place"(908). This mode of semiotics premised on spatial composition and simultaneous performance suggests both historical narrative of the masquerade myth and systematic composition of space demonstrated in the performance.

From the foregoing, therefore, the following points can be emphasised:

- That studies after Saussure have begun to deconstruct structural and systematic semiotics. These studies are premised on the need to expand the scope of classical semiotics to accommodate diachronic and historical properties hitherto excluded from the structural semiotic field of investigation. Significantly, these studies also reflect the trend in African discourse on symbols and icons with regard to the exploration of African mask. Since these studies are not directly reacting to Saussure, one can discern a generic connection between African mask idiom and

semiotics. It is obvious from available literature that African mask traditions already practice what is theorized in the West. For instance, in the Peircian semiotic model, an icon is a variety of signs that bears resemblance to its object. Yet the Igbo pre-modern carver has continually constructed multi-dimensional woodworks that not only resemble but refer in symbolic terms to the images of Igbo deities and ancestors.

- That the mask is a symbol of African spiritual and cultural power. Though Peter Mark highlighted that the iconographic interpretation of the mask is relevant only within its cultural boundary, this power is transcendental as evident in Ukaegbu's concept of 'aesthetic flexibility' which suggests interpretation of the Igbo mask in other cultures. Eli Bentor has described this phenomenon instead as "spatial continuities".
- That a very significant mode of semiotics of African performance is premised on the spatial composition of spectacles and simultaneous performance.

2.3 THE MASK AS THEORETICAL PARADIGM

The mask is one of the most valourised elements of traditional African theatre and performance. (Diakhate, 1997). The mask provides a veritable template for a theoretical paradigm of African performance in a post-modern age in search of theory and aesthetics. A growing list of books on the mask tradition continues to advance and stimulate African literary and performance discourse. However, many of these studies tended to generate confusion and controversies on the use of masks in Africa. One of such controversies is the association of African mask with

anthropology by Western observers. While observing that the tendency to label African mask as anthropology distracts its symbolic and iconographic interpretations, Peter Mark concludes that it is an unacceptable analogy that ascribes “art history...to the art of literate cultures as anthropology is to the art of nonliterate cultures” (139). It may be noted that such pejorative view of African art is not exclusive to the African mask. The account of the Nobel laureate, Wole Soyinka, at Cambridge University as John Whiting Fellow where his lectures were consigned to the department of social anthropology rather than English is a typical example. Irobi’s comment on Soyinka’s Cambridge experience “that some dim but distinguished egghead at Cambridge did not believe in any such mythical beast called African Literature or Africa drama” (2007:5) is as valid for the discourse on African mask.

Nonetheless these controversies can be interpreted in John Picton's assertion that " the people who wear the masks are, by and large, not the same as the people who write about the mask" (1990:181). Suffice it to say that the mask in Africa, like most aspects of African experiences, lends itself to the biases, prejudices and often incomprehensible observation of European experts, curators and cultural anthropologists. Charles Jedrej (1980) highlights this controversy in a paper that sets out to provide a viable approach to the understanding of the meaning of mask in African worldview. According to Jedrej, this confusion is "the product of a point of view located in the observer's European tradition. Only by concentrating on the evidence of what actually happens, rather than what we think is going on, can we hope for any comprehension" (1980: 229).

There is a fundamental difference in the use of the mask idiom in African and European theatre. Referring to the application of the mask in classical Greek drama, for instance, Inih Ebong notes that “the Greeks are universally acknowledged with scholarly accreditations for the "formal" and "conventional " use of the mask in the theatre." (1984:1). In Africa, the mask energy (to use Inih

Ebong's phrase) is directed towards African metaphysical and religious essence. Inih further stresses that " the use of mask in contemporary Africa derives...directly from the cultural and metaphysical roots of African aesthetic thought and mind" (2). It could be argued that it is at this domain that African mask derives its essence of power as exemplified in the classification of the mask tradition into elements of power, cosmology and socio-political harmony (Diakporomre, 2007; Tonkins, 1979). It will be pertinent to add at this juncture that African mask derives its elements of power from sources other than metaphysics and magic. In performance, for instance, masks are essentially stripped of its metaphysical powers and magic, yet the audiences demonstrate fear and bewilderment. Consequently, this type of power which can be classified as psychological power derives from the audiences' understanding of the cultural codes against which a masquerade originates. It can be argued that a performance simulation of *ijele* masquerade, for instance, will always induce fear and awe before an Igbo audience aware of its metaphysical force and function in the community.

The power of the mask is very well religiously and politically exercised in indigenous Igbo bureaucratic institutions. Applying what he termed "the social control theory", Jedrej (1991) notes that masks constitute a conscious attempt to produce a likeness of spirit or gods through which social and political issues in the communities are regulated. G. I. Jones in his book, *The Art of Eastern Nigeria*, attributes the predominance of the social and political function of the masquerade tradition to the manner in which the mask is carved to heighten a sense of fear and mystery (cited in Akpan, 1994:48). Jedrej corroborates that view:

The psycho-sociological corollary that the masks may also overawe, even terrify, onlookers, and have indeed been frequently observed to be deployed to this end against potential deviants has been developed into a quite sophisticated functional theory of masks which can be called the social control theory. Masks and

masquerades as institutions have been placed as a stage in the evolution of governmental institutions usually somewhere between kinship-based societies and societies with explicit institutions of government, law and adjudication (1991:1).

Masks, therefore, play governmental and political roles. Horton (1985) discerns that owing to disparate settlement pattern and weakening social structure in West Africa, masks and masking were institutionalised to perform extra-executive and judicial functions prior to colonial contact in the Nineteenth-Century. Perhaps this is what Atmore and Stacey, cited by Akpan, referred to as “absence of a centralized political state” (48) in the social system of pre-colonial southeastern Nigeria. The mask of *Ekumeku* with which the Ekumeku cult fought and defended the South-Western Nigeria against the British under the auspices of the Royal Niger Company will aptly be classified under Horton’s theory of social and political control. Horton continues further that:

the masking of secret society's executives makes immediate sense when considered as a device to ensure acceptance of the harsher sanctions applied by the society to offenders against the community laws...where the executives are masked, it is possible for the public to accept their actions, however harsh, as impersonal manifestations of the collective will. If they are unmasked and identifiable, their actions might cause dangerous resentment through suspicion of sectional interest. (1985: 15)

Leopold Senghor’s poem “Prayer to mask” is a quintessence of the power of the mask as medium of ancestor worship. Indeed, Senghor’s poem demonstrates Diakparome’s apt classification of the mask into cosmology, power and socio-political harmony. Even while represented as the garment of the ancestors, the mask takes on a creative force as the poem exemplifies:

Masks! O Masks!
Black masks red masks you white-and-white masks

Masks at the four points the Spirit breathes from,
I salute you in silence!
And you last, lion-headed Ancestor,
You guard this place from any woman's laughter, any fading smile
Distilling this eternal air in which I breathe my Forebears...
You who have arranged this portrait, this face of mine bent above
this altar of white paper
In your image, hear me!

(From *Chants d' Ombre* 1965)

In *L'Espirt de la Civilisation*, Senghor declares the mask as a symbol of African origin of western modernism, pointing out that “ after the failure of Greco-Roman aesthetics at the end of nineteenth century, artists and writers came at the end of their search to Asia, and even more important, to Africa” (1965:77). Although Senghor may sound pan-Africanist, however, his view is further replicated in an interview between Olu Oguibe and Egonu, a Nigerian painter whose works on masks provide equally stimulating insight on the power of the mask. In an explanation of his paintings *African Masks* and *Still Life with Mask in Landscape*, Egonu’s assertion about “the influence African mask have had on European modern art, especially cubism” (Oguibe, 2004: 66) highlights the contribution of African mask to European modernism. This view has been reiterated by Maurice Rayal who described the influence of African mask on Picasso as one of seduction, noting that “Picasso went to the Negroes (meaning African art) as one goes to the fields “ (Cited in Ladislav Segy, 1962: 279). Expanding this view, Irobi writes that:

Pablo Picasso was one of these artists who appropriated the motifs of African masks looted by the Europeans in the 19th and early 20th century and employed the scarified metaphors in the work thereby ushering in Cubism and altering the history of European art forever (2005:230)

This power, therefore, is transcendental and has remained a vestige of African heritage that resisted Western and European cultural hegemony. One can infer that the mask in Africa

predates the colonial experience. Contending that “no one has been able to fix the exact date of origin of African mask” Anozie notes that African masks have existed “before the Sahara became desert”. (110). Ossie Enekwe’s assertion that “There is myth behind every masquerade performance” (134) may have provided justification for the enormous power of the mask. Appraising masquerade performances in Kalahari region of the Niger Delta, Ossie Enekwe explains further:

Among them, masquerade represented gods, water spirits, village heroes and the dead. In many cases they symbolize the ancestors who introduced them. The bulk of their masquerades however represent manifestations of water spirit. They believe that in some of their masquerade displays, the masqueraders, whose identity may be known, are possessed by the spirits they are representing. (1981: 133).

One of the most persistent theories on Igbo mask and masquerade is its connection with ancestors and deities. The Igbo mask tradition is associated with physical representation of the ancestors in the human world. These representations are manifested in the religious and cultural festivals in various African societies. However, this phenomenon has been contextually adapted into modern drama and theatre through a process described by Ato Quayson as “commodification of indigenous cultures” (1997:42). Nwabueze’s survey of Igbo masquerade traces the history of mask in modern drama to the ritualistic reenactment of ancestors and deities:

In the earliest period of Igbo history, the ancestors were consulted through divinations, but later their physical presence became necessary when the rituals were evolved. The need for physical representation of the ancestor created the necessity to devise ways of representing the physical presence of the ancestral spirit. It was this situation that led to the evolution of the masquerade as a dramatic character (2003:45).

Hence the mask is genetically connected to mythic and ancestral powers. Indeed in most studies, the mask is closely associated with the assumption of divine power. In his study of masks in the North West Pacific Indians, Levi-Strauss has used the term “transformation set” to describe the structural relationship between masks and the myth from which they originate and to which they can transform (1975). Following Levi-Strauss, therefore, the apotheosis of most Igbo masquerades may be classified as transformation from and within the context of Igbo cultural traditions. After classifying the principles of masking and how masks work, Tonkin concludes that “we can see what masks do and why they are particularly capable of doing it... that Masking, acting through its paradoxes, is a richly concentrated means of articulating Power” (1979: 245). Ini Ebong, adding the performance perspective to this view, contends that “a mask is generally presumed to be imbued with strange metaphysical powers and attributes” which can be “translated into adept theatrical and aesthetic advantages both for the actor wearing the mask and for his audience” (2). In view of the attributes ascribed to the mask, Anozie submits that:

It is therefore in the mask as a system of langue that we are, or should be interested. It is this langue that can be reconstituted. Accordingly, we believe that a semiotic study of the mask is possible but only if the mask is viewed as an autonomous cultural code, a constitutive system of symbols, icons and, possibly too, of allegories (1981:117).

Though my research is stimulated by Anozie’s suggestion on the possibility of the poetics of the mask, the primacy of my study is a semiological interpretation of the mask idiom in the drama of Esiaba Irobi, and not through Anozie’s characteristic structuralist model. Apparently, though classical semiotics of the Saussurean model privileges systematic and scientific approach, discourses linking semiotics to historical objects are assuming scholarly significance as shown in *social semiotics* and *post-semiotics*.

The following points can be drawn from the analyses above:

- That there is myth behind every mask; most masks in Africa indeed are representatives of deities. In performance, this can take the form of identity transformation. The mask, therefore, constitute what Levi Strauss termed “transformation set”. In the drama of Esiaba Irobi, this can be interpreted as apotheosis in which case the masker transforms into a deity.
- That masks manifest vast and enormous power that transcends its mythic boundary to “functions that span and also yoke together the sacred and the secular in human existence” (Amankulor, 1982: 53). In this regard, the mask can function as agent of social and political control in consonance with the theory of social control.
- That the mask represents a symbol of resilient African past to which European origin of modernism can be traced. In this sense, African mask has demonstrated the capacity to transcend its indigenous religious and ritual functions to modern discourses with post-colonial resonances.
- There is also an aspect of the mask that induces and evokes a psychological effect on the audience. It is in this regard that Ottenberg speaks about the masked performer and the audience “bound in an intimate interrelationship” (1973:35) which necessitates production of meaning in the performance. The psychological effect of the mask on the audience is ostensibly transcendental. This is perhaps why Keith Ray and Rosalind Shaw describe the effect as “mask plus action” (1987: 655).

2.4 NIGERIAN LITERATURE: ESIABA IROBI AND THE EMERGENT GENERATION.

In the history of Nigerian literature, Esiaba Irobi belongs to the generation controversially classified as “third generation Nigerian writing”. Of this generation, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton acknowledge “that there was little or no scholarship on the rapidly expanding body of work. Even the academy in Nigeria, it seemed, was reluctant to extend its curriculum beyond the canonical work of first and second generation writers” (2008:2). In an introduction to a special issue of *Research in Africa Literature*, Adesanmi and Dunton insist that though the third generation writers are receiving appreciable attention by journalists, their works suffer a dearth of sustained scholarly study (2).

Ogaga Ifowodo’s description of the generation as “children of the sixties” (1998:16) distinguishes them as coming of age in the post-Biafran War era with its attendant kaleidoscopic military dictatorships and corruption of the political class. Indeed the preoccupation of the third-generation with the Biafran conflict validates Eddie Iroh’s observation that “writers of his [first] generation, who had lived through the Biafran conflict, were too close to suffering to write the definitive accounts of the war, and that the task will fall to later generations” (Cited in Hawley, 2008: 15). That Chinua Achebe’s memoir on Biafran war, *There Was A Country* (2012)⁶⁷ came after over forty years with so much ethnic temper corroborates Iroh’s view that the war is the narrative of a later generation. Adesanmi writes that many of these writers have developed “aesthetics of pain” in order to negotiate their “ hopes and dreams tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system” (2008: 121-122). Adesanmi and Dunton aptly describe the generation as:

⁶ Irobi's description of himself as a citizen of "the Republic Biafra" in an interview with Nnorom Azuonye (2003:1) proceeds from disillusionment with, and self-denial of, the Nigerian state especially since after the failed Igbo/Biafran attempt at session.

⁷ Achebe who worked as ambassador for the Biafran side during the war accused the iconic Yoruba leader, Obafemi Awolowo, in the memoir, of genocide against the Biafran Igbo.

Emergent writers who had acquired a creative identity markedly different from that of the second generation writers [such as Niyi Osundare, Festus Iyayi, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Zainab Alkali, Tess Onwueme and Bode Sowande] (121).

Researches on the development of Nigerian writing, for the most part, have remained continual rehash of scholarships on Wole Soyinka, J. P Clark, Ola Rotimi, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and the other members of the first generation of writers. The second generation of Nigerian writers which include Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Tunde Fatunde etc, have also enjoyed relative critical attention. There is, however, a considerable dearth of scholarship on the Irobi generation.

Needless to mention, the demarcation of Nigerian literary history on generational grounds is beset with controversies. Although Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton who pioneered the demarcation argue that it is predicated on temporal and ideological marker - hence a third generation is defined as one born before or after the independence in 1960 and being, therefore, preoccupied with post-colonial themes. This position has been refuted on the evidence of overlap of themes across generations. Femi Osofisan's comment on this issue in an interview is instructive:

As far as the theme and tone of political commitment are concerned, there is really not much distinction any longer between the younger or older writers, in the works produced from the early '80s onwards. The older writers, once accused of celebrating the past with uncritical nostalgia, while keeping their eyes closed to the present, in fact radically altered their priorities under the pressure of history, and of criticism, often acerbic, of younger generation (1997:8).

Regarding Irobi as an “early third generation dramatist”, Adesanmi and Dunton argue that his works have achieved prominence of the second generation. Yet, in spite of Irobi’s prominence as a dramatist, poet and theatre critic, Isidore Diala complains that he receives “less critical attention than he deserves.” (2005: 91). Irobi has written and produced over a dozen plays. These include *Nwokedi* (1991), *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), *Am I Too loud*, *Cemetery Road* (2009), *The Other Side of the Mask* (1999), *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* (1989), *FronDED Circle* (1999), *Put Out the House lights*, *The Colour of Rusting Gold* (1989). Irobi is a true representative of his generation. Irobi's poetry collections include *Cotyledons* (1987) *Inflorescence* (1989), *Why I Don't Like Phillip Larking and Other Poems* (2005). At his death of cancer in April 29, 2010, Diala states that:

he was working on the final drafts of many other plays, several of which were in fact already in the press: *Sycorax* (initially titled *The Shipwreck*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, commissioned by Oregon Shakespeare Festival Theatre, USA), *Foreplay* (Commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre, London, England), *What Songs Do Mosquitoes Sing*, *I Am the Woodpecker That Terrifies the Trees*, *Zenzenina*, *The Harp*, *John Coltraine in Vienna*. (6).

Significantly, existing studies on the works of Esiaba Irobi tended to overtly situate his dramaturgy within the influence of Soyinka’s mytho-ritual tradition. Discerning Irobi’s dramatic inclination in establishing universal paradigm through the Igbo cultural worldview, Isidore Diala submits “that Irobi’s drama, therefore, recurrently recalls Soyinka’s” (91). Irobi may have started the temper of this comparative critical opinion. In an interview with Nenghi Ilaga, Irobi declared: “ I would as a writer want to do for my generation what Soyinka, Achebe and Okigbo have done for their generation. In fact, I would like to write three of them out of Literature, if that would be

possible” (1989:11). In a review of Irobi’s *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* which satirises Soyinka’s essentially obscurist language, Adetokunbo Abiola, while situating recourse to pidgin english in the play as “indication of Irobi’s disrespect for language”, manages a comparison between the language of *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and King’s Horseman*:

Death and the King’s Horseman serves as an epitome of creation arranged by an imagination versed in the manipulation of language, while *Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh* was written by a naturing (sic) artist fast absorbing the indices of knowledge and craft whose evolution might terminate in the mastery of the genre (12).

Recalling Irobi’s appropriation of Igbo myth, folklore and poetry in his drama, though acknowledging his initiation into the Ekpe masquerade society of his birthplace, Umuode-Nsulu in Ngwa Igboland as providing the impetus to his “elemental drama”, Isidore Diala, a prominent Irobi scholar observes that Soyinka’s exaltation of Ogun has stimulated younger dramatists like Irobi to search for local deities for aesthetic inspiration:

To this unapologetic exaltation of Ogun may well be traced the vital source of the inspiration and model firing the zeal of generations of African writers to search the African pantheon, myths, and legends for deity-heroes capable of stimulating the creative imagination and dramatic action or of illuminating the human situation. Irobi’s career is in this regard revealing (90).

Consequently, many of these critical analyses on Irobi’s drama use the Soyinka influence as the inevitable backcloth of Irobi’s dramaturgy. These works, therefore, fail to discover the distinctiveness of Irobi’s text and performance. Suffice it to say that these analyses suffer from what Remi Raji referred to as “anxiety of influence” (1997: 9) . Where the critical opinion does

not stereotype the “anxiety of influence”, it has tended to refute the distinctiveness of the generation. In an essay that explores the coming of age of the third generation, Hewett (2005) demonstrates the reluctance of critics to acknowledge the literary tradition of the Irobi generation:

We would, of course, be remiss if we didn't ask the question: is the third generation really as new and different as it claims to be? Because we lack the perspective of history, it's probably too soon to say. However, there are enough writers whose work is fresh and different from what came before to suggest that yes, change is afoot; and collectively, the third generation does seem to be taking Nigeria literature in new direction. But we should also maintain a healthy skepticism regarding claims of absolute difference. (78)

In scholarship, Irobi is no less distinctive. In the essay “A Theatre of Cannibals: Images of Europe in Indigenous African Theatre of the Colonial Period” (2009), Irobi discerns that the presence of Europe in Africa from 1885 and the 1960s culminated in the expansion and adaptation of the iconographies of African performance to accommodate the exigencies of the colonial experience. The result, Irobi explains, is a complex discourse encoded in cultural symbols. In Irobi's opinion, such Eurocentric view as Ruth Finnegan's⁸ is borne out of ignorance of cross-cultural reference points which constitute the complex semiotic and cultural codes of African performance. However, Irobi's endorsement of David Kerr's political and economic motif of the colonial mission contradicts his theory of Western naivety of African performance. Significantly, Irobi agrees with David Kerr's view that the denigration of African culture and performance is a corollary of the political and economic agenda of the colonial mission. For acknowledging the existence of African performance will have translated into self-confession of

⁸ Ruth Finnegan's dismissal of African drama in her book, *Oral Performance in Africa* remains a reference point for Western pejorative view of Africa drama. In this essay Irobi also introduced Caroline Elkin's *Imperial Reckoning* which assertion that imperialism was not solely about exploitation Irobi debunked with the endorsement of the political and economic agenda of imperialism discussed in this review.

vandalism since, quoting Achebe, “you do not walk in, seize the land, the person and history of another and then sit back and compose hymns of praise in his honour. To do that will amount to calling yourself a bandit”. (2009:272). Juxtaposing the argument of western ignorance of African cultural codes and endorsement of the political and economic implication of colonial contact has remained one of the most consistent contradictions in Irobi’s essays and plays.

While “Theatre for The Cannibals” reflects on the image of Europe in African performance during the colonial period, in “What they came with: Carnival and the Persistence of African Performance Aesthetics in the Diaspora” (2007), Irobi identifies festivals and rituals as the dramatic elements existing on the continent before the arrival of the Europeans and which Africans took to the New World in the course of transatlantic slave trade. Irobi argues that since these rituals and festivals are embodied as “phenomenological deposits” , it has given the survivors of the Transatlantic slave trade the aesthetic infrastructure to negotiate survival in the New World. Distinguishing between African “performative literacies” which is an embodied cultural text and the western tradition of “cryptographic literacy” that is print-bound, the essay provides Irobi with an opportunity to “write back” to misleading imperialist discourse on the survival of African performance in the diaspora represented by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. When Paul Gilroy asserted that African performance in the diaspora was “irrevocably sundered from their origins”, Irobi’s response that indigenous African performance was rather a transformed and syncretised form also highlights a return to his seminal conviction that western critics of African performance lack the semiotic knowhow to comprehend African performance. Irobi asks:

But suppose we shift our examples of literacy to sculpture, dance, music, attire, gesture, dreams, space, and tattoos? What emerges is

a new definition of literacy that resides in semiotic intelligence. We are faced with iconographic literacy: What would an *omabe* mean or represent to Paul Gilroy without my analysis? Can he read it? If he cannot decode the messages encoded in Omabe's metalanguages, will the Nsukka-Igbo creators of this complex festival and ritual theatre, cultic and carnivalesque at the same time, not see Gilroy as a cultural and semiotic illiterate? (2007:910).

Though his drama has been critically ascribed to Soyinka's influence, however, Isidore Diala's essay on Irobi's legacy highlights a groundbreaking articulation of African/African Diasporanic aesthetics:

If Irobi's life was a restless search for new horizons, his deep anchorage in the oral tradition of his Igbo ethnic group, its rituals of self-renewal, myths and legends of enigmatic and daring deity-heroes, its lore of mysteries of life and transcendence of the human spirit, its rousing chants, masquerades, and dramaturgy remained the indispensable source of creative imagination and critical thinking. (2011:20).

Irobi's insistence that "theory need not be typographic" (2008) and his critical discourse which ascribes signification of myth, historical value and worldview on festival performances as masquerades, dance, sculptures constitutes enduring significance on contemporary Nigerian drama. Irobi's appropriation of mask represents a distinct dramatic experiment, and conveys a mythical and metaphysical urgency that sets Irobi's drama apart in morbid exaltation of violence. It is in this vein that Toni Duruaku (1996) interrogates Irobi's fascination with violence in his analysis of Irobi's *Nwokedi* as an exaltation of anarchy (91). In an interview with Nnorom Azuonye, Irobi expressed similar rebellious view of Nigerian society, "Anarchy! The worst is yet to come. Nigeria will break apart like a loaf of bread in water, it will capsize like a leaking canoe on the River Nigeria" (Azuonye, 2003: 49).

Though Irobi's drama has evolved under the influence of Soyinka's myth-ritual tradition, Irobi has specifically interpreted myth within the Igbo cultural tradition to suit the contingency of a post-military Nigerian generation. More so, Irobi has articulated nascent dramatic and cultural theories that corroborate the corpus of his distinctively polemical drama.

Finally, we can emphasize the following points with regard to review of literature on Esiaba Irobi and the third generation of Nigerian writers.

1. That there is a dearth of research and scholarly materials on the third-generation of Nigerian writers.
2. That the few available discourses on the Irobi generation is dominated by the "anxiety of influence" which robs the generation of a deserved recognition and distinctiveness as can be discerned from what Isidore Diala, with regard to Irobi for instance, aptly referred to as "the Irobi canon". Undoubtedly, the third generation to which Irobi belongs has taken Nigerian and African literature in a new direction.
3. Though the focus of this thesis is essentially on the drama of Esiaba Irobi, the playwright's advocacy for theories derived from African indigenous performance elements has provided significant stimulus for my recourse to Igbo mask.

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 INTRODUCTION:

The aim of this chapter is to investigate and discuss three of Esiaba Irobi's plays in the light of the significance of the mask. These include; *Nwokedi* (1991), *The Other Side of the Mask* (2009) and *Cemetery Road* (2009). Issues explored in chapter two will constitute a background for this discussion with a focus on the appropriation of the mask in the drama of Esiaba Irobi and its signification of diverse meanings against the specific tradition and culture that has produced it.

3.2 SEMIOTICS OF THE MASK: THE DIALECTICS OF APOTHEOSIS IN ESIABA IROBI'S *NWOKEDI*

Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* explores the Ekpe ritual festival and the myth of communal renewal in Osioma, a peasant community southeast of Nigeria. Though working with a primordial myth, Irobi sets in motion contemporary social, political and economic circumstances that seem all too familiar to Nigeria and Africa in general. It is a myth that predates the colonial experience; a myth that defines the existential ethos of the peasant community, constructed on an equally mythical family set aside by tradition to produce a lineage that must rid the community of accumulated evils and decay. Soyinka calls this family "the strong breed"⁹. The strong breed may be described as a motif in ritual drama in which a community regenerates itself through the suffering and death of a scapegoat or carrier. This scapegoat or carrier tradition is often based on bloodline of ancient and mythological lineage, hence the term strong breed.

⁹ This is inferred from the title of Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* in which a particular family is destined to perform the rite of purging the community of accumulated evils

In Irobi's *Nwokedi*, the strong-breed reposes on the Nwokedi family which primary responsibility is to slaughter the sacrificial ram with a single stroke of the knife. This ritual is a communal cleansing of guilt and decay in the land. At the moment of the play, Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi has taken over the assignment from his father (Nwokedi Snr) and has discharged the assignment in the past six years. In semiotic terms, even the name Nwokedi (the strong man) is not fortuitous, but suggestive of the cultural tradition in which lineage is an abiding sign of continuity and heredity. Irobi once argued that African philosophic thoughts are encoded in names. According to Irobi:

In Igbo culture children are not given names plucked from television or dictionaries or the bible or flower gardens or a single's bar. A child's name is a philosophical contraction of what his or her parents or entire community experienced at the time of his or her birth. (2006:10)

Naming in Igbo tradition is a form of signification of family or communal history and experience. It embodies a deictic sign that links the parents with the ancestors in a communal experience and celebration. Soyinka asserts that "careful thought, sense of history, hopes and expectations ride on the name we decide to give a new human entity we have brought into the world" (2013:3). There is little wonder that the family so-named Nwokedi is imbued with both human physical and metaphysical attributes. It is also a name that connects history and myth to a family upon which a pivotal ritual of a clan is constructed. Nwokedi Snr is an astute politician and an orator from whom Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi (Nwokedi Jnr) may have inherited his uncompromising aggression. In his corrupt nature, Nwokedi Snr. is as violent as he is diabolical. Upon his loss of a seat in the Parliament, he unleashed *Amadioha* ("the god of thunder, lightning and thunder") on his political allies to swear against accusation of complicity in his defeat at the election. Even his wife is not spared the acerbic anger:

NWOKEDI SNR: That woman? That schemer? That saboteur! Do you know she has been Nwokedi's political adviser. Weaving out plans on how to destabilize my political career. With that renegade! That anarchist. That Absalom! Where is he?

ARIKPO: In-law, control your rage!

NWOKEDI SNR: How can I? Why should I? How can I control Myself when I have lost my seat at Parliament? Lost my case at the Court of Appeal. Lost my deposit. Lost my name and my face. How can I when I have lost everything that gives meaning to my life? (66)

In characterising Nwokedi Snr with aggressive traits in a society with such hereditary culture, Irobi seems to be setting a physical standard for the strong breed. Irobi's strong breed is the aggressor and executioner of justice. In introducing the mask idiom into the play, Irobi makes the human attributes merely preparatory to the strict initiation required for participation in the masquerade cult. Nwokedi Jnr demonstrates his brute force in the scuffle with Sergeant Awado at the National Youth service camp in Bakalori. After physically subduing and brutalising the military officer who accosted him for not participating in the routine parade, Nwokedi Jnr rebuffs attempts by fellow corps members advising him to flee from the impending punishment of "the madness of solders":

CORPER: Run for your life.

NWOKEDI: Run? Why should I run? (fierily) This is our moment. Our moment. When we must gather our strength and energies into the demands of a revolution. This is the moment when what makes us young men and women must muster us to the last and supreme sacrifice. The supreme action. The greatest decision. This is the moment of revolt. We must cross the threshold now. All of us.

CORPER: Who are you?

NWOKEDI: (assertively) I am Nwokedi!

HABIBA: Nwokedi?

NWOKEDI: There is a magic in the name.

CORPER: (to Habiba, searchingly) Nwokedi?

NWOKEDI: A stubborn dog dies barking, his eyes bloodshot, a symbol of his times. (66)

Instructively, Nwokedi Jnr's reference to "magic in the name" may not be purely hubristic, but a reinforcement of the social and primordial significance of the lineage. The reference to "strength", "energy" and "stubborn dog" are the basic symbols and denominators of initiation into the masquerade cult. The relevance of these cultural codes in spearheading the contemporary revolution of the play cannot be over-emphasised. Perhaps a more symbolic demonstration of force and strength is discernible in Nwokedi's murder of Dafinone, the Capone of the Buccaneer Confraternity for looting money belonging to the cult. Nwokedi's mutiny against the Capone signifies the importance of brute force and strength as an ingredient of heroism for a strong breed. In the world of university confraternity where terror is the rule of the game, Nwokedi Jnr's triumphant revolt and eventual murder of the covetous Capone highlights his predominance even in the underworld of secret cult:

DAFINONE: You were once a buccaneer?

NWOKEDI: Yes. At school, I was a buccaneer.

DAFINONE: During your career as a buccaneer you murdered a fellow sea dog.

NWOKEDI: What did the sea dog do?

DAFINONE: He did what sea-dogs do: Looted the stockade.

NWOKEDI: Looted the stockade? Little wonder he died like a sea-dog? (40)

These attributes also have historical undertones and significations. For instance, in naming Nwokedi's age-group Ekumeku, after the historic Ekumeku movement which pioneered the war of resistance fought by the Igbos West of the Niger against the British for thirty-two years, Irobi discerns a prototype for the contemporary revolution against corruption, social anomie and decay of the political class. The Ekumeku movement recalls such major historical and political uprisings against European colonialism as Maji-Maji War in the then Tanganyika and Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya, both of which have inspired such dramatists as Ibrahim Hussein and Ngugi Wa Thiogo respectively.

The Ekumeku (which translates as whirlwind) movement represents a stubborn resistance to imperialism. Writing about the resilience of the Ekumeku resistance to British imperialism between 1850 and 1883, Onuuka N. Njoku writes that "inequality in armament, not heroism or military strategy, foredoomed the Ekumeku resistance to failure; the wonder is not that it was crushed but that it endured for 32 years" (1992:493). This is the heroism and military strategy that Irobi wishes to recuperate when he names Nwokedi's age-grade¹⁰ after the historic movement. An important element of the Ekumeku movement in its guerilla war against British imperialism is the mask. According to Ekechi, Ekumeku guerilla "belongs to a specific subtype of ancestral mask society whose activities were restricted to nighttime" (Manfred,1997: 163) Irobi's introduction of the Ekumeku in the play is a conscious revival of a historic *referent* to the mask. In the play, the Ekumeku age-grade, under the leadership of Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi is charged with the responsibility of transcending this historic role to Nigeria's post-independent democracy. Though Irobi's Ekumeku in the play is divested of the mask feature, Nwokedi Jnr,

¹⁰ The age-grade is a social classification in Igboland based on age groupings for the purpose of allocating public duties.

reposed with the leadership of the age-grade, is made the mask-carrier. In Osisioma village, Nwokedi Jnr and Ekumeku are foisted with the charge of dispatching the old year of accumulated evils and ushering in the New Year. However, Nwokedi Jnr sees the Ekumeku as no less than a combatant age-grade. Recounting a dream to his father in which the latter was beheaded in place of the sacrificial ram, Nwokedi Jnr triumphantly declares that “ my age-grade came singing a war song. They came, their matchets unsheathed. The Ekumeku came chanting the resolve of my generation” (82). Thus, it is to the war-like Ekumeku age-grade that the community reposes the responsibility of spearheading the Ekpe festival. Mrs. Nwokedi explains this collective responsibility of the Ekumeku age-grade:

MRS. NWOKEDI: It is a festival of life.

ARIKPO: Who is organizing it?

MRS NWOKEDI: The entire village of Osisioma. But Nwokedi’s age-group is in charge.

ARIKPO: The Ekumeku?

MRS NWOKEDI: Yes, the Ekumeku.

ARIKPO: (*scrambles for his suitcase*) The Devil’s Brigade.

MRS NWOKEDI: (*staying for his hand*) In-law, there is no cause for fear. No cause for flight either. (*pointing*) The village wishes no one death. Like I said, it is a festival of life. A festival in which the old year dies and the new year is born.

ARIKPO: How does the old year die?

MRS NWOKEDI: It dies when the land is cleansed with blood.

(16)

Thus, though confronted with the possibility of expulsion from the National Youth Service scheme which will mark his graduation from the University, Nwokedi is undaunted. Instead he

presents himself to revolt against the establishment and orthodoxy. In making his character a mythological as well as revolutionary hero, the play transcends the symbolic to the physical exaltation of violence. This way Irobi has created a strong breed that represents a generational shift from Soyinka's. For instance, in Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *Death and The King's Horseman*, Eman and Elesin Oba, respectively, are confronted with a receding moment of history; Eman escaping his fate from his village where he is designed as the sacrificial victim, and Elesin Oba fatally declining death at the last hour in order to take a bride. Conversely, Irobi's Nwokedi Jr charges and surges forward to the primordial responsibility. However, when Soyinka has made his strong breed victim of the ritual sacrifice, Irobi's is the executioner. This is why the physical and aggressive nature of heroism is imperative. It can therefore be argued that Irobi's concept of heroism is predicated on the world-view of Igbo masking tradition. Thus Toni Duruaku's assertion that Nwokedi "is a warped personality with a mission that cannot solve anything" (1996:91) is an apparent misinterpretation of Irobi's appropriation of the mask elements into the construction of character portraiture in which physical ruthlessness and aggression is integral to the mask-wearing role. Indeed Duruaku's contention that Nwokedi is "a ruthless crusader" undermines Irobi's representation of the spirit that possesses the mask. In Irobi's drama, there is no privileged carrier of guilt, but a privileged killer of the guilty. Essentially, Irobi endorses Soyinka's logic of ritual sacrifice as an exercise of social and political regeneration. In choosing the option in which society set aside a hereditary formulae for socio-political regeneration, Irobi wades into the meta-textual argument between Soyinka and Femi Osofisan in support of the former. In an interview with Edde Iji, Osofisan, while acknowledging the profundity of Soyinka's logic for human sacrifice as regenerative act, states that:

What I do not believe is that people should be designated or coerced into it, who have not hand in ruining the society. I think if you are

going to cleanse the society, it should be of those very elements who have been responsible for dirtying society, for bringing sin; these are the people who should bear the burden of cleansing it. But I think they get away too easily...if there is any purgation, these are the people who should bear the brunt of such purgation; be made to sacrifice themselves. (Iji, 2001:5)

With *Nwokedi*, Irobi has literarily responded to Osofisan's call and created characters with equal physical aggression. This mode of characterization may have been informed by Irobi's awareness of the physical and psychological demands for initiation into the masquerade society in Igboland. Irobi has dedicated the play partly to "all members of Umuakwu Progressive Union/Who not only initiated me into the metaphysics/ and theatrical ecstasies of the EKPE festival/but have also sustained a dying Igbo tradition" (*Nwokedi* iii). Indeed Leon Onyewuchi Osu attributes Irobi's literary foundation to "a masquerade-active" father's lineage" (2011:153). In this sense, contrary to the views of critics like Duruaku, it may be argued that *Nwokedi* Jnr. is not "a real" personality. He could be seen as in Keir Elam's view, "an approach which sees the *dramatis persona* as a more or less complex and unified network of psychological and social traits" (1980:131). His character is a signifier of the constitutive physical and psychological traits as required for initiation into the masquerade cult. *Nwokedi* Jnr is Irobi's ideal hero constructed from the semiology of the masquerade in the Igbo cultural and religious ontology. Irobi has not constructed the character of *Nwokedi* Jnr out of the framework of the 'real' world but from the secret recesses of the masquerade society. Aston and Savona have explained this dialectic of character construction further, that:

the logic of character definition and representation is not necessarily the logic of the external world, and that a dramatic world which subverts external logic may nonetheless remain accessible to the spectator. (1991:43)

Nwokedi Jnr's character accommodates all the powers inherent in the mask; the religious, political and metaphysical as demonstrated in his pivotal role during the Ekpe festival. His predilection for violence, what Duruaku referred to as "warped personality", is suggestive of subversion of the "logic of the external world". The external world of the Igbo universe is clearly defined by the prescriptive logic and philosophy of *omenanaism*. Sunday Anozie has defined *omenana* as "the unwritten laws and modus operandi of the (Igbo) people" (1981:104). There is an apparent subversion of Igbo *omanana* and socio-cultural norms when Nwokedi Jnr threatens his mother with violent death on her proposal to him and the Ekumeku age-grade to step down for his father at the parliamentary election. According to Nwokedi Jnr's mother "When I suggested the idea to him, he told me that if I mentioned it again, he will smash my head against the walls and watch my illiterate brains surge out like congealed milk. So I shut up" (68). In Igboland, a subversion of *omenana* is regarded as *alu* (abomination). In a similar vein, Nwokedi jnr's characteristically acerbic attacks on his father is no less an abomination in the Igbo worldview. Responding to the older generation's failure to change the depraved state of the country, Nwokedi brazenly confronts his father with swearwords. "You rats that bite and blow. Trousered apes, bloated by rancid crude oil. Kings that rule by deceit. What happened to you? Bats, Night's acrobats" (77). Earlier in the First Cycle of the play, during the campaign in favour of the Ekumeku candidate, Ozoemena, Nwokedi Jnr's speech which caused the displacement of his father from the parliament is full of these abominable traits. Contesting his father's manifesto, Nwokedi referred to his father as:

distinguished rogue, a political obscenity, a resourceful liar...a high-degree thief, a confidence trickster, a carapaced tortoise whose grey-haired generation has ruptured our future and left us foundering in the wind like yellow leaves in the harmattan. This same crook standing here, this vegetable who calls himself my father...(11).

Thus, though it will be difficult to place Nwokedi Jnr's character within the context of the external world of Igbo acceptable social behaviour, it embodies the psychological and mythic traits of a masquerade-carrier on which Irobi's idea of heroism is premised. Indeed Nwokedi Jnr's perception of heroism is discernible in his account to his father of a dream in which he substituted the father's head for the festival ram as mentioned above. Recounting how he beheaded his father, and the triumphant celebration of the feat with his age-grade, Nwokedi declares that " They {Ekumeku} came in here, their eyes on fire. The hot-blood roiling in their veins. They came and carried me shoulder high, a symbol of triumph. They bore me like a hero from myth to myth-centre of the village" (84). Nwokedi's excesses are accommodated within the provenance of Igbo masquerade traits as exemplified in his role in the Ekpe festival. Explaining the inevitable role of the Ekpe festival rite in the lives of the community to Habiba, a fellow member at the Bakalori Youth Service Camp, Nwokedi privileges his role as the pivot of the communal passage:

NWOKEDI: I am the one empowered by the land to slaughter the sacrificial animal at the shrine of the gods and renew the strength of the earth with its blood.

HABIBA: Can't someone else do that...

NWOKEDI: Nobody else can. The courage that act requires reposes in our family. That is why we are called *Nwokedi*

HABIBA: That means they will have to defer the festival if you don't return today.

NWOKEDI: The Ekpe festival is never deferred.
(*Nwokedi* 37)

Irobi's construction of the Ekumeku age-grade on the historical Ekumeku movement in the West of the Niger bears an important referent of the masked warriors who defended the territorial integrity of Nigeria against the Royal Niger Company which represented the British Colonial interest at the beginning of the 19th century. As Elam has noted on dramatic characterisation of historical personages, "the critical consideration is not the ontological standing of historical figures in the dramatic world...but the referentiality of the drama" (106). Undoubtedly, the reference to Ekumeku as an historical point signifies not only a resilient resistance to European imperialism as I have observed above, but also a recuperation of the masked tradition which Ekumeku deployed in its guerilla war against imperial Britain. Hence the essential properties of Ekumeku which included masking, communal resistance, aggression and revolt are preserved in the dramatic world of Irobi's play. A typical demonstration of Ekumeku's revolt and resistance is discernible in the political coup which displaced Nwokedi Snr from parliament. It is instructive to note that at the end of the coup a member of the Ekumeku, Ozoemena Nwakanma, a hitherto jobless law graduate, beats Nwokedi Snr by more than 10,000 votes. The coup speech bears the mark of resistance as Mrs. Nwokedi reenacts to Arikpo at the first circle of the play:

MRS NWOKEDI: Do I speak for you?

EKUMEKU: You speak for Ekumeku

MRS NWOKEDI: Shall we squat here with folded arms and
Watch our lives shrivel like cocoyams between the paws of
a disembodied entity, a trousered ape who has no dream for
anybody including himself.

EKUMEKU: No.

MRS NWOKEDI: (*with passion*) My generation, we are the
only possible alternatives. We are the last human frontiers
to the marauding monsters and bleating beasts devouring
our lives daily. We are tomorrow. In our arms are the

banners of a rumpled future. Between our fingers burn the tapers and flames of a new life. In our eyes gleam the light of dawn. We are tomorrow and tomorrow is us. (*Nwokedi* 12)

Just as the Igbo masking tradition has provided Irobi with dramatic resources for an ideal hero, it also embodies the referents, characteristics and symbols required for abiding resolution of the human and metaphysical conflicts in the play. Indeed it needs be mentioned at this juncture that though Irobi's heroes may seem all too neuropathic and anarchic, they fall within the image of what Joseph Campbell termed "mythological hero". Nwokedi Nwa Nwokedi, for instance, fits snugly into the "traditional views of the mythic hero as savior of his people" (Cohn, 1969: 85). Nwokedi Jnr's definition of a rebel to the Adjutant at the Bakalori Youth Service camp during a fight represents the manifestation of a radical and challenger to authority:

ADJUTANT: Who are you?

NWOKEDI: I am a rebel.

ADJUTANT: A rebel? What is "a rebel"

NWOKEDI: A rebel is the man who says "no!". The man who says, "it is enough!". Who refuses to conform to a rotten authority, and threatens the establishment, shakes up the creaky system (fists clenched). I am a rebel, the future is my cause. (*Nwokedi* 31)

That Nwokedi Jnr epitomises the attributes and semiotics of the Igbo masking tradition while conforming to the principles of Irobi's innovative conception of a communal hero highlights what Isidore Diala referred to as " [Irobi's] audacious and often iconoclastic recuperation of Igbo myths and performance traditions" (2011:25). Significantly, in devising a resolution to the human and metaphysical conflicts in the play, Irobi's recourse to the masking tradition is equally

ground-breaking. This recourse agrees with Inih Obong's assertion that the use of mask in African theatre derives from African aesthetic thought and mind. Irobi's aesthetic mode of resolution revolves around the thought and philosophy of apotheosis. Ola Rotimi puts this correlation between African mask and ancestral deities in perspective:

The mysteries and strange forces long identified with mask in traditional thought become real at the moment of ceremonial performances. This is when the power of the god or spirit of the ancestor comes forth and enters into the masked with the aid of the masking medium. The feel of the presence of these powers affects the masker's state of mind... Sometimes, further stimulated by sounds of rhythm (music), this feeling of mystical eminence is heightened and stretched beyond the level of the purely physical to affect the psyche, precipitating of state of trance (1971:144)

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi centralises the transformative power of the mask into a deity as an abiding mode of conflict resolution. Irobi's conflict is at once primordial and contemporary. Though the propitiation of the community is a primordial rite in which a ram is beheaded at the end of every year, Irobi explores a more contemporary conflict of a nation adrift in economic and political deprivation. In a conversation with a fellow corps member, Habiba, Nwokedi Jnr admits that in the pre-colonial period the practice involved human sacrifice, "When time was young, it used to be a man" (38). Irobi's recourse to the mask as a mode of resolution for the primordial and contemporary conflicts draws on the mask as possessing properties of apotheosis. This is highlighted in the Ufor-bearer's chant when Nwokedi Jnr dons the mask:

UFO-BEARER: Our people also say ... when a people mould a god, they also make a man the spirit of the god. And whenever the god is summoned, the spirit appears in the wake of the god. Is it not so?

CHORUS: It is so!

UFO-BEARER: 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 greenness of a new life. Is it not so?

CHORUS: It is so! (91)

In transforming his tragic hero into a deity, Irobi advances a different tragic sensibility from Soyinka's world-view. Soyinka conceives of modern African tragedy as a symbolic re-enactment of the primordial conflict in which Ogun, his patron-deity, emerges as the first actor. In Soyinka's view, "it is this experience that the modern dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting the actions of the first active battle of will through the abyss of resolution" (1976:159). Irobi seems to have reversed Soyinka's tragic vision in a modern world in which human agency and character is not considered a sufficient mode of tragic heroism. Irobi's recourse to the mask suggests aesthetic recreation of divinity that highlights loss of confidence in the human agency to salvage a decadent society. Irobi's drama, therefore, suggests man assuming the role of God. When requested by his mother to "leave vengeance to God" concerning the alleged murder of his twin sister Ezinne and her children by the husband, Senator Arikpo, Nwokedi has responded "when man waits for God to act and God does not act, man takes up the role of God and acts" (64). In Soyinka's drama, man imitates and re-enacts the conflicts of the gods. In Irobi's drama, man transforms into a deity and assumes the role of the gods. The mask therefore is the vehicle through which man is transported to this state of apotheosis and possession. It is a state that has all the enablement of what Soyinka referred to as "the Unconscious, the deep black whirlpool of mythopoeic forces" (1976:153). That this world is negotiated with music and dance, as Soyinka prescribed, is equally evident in Irobi's *Nwokedi*. Indeed Olu Oguibe's description of Irobi's role as Elesin Oba at the University of Nigeria's

Nsukka's production of Wole Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* may have provided an insight into Irobi's engaging experience with music as stimulus for spirit possession which largely defines the kinesthetic composition of the mask in *Nwokedi*. According to Olu Oguibe:

With throbbing music and elegiac praise-singers egging him on, he became transcendent, like a great masquerade, ritual in slow motion, every step and every gesture testifying to the unimaginable burden of a man who must die to please his king and save his people and their universe. As the sweat poured from his brow each night, and hearts thumped all around to the relentless drums, every sinew in his body bore that testament, heroic and monumental, in silence greater than silence itself, spirit already severed from the albatross of flesh. Most had never seen theatre quite as electric and probably never will. Earlier acquaintances had seen Irobi in Shakespearian roles, but those who also saw him in the role of Elesin Oba attest that nothing else could compare. (2010:1).

Though *Nwokedi* is set in a turbulent post-colonial state (the play starts in a period of civilian democracy and ends in military take-over), the activities of Nwokedi Jnr and the Ekumeku age-grade suggest a state of lawlessness. The rampage of the masquerade and its act of ritual murder in a civilian democracy is significantly suggestive of breakdown of state law and order. The masquerade assumption of alternative power in defiance of the state is Irobi's logic that corruption will endanger civil confidence in instituted authority and ultimately cause breakdown of law and order. The conversation between Senator Arikpo and members of the Ekumeku on his offer for a handshake recalls Irobi's prophesy that Nigeria will recline into a state of anarchy¹¹. It is this form of anarchy that defines the operations of Nwokedi Jnr and his Ekumeku age-grade:

ARIKPO: This is the hand that moulds the law.

OBIDIKE: (laughing) The law? The law of animals...

UKADIKE: (laughing) The law of scavengers

¹¹ In Nnorom Azuonye. "My E-conversation with Esiaba Irobi." Sunday Vanguard 21 Sept. 2003: 49.

AMADIKE: (bitterly) The law that have left us floundering like nomads on this blasted earth we call our land.

UKADIKE: The laws that say that as young men, our job in this nation is to look for jobs. Laws my arse! (slaps Aripko's hands with his matchet)

MRS NWOKEDI: Don't do that Ukadike! He is a member of the Constitution drafting Committee! (18-19)

In the pre-modern political system, the activities of masquerade and the Ekumeku age-grade is an integral instrument of state policing and social control. That Ekpe festival includes the masker cutting off a human head as part of its ritual requirement constitutes a structural part of the cultural and social context of the event. However, as a result of the triumph of democratic reasoning, this mode of cultural operation and policing disappeared. There is a sense in which Irobi's reinvention of this phased-out system in *Nwokedi* foregrounds an endorsement of the masquerade and age-grade system as a more viable apparatus for social and political control. It acknowledges Irobi's confirmation that corruption is a breeding-ground for loss of confidence in the state and that anarchy is the youth's response to the failure of the state. In a review of *Issakaba*, a video film premised on an equally violent means of youth policing, Paul Ugor describes this phenomenon as an alternative mode of negotiating new citizenship. Referring to the trend as "re-traditionalizing" the process of governance in Africa, Ugor added that:

These new youth movements could be fruitfully interpreted as marking the rise of alternative, most often violent citizen responses to collapsed or failing states in sub-Saharan Africa, especially where such states fail abysmally in fulfilling their civic responsibilities of protecting their citizens (2011: 82).

It could be argued that in "re-traditionalizing" the mask and the age-grade system, Irobi acknowledges the failure of the Nigerian state. *Nwokedi* is an aesthetic intervention that privileges divine resolution as an antidote to the abysmal human conflict necessitated by the state

failure. Irobi does not endorse anarchy, however inevitable it may appear in the face of uncompromising state failure. *Nwokedi* is a caution that anarchy is a corollary of state failure to discharge civic responsibilities to her citizens. In semiotic terms, the mask is more than an aesthetic recuperation of Igbo cultural tradition. It signifies apotheosis in a drama in which resolution is more appropriately divine. Through the mask idiom Irobi reinvents the gods in their physical manifestations. Therefore Irobi's drama is significantly different from what Martin Owusu termed "drama of the gods". In his study of seven African plays from an essentially post-colonial interpretation of myth and deities, Owusu conceives drama of the gods as that which does not physically involve the deities in the dramatic action (1983:128). Thus Irobi's drama which physically invites the peasant god of Isisioma people for expurgation of social and political ills may be more aptly labeled the drama of the gods.

3.3 SEMIOTICS OF THE MASK: METAPHORIC UTILITY OF THE MASK IN ESIABA IROBI'S *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MASK*.

The significant point has been made that masks in African tradition epitomise power (Tokin, 1979; Picton, 1990; Diakparomre, 2007), ambiguities and paradoxes (Bentor, 1994; de Jong, 1999), magic (Aniakor, 1978; Amankulor, 1977) and other metaphysical realities which Keith Ray and Rosaland Shaw simply referred to as "mask plus" (1987:655). Most of these attributes necessitate discourses which reinforce the mask as demonstrative of iconographic and symbolic potentials (Irobi, 2005; Okagbue, 1997). What Levi-Strauss (1975) referred to as "transformation set" finds compelling relevance in the function of the mask in Igbo cosmology where the mask is imbued with the energy and power of apotheosis. This is typically the case with *Nwokedi* as observed in the first section of this chapter. However, the sense in which the plastic and static

components of the mask transform into performative and kinesthetic masquerade, investigations into the masking tradition are revealing of interdisciplinary curiosities. It is this multiplicity of semiotic possibilities and curiosities that informs Irobi's play, *The Other Side of the Mask*. Beginning with the title, *The Other Side of the Mask* presents the playwright with opportunity to experiment with the many and diverse discourses of the Igbo mask tradition. With a plot structured on the three-dimensional nature of the wooden mask, *The Other Side of the Mask* reveals Irobi's attempt at privileging the mask as not only a static object of Igbo creative energy and vision, but also a central element of dramatic and festival performance.

Set in the studio of Jamike, a brilliant University fine arts lecturer and sculptor, Irobi draws freely from the world in which the mask is the centre-piece of a vast dramatic and visual discourse. From the stage direction, Irobi establishes a setting that calls attention to a semiological exploration of revolt and resistance against social and political deprivation in a post-military democratic society.

In *The Other Side of the Mask* this revolt is metaphorically thrown against the backcloth of a sculptor's studio: "*Chunks of wood litter the entire floor. Masks, statues and stumps of other unfinished carvings share the scanty seats with books*" (5). A carver's studio is representative of a world in which the mask takes pivotal position. And since Jamike's studio also functions as the shrine that houses the family deity, Amadioha, Irobi seems to have devised a drama premised on taking ritual to its ancient religious root. Irobi's recuperation of the shrine, a geographical space and venue for traditional Igbo rituals, into a modern drama constitute one of his most sustained theatre visions. The shrine is the home of deities and a symbolic meeting place between humans and the gods. In portraying the shrine as set in the play, Irobi attempts to decode an Igbo

dramatic tradition in a culture where ritual is circumscribed by what M.J. C Echeruo referred to as “dramatic limits” (1981). In writing about *Ifa* divination shrine in the South-West of Nigeria, Henry Johnson Drewal and Margaret Drewal give a significant insight into the function of the shrine in African ritual performance:

[the shrine is] where the spirit of the deity, which is an active force, may reside. It is composed of containers holding vital ingredients to activate the spirits; objects necessary for the diviner’s performance...Because it resides at that place, the spirit must be continually fed and nourished through sacrifice. And before it is fed, it should be attentive; thus, it is “awakened” with incantations and actions, such as spraying gin on the shrine... If a person neglects his shrine, that is, if he does not offer it food – however little – the spirits will leave. (1983:64)

In Igbo cosmology, distinct from the Yorubas in the account above, neglecting a shrine can lead to tragic consequences. Essentially, *The Other Side Of Mask* dramatises the tragic effects of neglecting the creative genius of Jamike who represents Amadioha’s creative and destructive force. Jamike sums up the play’s most enduring concern when he states that “when the creative juice is neglected, it percolates and ferments. And when it ferments, it evaporates into violence” (53). As Achebe indicates: “The Igbo insist that any presence which is ignored, denigrated, denied acknowledgement and celebration can become a focus for anxiety or disruption” (cited in Irobi, 2009:269). Jamike’s anecdote to Njemanze in the play captures the tragedy that results when the shrine and its deity are neglected:

Jamike: Well, the lot to tend this god fell on me as the one who took to my father’s trade. And secondly, all my life, it has been my undying wish to redeem from nature what the cosmos took from man.

Njemanze: You shouldn’t. You are an intellectual.

Jamike: Prof., I know a family of four young men, educated

young men to whom their illiterate father, on his death bed, handed over their family god: *Osiogwu*. *Osiogwu* is the younger brother of *Amadioha*. A god of war. He gave the god to them to tend. They abandoned it. To the laughter of termites. What happened? Every three years one of them died until the four went, clad in coffins, to break their bread among the dead? (103)

The significance of the mask in *Nwokedi* is different from that of *The Other Side of The Mask*. Unlike Nwokedi Jnr. who must wait for the annual circle of the Ekpe festival to wear the mask, Jamike, being a sculptor works closely with the wood and calls the mask “a garment of wood” (17). However, though Jamike has some sublime nature borne of his artistic and creative impulse, he shares all the anarchic and neurotic characteristics of Irobi’s ideal hero. Yet it can be argued that his characterisation is not borne of the typical prerequisites for initiation into the masquerade cult which marks the semiology of the mask in *Nwokedi*. Rather, in a different mode of character representation, Jamike is crafted, in his own words, to “capture the schizophrenic beauty of our present history” (90). This history chronicles six symbolic years of Jamike’s anguish and deprivation by judges of the National Award for Sculpture to which he has submitted his works without winning any laurel. More importantly, the “schizophrenic beauty” is also a tacit reference to the paradox of Amadioha, the Igbo god of thunder renown for wrathful vengeance. The attributes of Amadioha may have stimulated Irobi’s construction of Jamike’s character whose campaign for vengeance parallels the disposition of Amadioha in his manifestly symbolic “thunderbolt or meteorite stone with which God hurls to strike to death the wicked or evil doers” (Ibeabuchi, 2012:15). Njemanze’s statement to Jamike that “the hearts of true artists are tender. Why is yours made of stone?” (118) suggests Jamike as sharing the physical image of Amadioha. Clearly, Jamike’s anguish and pain that culminates in the campaign for vengeance

is expressed in the following conversation with Njemanze who, though his godfather, is chairman of the panel of judges and has collaborated in Jamike's deprivation and anguish:

Jamike: I am weeping for the wasted years. The murdered years. The shriveled years. The bleeding life. The tender life that gathers moss. The sweating stone. I am weeping for that which I know is mine but which I never get. Prof., where are my laurels.

Njemanze: Your laurels?

Jamike: Where are my laurels? Where are they? Where did you hide them? Did you hide my laurels under the mattress in your bedroom.

Njemanze: Jamike, What's come over you?

Jamike: (*quivering with fury*) Are you not the chairman of the panel that gives out the national awards in sculpture? Are you not the hand that denies me my destiny? Is yours not the face that shrivels in disdain when my work is mentioned for the award? (83)

One may as well classify it as the "schizophrenic beauty" of the life of Esiaba Irobi. Indeed many have discerned in Irobi's life as an artist a prototype for Jamike. It is pertinent to recall Irobi's statement about the correlation between his life and country as embodying vital ingredients of the burden of the artist. In an interview with Nenghi Ilagha, Irobi declared that the "historical rigor mortis and political epilepsy of the country itself has left cracks on the mirror of the mind. Whatever has happened to the country has happened to me" (1989:11). Artists like Jamike and Irobi bear the testimony of their country's asphyxiating history. Olu Oguibe's account and reminiscences of Irobi's life after his death of cancer in April 29, 2010, fits Jamike's character as well:

Between 1986 and 1989, Esiaba Irobi was at the height of his powers as a poet, playwright, actor and theatre director. One of his

great motivators was the annual award competitions run by the Association of Nigerian Authors. Each year he would submit at least two full-length manuscripts in both poetry and drama categories, all meticulously finished and bound. Each year he would end up a runner-up, but never a winner. He would curse the “impotent” judges and do a routine of showing them his arse in absentia. “philistine” he would say, “who have no understanding of what poetry is”. In other countries, he would remind me, people appreciate their youths, recognize their talent, and encourage their efforts, “but here, they pull the cotyledons with bare hands and leave them by sidewalks to die”. (2010:1)

Irobi imbues Jamike with his hardworking, if acerbic, characteristics. Apparently, Irobi’s abrasive nature is also used as instrument for the characterization of Jamike. Convinced of his greatness and suspicious of duplicity by judges of the National Award Committee, Jamike solicits the mediation of Amadioha for adjudication. His conversation with Njemanze clearly articulates the unbiased adjudication of Amadioha’s power:

Prof., I have mentioned your name, the names of the other judges and my name before the incantations. So if I am wrong in my assertions about the quality of my works, I will die tonight. But if I am right, if the judges have used my genitals as a rope to tie me to the tether of failure, the judges will all die tonight. Including you Prof! (103)

In the *Other Side of The Mask*, Irobi is driven by a tendency to explore the different symbolic and iconographic properties of the mask. This is what John Piction may have referred to as the “metaphorical utility of mask” (1990:188). There is an apparent paradox of the mask as revealing, instead of concealing, in the following passage where Jamike reveals to Njemanze that all those believed to have conspired against him have been reported to Amadioha for vengeance. However, one can only deal with Amadioha in a state of possession which must be induced by the mask. Only the mask can reveal Jamike’s transaction with Amadioha. In this sense, the mask

contradicts the traditional function of concealing identity. Though Jamike's face is physically hidden behind the mask, the efficacy of Amadioha's power is ultimately revealed. This phenomenon affirms John Picton's assertion that "mask in Africa effaces its wearer's identity, therein and thereby re-defining it as something other" (1990:188). In the following dialogue, the fear-inducing power of Amadioha is demonstrated and revealed behind Jamike's mask:

Njemanze: Jamike, please forgive. There is healing power in forgiveness.

Jamike: (*as he puts off the mask*) Prof., I never mentioned your name. I was only joking.

Njemanze: Thank you.

Jamike: (*he puts on the mask*) Prof., I did. I mentioned your name. And the god heard your name.

Njemanze: Jamike, why, why, why?

Jamike: (*he removes the mask, smiles*). Anyway, I did not.

Njemanze: Thank you.

Jamike: (*the mask in front of him*) Prof., to be candid, I cannot remember if I mentioned your name or not. You know I was possessed. And under possession, grievances borne in the mind often leap out the sub-conscious like a tadpole in a boiling pond. (104-105)

The role of Amadioha in the resolution of the conflict in the play is very significant. That Amadioha is cast in the mould of a mask highlights Irobi's sustained dramatic aesthetics in dealing with deities as instruments of conflict resolution. Amadioha is the Igbo god of thunder and lightning reputed with rashness and anger akin to Sango in the Yorubaland of South-Western region of Nigeria. Amadioha is an important deity in the pantheon of the Igbo religious universe and thus plays a significant role in the religious, social and political lives of the Igbo peoples. In *Nwokedi*, upon suspicion of conspiracy against his political allies for his loss of the parliamentary election, Nwokedi Snr. has invoked the power of Amadioha for intervention. Amaury Talbot writes that "stones form part of his [Amadioha's] symbol" (1926:47). These

stones form the mythical missiles of Amadioha's unmitigated anger and wrath. According to Geoffery Parrinder:

Amadioha is one of the most important gods {and most villages have a shrine dedicated to him...seen in the lightning and heard in thunder, and punish sorcerers, witches, and those who break his laws. But since he sends rain he is also a giver of fertility and prayers are made to him both for increase of crops and for children in the home. (1962:33)

Therefore, in invoking the power of Amadioha for intervention, Jamike is not only drawing on the seminal wrath of Amadioha, but also the totality of Amadioha's divine will; the will to kill and the will to give children. This is also another attribute that Amadioha shares with Jamike. It is in this sense that one may understand Jamike's reference to his artworks as his children. Earlier in the play, Ziphora speaks about Jamike's statues and carvings as "those carvings are to him more precious than life. He calls them his children". (29). A significant contrast is implied in Jamike's role both as godhead and as human when he is urged to take his betroth Elsie for procreation. The power to create resides in both capacities:

Njemanze: See how she stands like a bride at the altar waiting for you. Move to her. Embrace her. Take her in your arms. Kiss her. Make love to her. Have children. Multiply and...

Jamike: Prof., remove that veil and see my children.

Njemanze: (*aghast*) Your children?

Jamike: Yes, my children. Remove that veil. (81)

However, after murdering his friend, Animalu, Jamike's reminiscences highlight the connection between killing and giving life, both attributes which he shares with Amadioha. The duality of Amadioha as a regenerative and destruction deity is expressed and represented in Jamike:

(*ebbing*) Yes, Blood! Blood! Blood! On my hands. Yet with these hands I have felt the inner life of a piece of wood pulsing like the plate of a new-born-baby's head against my palm. With these hands so smeared with blood I have known the mystic force of a lump of clay as it throbs like the human heart in the hollow of my palm! Yes! With these very limbs so defiled with blood I have experienced the tingling ecstasy as pieces of metal begin to speak in tongues, manipulated into music by these sticky phalanges. With these very fingers I have copulated with night and given birth to light. (110)

Describing Jamike's carving as a spiritual and creative exercise, Ziphora explains that the moment of carving a wood into sculpture engages the mind in a journey with the spirit "in silence or on the wing's of music" (8). Ziphora sees this as a moment of apotheosis and ultimately of creation: "At moments such as this, I see him in his full splendor; the splendor of a sculptor, a carver, a god, a god chiseling chunks of wood into shape, giving them hands and feet, and breathing life and fire into them" (8). Ziphora states that Jamike burns his life in the process of creation:

What do you think he has been using to crave (sic) and sculpt these works? Electricity? No! (*Confidently*), He's been using his life span. And he has almost burnt it out. I hope you do realize how dangerous this art is. He has to give shape to these bits of wood and imbue them with the breath of life. From what source? (*Pause*) His own life! (24)

The myth of Amadioha is very all-encompassing for Irobi. If Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman* is seen as a thesis play that set out to explain Soyinka's "search for meaning of tragedy" (1976:140) within the boundaries of Yoruba (African) worldview as spelt out in *Myth, Literature and African World* (Apia, 2007; Ugor, 2012), then Irobi's motif in *The Other Side of The mask* is a metatext of specific and distinct vision of Igbo tragedy premised on the myth of Amadioha. Isidore Diala has argued, in this regard, that Soyinka's "unapologetic exaltation of

Ogun” is the “vital source of the inspiration and model firing the zeal of generation of African writers to search the African pantheon, myth and legends for deity-heroes capable of stimulating the creative imagination and dramatic action” (2005:90).

However, *The Other Side of The Mask* emphasises Soyinka’s illogic in constructing an African tragic vision on the Ogun myth. Appraising Soyinka’s argument on the origin of Yoruba (African) tragedy as located on the separate qualities of Obatala-Ogun which parallels the Apollonian-Dionysian perspectives as postulated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, one can argue that Irobi seems to have identified Amadioha as unifying these separate tragic sensibilities. Discerning the Greek tragedy as resulting from two “formative forces” (24) of Apollonian-Dionysian duality, Nietzsche writes that “the pair accepted the yoke of marriage and, in this condition, begot Attic tragedy, which exhibit the salient features of both parents” (1956:19). In his seminal essay, “The Fourth Stage”, Soyinka has relied on Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory to explain the origin of African tragedy. Juxtaposing the Greek (European) deities and its Yoruba (African) counterpart for the purpose of tracing the aesthetic and universal commonality, Soyinka asserts that “such is Apollo’s resemblance to the serene art of Obatala the pure unsullied one, to ‘the essence’ idiom of his rituals, that it is tempting to place him at the end of a creative axis with Ogun, in a parallel evolutionary relationship to Nietzsche’s Dionysos-Apollo brotherhood” (1976:141). Soyinka conceives of African tragedy as sharing universal binary of Obatala-Ogun formation after Nietzsche’s Apollo-Dionysus formation. This generalised view of African tragic vision has been questioned by other African scholars who stopped short of seeing Soyinka’s supposition as “Yoruba imperialism of the thought world” (Appiah,1992:82). Recognizing Soyinka’s cultural crusade in the essay, however, Appiah admonishes that “what he needs to do is not take an African world for granted but to take for granted his own culture-to

speak freely not as an African but as a Yoruba and as a Nigerian (79). This is precisely the creative motif of Irobi's *The Other side of The Mask.*, namely; that Amadioha embodies the life-giving and destructive attributes that exist separately in Obatala-Ogun and Apollo-Dionysus dualities.

Irobi seems to acquiesce with Anthony Appiah that Soyinka's logic is only relevant in defining a tragic vision that is specifically Yoruba rather than African. Irobi's exploration of the Amadioha myth in *The Other Side of the Mask* finds expression not only in interrogating Soyinka's assumptions, but also in articulating an Igbo version of a tragic vision. The source, therefore, of Igbo tragedy is unified and emanates from the dual images of birth and death embodied in one single deity (See fig.1). It is instructive to note that Jamike demonstrates this power of Amadioha as transcendental force prior to the murder of Dr. Animalu:

I want to transcend life. As an artist, I must transcend life by creating life. But if the world will neither let me create life nor appreciate it even when I have created life, then I must destroy life. To destroy life also makes me transcend life. (73).

That Irobi mobilises Amadioha to interrogate Soyinka's assumption is not the focus of my argument. However, it privileges Amadioha as signifying the Igbo paradigm of dramatic and tragic experience. As Terry Engleton puts it, "all tragedies are specific: there are tragedies of particular peoples and gender, of nations and social peoples." (2003: XVI).

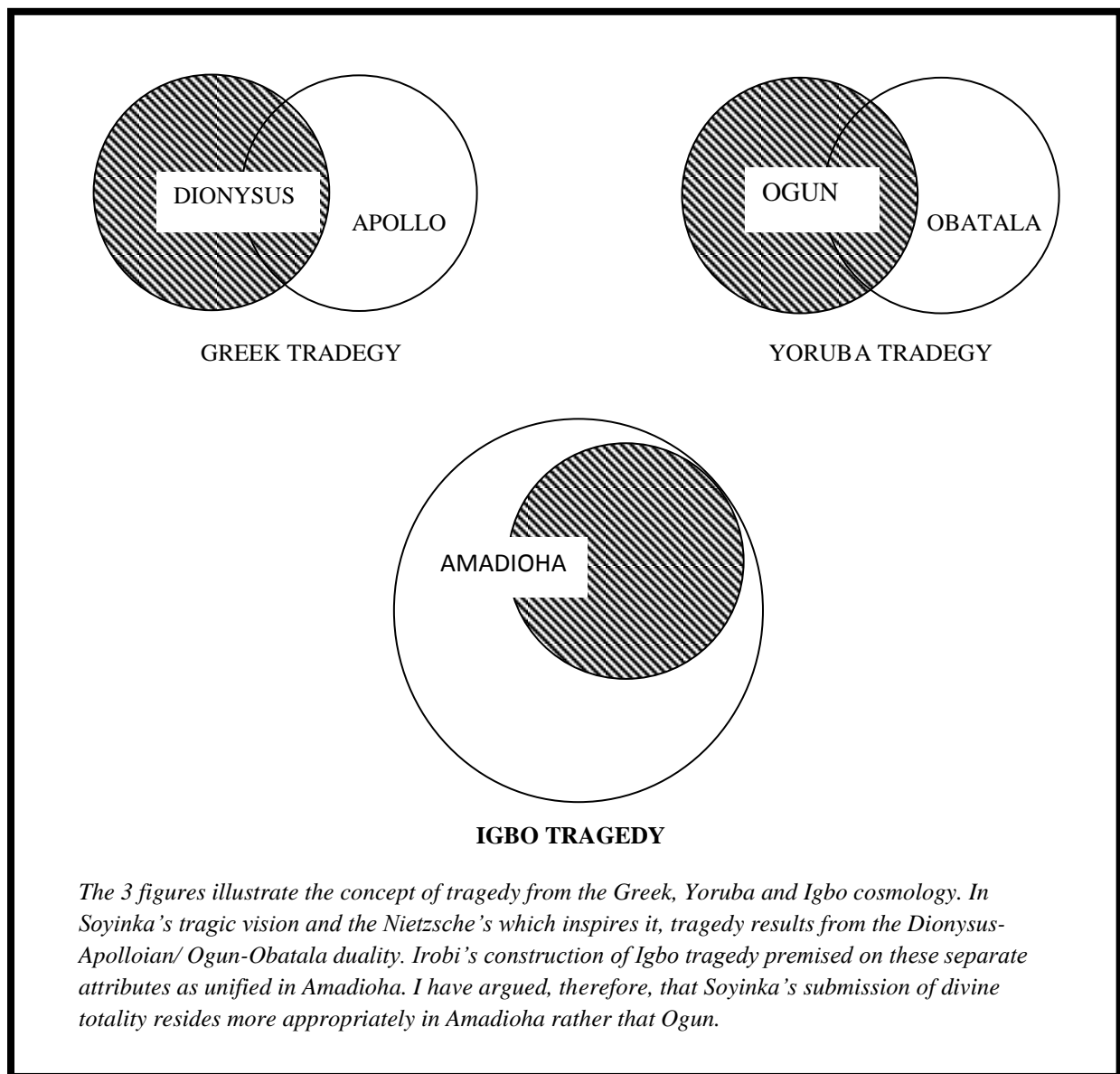


Figure 1

Amadioha particularises the Igbo version of this communal and shared universal experience. My focus, however, is that Amadioha is constructed in the image of a mask. Although Amadioha is described in the play as “a small carving made of wood and copper” (29) with a “grisly face” (100), its manifestation in a mask form is discernible from the conversation below:

Njemanze: Who carved that mask?

Jamike: My father did.

Njemanze: What is it for?

Jamike: For tending Amadioha and doing his will.

Njemanze: What is his will?

Jamike: The will of a god varies from season to season.

Occasionally he demands blood. At other times, life. (105-106)

In the moment of the play, it is Jamike's responsibility to discharge the will of Amadioha. The lot falls on him as the incarnate of the family's ancestral creative spirit. For, although Jamike is the younger of the two sons in his family, he follows his father's lineage as a sculptor. This sets Jamike apart as strong breed in the mould of Nwokedi Jnr. Although Jamike's elder brother, Kamuche, is a successful naval officer to whom political power is entrusted as a Squadron Leader in the Nigerian Navy, Irobi is interested in the spiritual power as a regenerative and creative force. This is evident in Jamike's declaration: "I am interested in the formation of souls. I am interested in the creation of a new world. I believe I am spirit, my father's spirit that is why I carve out of a spiritual reserve" (99). Indeed, Nobert Oyibo Eze describes Kamuche's power as a demonstration of "the degree in which militarism pervades the psyche of the average Nigerian man of authority" (2010:1). In contrast, Jamike is a repository of spiritual force and power. Though Kamuche is indifferent to Jamike's works, he finds interest in Jamike's assignment as the family priest of Amadioha. This is evident in the following conversation which also highlights Jamike as a strong breed:

Kamuche: Who is interested in his works. I only want to see the family fetish we put in his hands.

Zhipora: A fetish.

Kamuche: Yes. Amadioha. It is a small carving made of wood and copper. He is supposed to be tending it. Sacrificing to it every seven days.

Zhipora: (*perplexed*) What exactly is it?

Kamuche: A god.

Zhipora: What sort of god?

Kamuche: The god of justice. Amadioha! If solicited it can send thunder and lightning to one's enemies. (29)

Like *Nwokedi*, *The Other side of the Mask* has extensive historical breadth. Indeed history is used in Irobi's plays to achieve discursive ends. Irobi's drama explores history not just to construct enabling characterisation from the recesses of a glorified and celebrated past as in *Nwokedi*, but to draw attention to, and juxtapose with, an untoward present. While the reference to Ekumeku in *Nwokedi*, for instance, has provided Irobi with a historical resource for the construction of an ideal hero with masquerade attributes, the allusion to Mbari in *The Other Side of the Mask* is a quintessential model in history for the exaltation of the artist and sculptor. While exploring the historical elements of indigenous African art, Irobi identifies Mbari as a significantly adaptive and discursive visual and performance tradition:

Mbari was a communal form of sculpture in Owerri, Igboland, Nigeria. In this art form, selected men and women were isolated from other people so that they could sculpt in secrecy, and later on display in a public gallery among other artifacts and figures of animals, deities, gods, and humans who had played instrumental roles in the lives of the community within a particular period of time. (2006:269)

Mbari sets sculptors apart as creators of Igbo/African deities and as builders of pantheons where the gods live. The sculptors were considered as interveners in the religious and social crises that culminate in the construction of Mbari houses. Arguing that "the first ostensible purpose of an

Mbari house is to render worship to the god in whose honour it is erected” (1996:99) , G. T. Basden highlights the social and religious significance of constructing an Mbari house:

The erection of an Mbari house is prompted by local circumstances. A report begins to circulate that deaths have been rather too frequent and measures should be taken to check this evil. Following old-time precedent, the chiefs consult “dibia”. He advises the building of an “Mbari” house, assuring people that this work will placate the gods and win favours for them; the lives of the old will be preserved and the new life (in form of children) will be bestowed (100).

Thus while *The Other Side of The Mask* represents aesthetic exploration of the denigration and denial of the artist that ultimately leads to madness and neurosis, Mbari recalls the moment in Igbo cultural history when artists were highly revered and glorified. The reference to iconic masters of European artists and men of letters in the play like Franz Kafka, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Goya, Picasso, Nietzsche, Ted Hugh, Camus etc is not only an attempt to “explore the suspected ancient kingship between inspiration and lunacy” as Isidore Diala (2005) has argued , but also to establish a universal common ground for artists subjected to social denial and denigration. Diala’s argument may have resulted from Njemanze’s view that:

Artists...whether poets or painters or sculptors or musicians...often go mad because they work very close to the core of life...very close to dream and intuition and impulse...That’s why they go mad or have mental breakdowns more often than other people. Their work is extremely hazardous both to the body and the spirit. Remember Van Gogh (115-116)

This view is contained by Jamike’s question which ascribes the artists’ madness to denial of recognition by the society. Jamike’s question: “isn’t it possible that artists go mad often, very often because they toil and scratch their spirit out but never get their laurels?” (116) suggests an

important motif of the play. The allusion to Mbari locates the Igbo cultural history as a site of reference for artistic glory, honour and reverence. Mbari signifies not just a home or pantheon of the gods represented in the form of masks, wood images and stones of deities like Amadioha, but also a historical reference point that recalls the honour of the artist which eludes even European cultural history. Jamike captures that moment of history in the following statement:

Prof., time there was when a sculptor had his place in the society.
When he was venerated. When he moulded the image of the gods
of his clan. When he, a mere artist, held captive, for one whole
year, the garment of wood for the naked spirit of the festival of
life. When he stood out among his fellow men and was revered.
But now...(109).

The other side of the Mask is a lamentation for what Isidore Diala referred to as “the wreckage of history” (2011:36). The play suggests that the culture of denial and exclusion of the talented artist is a universal historical phenomenon. In mobilizing Mbari as a discursive element in the play, Irobi makes history a compelling resource to negotiate an unbecoming malaise. It can be argued that the implication of Mbari signifies not just the house of the gods and masks of Amadioha, but also indicates the existence of institutional intervention that can only be located in Igbo/African cultural history. This privileging of African history against European history as possessing unique institution can be classified as “politics of knowledge” (Irobi, 2006:12). An important strand of this politics is that it invokes pan-Igbo and Afro-centric counter-discourse to European hegemonic view of African history and institutions. Irobi has been critical of the philosophies of G.W. Hegel and other European scholars who denigrated and excluded African history. According to Irobi, such views about Africa results from:

European misunderstandings and deliberate distortions of other
people’s history and cultural intelligence. It is the foundation of the
theory of race against which we are all butting our heads and

brains today. Infact this philosophical notion of being (us) and nothingness (the other) can be traced to, among many other European philosophers, Hegel, who believed until his death that Africa contributed nothing to human history. (6)

In this sense, the reference to Mbari in *The Other Side of The Mask* translates to a textual riposte and corrective of such views as Hegel's that "Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (1991:92). In postcolonial discourse, this kind of writing that contests western pejorative view about Africa cultural tradition with a historicist revision is what Isidore Okpesho referred to as postimperial text (see Kasule, 2009:16). *The Other Side of the mask* belongs to the kind of text that suggests new ways of seeing and understanding African history.

The Other Side of The Mask does not belong to the category of plays in the Irobi corpus considered as "theatre of the bloody metaphor" (Oguibe, 3), marked mostly with youthful revolution, communal temperament and violence, however, it is considered "Irobi's finest play" (Diala, 99). In *The Other Side of The Mask*, Irobi portrays a dejected, rejected and solitary protagonist. However, the beauty of the play draws not only from its interrogation of Soyinka's tragic vision as I have argued above, and the discursive breath of its historical counter-discourse, but also, most importantly in the sustained exploration of the diverse interpretations of the mask. This has been briefly hinted at in the opening remark of this section.

As suggested in the title, the physical mask is classified as three-dimensional woodwork, yet its metaphorical function of inscrutability is manipulated to achieve multiple meanings in the play. In connecting the physical structure of the mask with the general characteristics of the dramatic

construction, Irobi attains a telling unity of form and style. An important result of this connection is that true identity of characters are exposed and revealed. Dr Animalu, for instance, who parades himself as Marxist critic is revealed as no more than an “African caricature of Fidel Castro” (55). Jamike locates Dr. Animalu’s real identity on the dangerous revolutionary dogma of Khmer Rouge, a communist movement that reigned with terror in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. This is discernible in the following conversation:

Jamike: Dr. Khmer Rouge, how long will you wear this mask?

Animalu: What mask?

Jamike: The mask of commitment (*Lyricaly*)
Behind the mask a beard. Behind the beard, a face.
Behind the face, a mind. Within the mind, envy,
Spite, mockery, cynicism beguiled with smiles,
Cunning, subterfuge, intrigues. Dr. Khmer Rouge
How long will you wear this mask? (54)

Khmer Rouge represents a dangerous twist in history resulting from communist and Marxist dogmatism which culminated in the Cambodian genocide. Irobi seems to suggest that what happened to Cambodia under the fascist regime of Khmer Rouge will be the lot of any society that yields to such communist and Marxist dogma as Dr. Animalu is propagating. Khmer Rouge is the reality of dogmatism hidden behind the mask of commitment.

Animalu represents Irobi’s caution against dogmatism. Hidden behind the mask of Marxist ideology, Animalu’s real identity is not only his phony and fake communist propaganda, especially as discernible in his art criticism which consists mainly of superfluous search for commitment, but also his immoral conduct with female students of the University. Irobi invokes Khmer Rouge to warn against revolution sponsored by immoral and superfluous propagandists.

Diala's interpretation of Animalu's character to suggest Irobi's perception that Marxist intellection may not necessarily translate to effective revolution (2011: 56) is not far-fetched; however Irobi's interest with Animalu lies more with a far greater social and political danger of misguided dogmatism.

On the other hand, Animalu accuses Jamike of not having a face, but living behind the ever-changing mask of art. Though self-indulgent in his confession of Marxism, Animalu directs attention to a critical question about artists. Through Animalu, Irobi speaks to the lot of artists who spend their checkered lives in self-imposed confinement. *The Other Side of the Mask* ostensibly explores the schizophrenic and paranoid life of artists that transform them into social outcasts. These are artists like Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka and others to whom Irobi makes reference in the play whose lives demonstrate the psychological transformation of an artist to neurotic individuals. Jamike's life as an artist gradually deteriorates into self-confinement. The elder brother, Kamuche, recalls Jamike's teenage years as one filled with radiance of family and communal promises: "How his teenage face radiated its brilliance and beauty. How he shone! A single solitary meteor displaying its splendor amidst a sky of expiring stars" (27). Ravaged by mental disturbances resulting from denial of recognition and socially-constructed avarice, Jamike commits suicide. His death puts to an end a Sisyphean life (seeing as he does his life as an endless toil, Jamike has declared "I am Sisyphus"). Jamike thus belongs to the caste of artists living through the myth of bohemianism. According to Animalu, this is the mask that hides Jamike's identity:

Jamike: (*angrily*) Don't tell me that I am wearing a mask.

Animalu: You are, Jamike.

Jamike: (*advancing*) What mask, you vandal.

Animalu: A gnomic

Jamike: (*pounces on him*) What mask I ask!

Animalu: Your art.

Jamike: (*flaccid*) My art?

Animalu: Yes. Your art. You hide behind it and refuse to face reality. You crouch behind it while life passes you by. You bury your life in meaningless toil and, an artist, you do not even feel what the people around you feel: their ecstasies and agonies, their everlasting...(65)

It is in the mask, an indigenous African performance and artistic form that Irobi locates the sign and metaphor for multiple exploration of meaning in drama; ancient and contemporary. For though the mask is an icon of ancient and primordial tradition, it demonstrates transcendental attributes of contemporary implications. Though Jamike concedes that life is short, yet “art is long”. According to Sunday Anozie, the mask existed before “the Sahara became desert”, however Irobi’s adaptation of the mask metaphor intimates a viable interpretation of social and political situations in Nigeria. Thus *The Other Side of the Mask* negotiates contemporary issues through the prism of myth and tradition. It is a play that celebrates the transcendental power of African mask. Invoking Nietzsche with whom he shares “a certain kinship of mind” (68) Jamike argues that the mask of the artist is marked with profundity and sincerity. Jamike’s statement that “Art, as a mask, has only one face. A beautiful face. Beyond, is the other side. The other side. And that side is ugly. Ugly and grisly” (66) embodies the veneration of African mask as well as caution the danger inherent in neglecting the mask which epitomises the god Amadioha. Irobi seems to venerate the life-giving and creative force of Amadioha, but warns against the wrath of a vengeful deity. This is perhaps what is referred to as the paradox of the mask (Tokin, 1979; de

Jong,1999). In representing this binary and opposing attributes through which Irobi has explored a distinct version of Igbo tragedy , Amadioha may be labeled Irobi's patron deity.

3.4 CEMETARY ROAD: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE MASK IN PERFORMANCE AND REVOLUTION.

Cemetery Road (2009) was published the year before Irobi's death. Clearly, another in Irobi's corpus that explores the binary concern of generational hostility; a dying but irresponsible generation against a growing and deprived younger generation. This is one of Irobi's most enduring dramatic motifs. In *Nwokedi* the impact of this concern is mainly felt between the youthful Ekumeku age-grade and the older generation of politicians represented by Nwokedi Snr. and Senator Arikpo. In *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike is driven to neurotic proportions and ultimately to suicide as a result of social denial designed by the deceit of senior members of the University faculty where he teaches. The same motif courses through the bloodletting and physical violence of youth restiveness in *Hangmen Also Die* and the elemental drama, *FronDED Circle* which plays out dangerously as Onwutuebe explores the world of magic to perpetuate his life on earth by feeding on his children. *FronDED Circle* is perhaps the extreme case of generational hostility identified in the Igbo world of magic and metaphysics. *Cemetery Road* will be located within the same framework.

Cemetery Road is also another of Irobi's plays that takes one back to Irobi's life. In *Nwokedi*, while it is difficult to distance Nwokedi Jnr's masquerade obsession from Irobi's in a play dedicated to his initiation into the Ekpe masquerade cult, *The Other Side Of The mask* presents a more inextricable bonding between character and author. Isidore Diala has observed Irobi's yearning for laurels in an interview when he admitted wanting "some validation, some

recognition, and I felt that there was a lot of politics in what was happening” (2011:36-37). Equally significant in this act of self-portraiture is Irobi sharing his epitaph with Jamike. Jamike’s epitaph etched on the door of his bedroom, which first appeared in Irobi’s collection of poems *Inflorescence*, 1977, highlights a sustained recourse to the artist life as inspiration and resources to his dramatic vision:

There is beauty in my breast
Even here where all things rest
I am the flower of the twilight
That blossomed in the night. (*Inflorescence*, 1; *Mask*, 23)

However, one may view these plays as concentric discourses leading to *Cemetery Road* which is centred more on the artist’s primary constituency. Theatre was the centre piece of Irobi’s life and career. Like Irobi, Mazeli, the central character in *Cemetery Road* is a drama lecturer, actor and theatre director. The “Opening Glee” of *Cemetery Road* recalls Olu Oguibe’s account of Irobi’s persecution by senior members of the faculty at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka that ultimately drove him into exile:

And, every so often, he took a theatre troupe on the road to perform. His troubles with his senior colleagues in the drama department did not seem to slow him down; instead, it drove his exceptional industry even as it fueled some of the violent edge that marked his work at the time (2010:1)

Madubunjoala’s monologue at the “Opening Glee” of *Cemetery Road* provides a most validating background to self-portraiture of Irobi’s life as scholar and dramatist. Exploring as it does one of theatre’s most seminal discourses on the controversy of the definition of tragedy, Madubunjoala opines that “some scholars have argued---and I vehemently disagree with them---that in the second half of the twentieth century you cannot make a tragedy out of the life of an intellectual”

(*Cemetery* 6). It suggests Irobi's contribution to the polemics of anti-Aristotlean conception of tragedy which began with Arthur Miller's *Tragedy of a Common Man*. *Cemetery Road* therefore is the tragedy of the persecuted intellectual. In an apparent example of self-referentiality of theatre, *Cemetery Road* discerns universities in the "Third World" countries as possessing all the ingredients of ignoble conflicts that can fuel a tragic fate. As Madubunjoala asks:

What about us here? In the so-called 'Third World' where there are no research grants...And suppose the egghead decides to climb down from the steps of his ivory tower to confront the stark, humiliating realities of life as it is lived here, what will be his fate?
(6)

Theatre is the background against which Irobi navigates the various and polysemous worlds of Africa's experiences with slavery, colonialism, third world politics, the dynamics of neocolonialism, human rights advocacy, international espionage and the terror of military rule. Surveying the all-inclusiveness and diversity of the play's thematic scope, Diala perceives the play as Irobi's "most ambitious" (2011:34) It is the symbolic sense in which drama is perceived to be the envelope of the representative world of all human experiences. The play thus lays premium on the capacity of drama as a revolutionary tool for African advocacy against the continual and ever-resurgent political, economic and socio-cultural malaise of the post-colony. In placing the African mask at the centre of this advocacy and revolution, Irobi not only acknowledges the African mask as a significant element of ritual and ancient dramatic tradition capable of transcending to the modern stage, but also highlights its adaptive revolutionary sensibilities. Irobi seems to argue that the instrument for a modern economic, social and political revolution can be located in a primordial mask tradition. Significantly, the appropriation of African mask into the inevitable novelty of proscenium-type theatre has been one of Irobi's

contributions to a dramatic tradition that stretches beyond the limits of Igbo ritual¹². However, deploying the resources of the mask idiom to cause a political revolution distinguishes Irobi's drama as a proactive demonstration of transcendental power of the mask. Mazeli's introduction of the mask reinforces a symbolic adaptation of the mask as instrument of subversion of political power. There is an implication of coup plotting by Mazeli and his troupe of University drama class as they rehearse a performance to assassinate the Military president of Nigeria during a commissioned performance at Nicon Neo Niga Hotel:

Amina: ...What happens to us after we have assassinated the president? We will be shot, won't we?

Mazeli: Are you afraid of death?

Amina: We are not afraid. But we don't want to die.

Mazeli: You don't want to die?

Chorus: We don't want to die, Dr Anyanwu.

Mazeli: Alright, bring the mask to my house. I will be the spirit in the mask. In fact, give it to me now. (*To the student in the mask*) Remove it.

Mask: (*waves his head*) Dr. Anyawu, I will not remove this mask.

Mazeli: Do you want to die?

Mask: Yes, I want to die provided it is after assassinating the president. (115)

Mazeli's reference to the mask as "Ancient spirit" (114) suggests the mask as a pre-historical element of African cultural tradition. The mask predates the colonial contact in the 19th century which introduced western culture into Africa. Irobi conceives of African mask as constitutive of powers that can break the western cultural hegemony symbolized by the proscenium arch. This is the central focus as Mazeli directs the troupe for the revolutionary, insurgent performance:

¹² Though Osse Enekwe has argued that Igbo ritual is a dead-end, Leon Onyewuchi Osu and Isidore Diala have both separately stated that Esiaba Irobi's adaptation of Igbo traditional and ritual elements into his modern dramas have stretched the ritual beyond the limit.

With the piece you have just shown me, the play is still trapped by the Proscenium Arch. Now we are going to break that illusion. Music! (*The drummers intensify their beat*) Dancers (*two female students dance into position on both sides of the mask*) Father! (*The mask appears, begins to dance*) Move! (112)

Returning to the recurring discourse on the naivety of Western scholars about the semiology of African masquerade performances, *Cemetery Road* provides Irobi with yet another opportunity to expatiate on what has become synonymous with his scholarly career. In one of his most incisive essays on the elements of traditional African performance, Irobi discerns African mask as part of the phenomenology of lived experience embodying cultural codes and symbols too complex for the comprehension of the western observer (2006). This is obviously why Hazel, the BBC correspondent in the play, could not understand the immanent metaphysical danger in photographing a dancing masquerade. Soyinka presents similar view in *Death and the King's Horseman* when Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings tango in the egungun ancestral masquerade for the entertainment of the Prince at the Ball. Olunde's statement to Mrs. Pilkings: "You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (192) suggests the highpoint of colonial arrogance. It could be argued that while Soyinka ascribes arrogance to Western attitude to African culture and history, Irobi perceives it as one of ignorance.

Cemetery Road undergirds Irobi's perception of the change in western attitude towards African history from arrogance during the colonial encounter to ignorance in the postcolonial history. Irobi makes mockery of colonial ignorance when the BBC reporters, Douglas and Hazel, are erroneously dispatched to Nigeria to cover the story of an impending coup in Liberia. Earlier the BBC Controller of Programmes in London had asked "Are you sure you are in Nigeria and not

some other African country that sounds like it. Algeria, for example?" (108). After consulting his diary and the West African map, the Controller's apologies suggest the tragic consequences of colonial ignorance as the reporters' visit to Nigeria culminates in the chain of events that lead to the eventual death of Mazeli:

Controller: I am really sorry. You should have been in Liberia. I've just got sitrep from Renter. There has been a coup in Liberia. I misinformed you. (*moves back to the map, finds Liberia*).

Douglas: (*sarcastically*) I understand perfectly well.

Controller: You can't tell one of these ungovernable African countries from the other, can you? They all sound alike, don't they: Nigeria, Liberia, Algeria, Mauritania, Gambia, Zambia. Why couldn't the colonial idiots who created these countries give them more distinguishable names... (108)

Thus, in *Cemetery Road*, Hazel's conception of the mask as a piece of artifact fit for entertainment in England is promptly contained by Mazeli's insight into the religious function of mask. This is collaborated by the reaction of the dancers and The Mask as Hazel makes her entry with the camera:

[*They all begin to move. HAZEL enters with her camera. The music ebbs automatically. The characters stop dancing and only sway, rooted to their spots*]

Hazel: (*begins to set up and focus*) Mazeli, can I record this.

Mazeli: I am afraid you cannot.

Hazel: Why not?

Mazeli: Because it is a sacrilege. Even your presence here is sacrilege.

Hazel: But the mask looks interesting. Our viewers in England will be most delighted (*switches on the audio*) (112)

It will appear that Irobi's premise of western ignorance of African history, geography and religious traditions is pervading. In Igbo religious tradition, it is considered a taboo for women to interact with masquerades. In *Cemetery Road*, Irobi deals not only with the sacrilegious act of photographing a masquerade, but also with the fact that Hazel is a woman. Hazel's photographing of the mask exemplifies what Irobi termed "cultural insularity" (Taylor, 2005:32) of the west. The reaction of the mask is a demonstrable representation and sign of the predictability of danger and death as Hazel, a woman, produces a camera:

[The mask lets out a terrifying growl, then bellows. Begins to signal with its hands. One of the students hands him a knife. They begin to dirge. The mask advances menacing towards her. The stage darkens. A hue of red pervades. MAZELI pulls the mask back with its leash then rushes to the equipment and switches it off. Turns the camera's lens around to the opposite direction. The mask stops.](113)

Cemetery Road demonstrates the transcendental force of the metaphysical power of African mask. It suggests that though taken out of its original context, the mask constitutes what Elizabeth Tonkins referred to as "repository of power" (1979:11). In deference, Mazeli refers to the mask as "sacred spirit". At other times he addresses the mask as "Father". And though the mask is deployed in the play primarily for the theatrical and performance purposes, Mazeli refuses to accept the mask as a mere tool of playmaking. To Mazeli, the magical and metaphysical power of the mask transcends the cosmetic and representational limits of drama. This view which sees African mask as an embodiment of power contradicts the western perception of the mask as artifact and viable piece of entertainment. The mask even as used in a dramatic piece does not deprive it of its ritual components and power. This is why Mazeli is alarmed at Hazel's effrontery in photographing the mask. It is instructive that Mazeli will rather

give up the tape that contains reductive images of Africa for which he is haunted by the State Security Services in collaboration with British Broadcasting Services than allow Hazel to contaminate the sacredness of the mask:

It is sacrilege, Hazel. (*angrily*) This is not a play thing. It is a sacred spirit. How dare you take a photograph of it? Look, I advice you right now, for the sake of your life, to get away from here as quickly as you can, and as far. If it is your tape that you want, go to my house, 13 Cemetery Road, and ask my fiancée Somadina to give it to you. Tell her I said so (113)

Mazeli places on the mask his hope of redeeming the nation of its many and diverse problems that span its history from slavery, colonialism, post-colonial complication, and corrupt African collaboration. Mazeli's heroes are Che Guevera, and Queen Amina and Thomas Sankara. Identifying with western communist ideology, Mazeli works with his University drama class on improvisational community theatre premised on the ancient mask. It is instructive that Irobi's handling of Marxist propagandists is very characteristically fatalistic as evident in the death of Animalu and Ogbasiegbe in *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Hangmen Also Die*, respectively. However, he creates another consequence of the propagation of Marxism in *Cemetery Road*. Clearly *The Other Side of The Mask* is a cautionary tale against the danger of self-indulgent propagation of communism as evident in Cambodia during the evil regime of Khmer Rouge. In *Cemetery Road*, there is a sense in which one of the greatest threats to the fighting spirit of a revolution is the wherewithal to stand the harsh economic realities of a depraved country. This is what Lawani, Mazeli's University friend and communist comrade is confronted with:

Mazeli: So you joined the SSS, Lawani. What happened to the dreams we shared at school? Where did those dreams decay?

Lawani: They decayed in the compost heap of reality. Of

unemployment. Of poverty. Both you come from middle class families. Somadina's father was a permanent secretary. Yours, a minister. Remember, my father was a labourer until I got this job. Did you expect me to go chewing palm kernels all my life.

Mazeli: Couldn't you get any other job except this one that pitches your tent with tyrants who prosper on the hunger of the poor. Vultures without vision. (142)

In revisiting the topic of slavery in the twenty-first century and the often western containment which draws on African collaboration as a justified reference point, Irobi validates a historical tragedy with a recurring presence of a post-colonial version of another tragedy. Lawani's sabotage of the economic and political interests of Nigeria and indeed Africa by enriching himself through simultaneous membership of both M16 and CIA, suggests history repeating itself. In post-colonial politics, western manipulation of the economies and politics of third-world countries is mainly through infiltration of secret service agents. As Lawani asks "How can we determine our own destiny when M16 and CIA Agents are crawling all over our country like scorpions. Fomenting coups. Destabilizing governments" (134). This is the new mode of slavery. Unarguably, Irobi is sounding pan-Africanist in this view which recalls Kwame Nkrumah's argument that imperialism relied on the support of state mechanisms like the armies and intelligence as a collective structure of invisible government (1974:204). Indeed Nkrumah popularized the term 'neocolonialism' reported to be "the most dangerous form of colonialism" (Rao, 2000:167). This danger is expressed in the following conversation in which the Nigerian military establishment will rather arrest Mazeli than protect their national interest and image continually misrepresented in the western media:

First Soldier: We have come because we do not want any trouble with the British Government. If those correspondents were from Cameroun or Congo Brazzaville or Burkina Faso, we can kick them out of the country and say, as we kick their arses, ‘to hell with them’

Mazeli: Why, why, are you soldiers filled with so much self-contempt that you would treat foreign journalists with such respect and abuse African correspondents. Why?

First Soldier: Because we know the home governments of the African correspondents cannot do anything to overthrow the government of this country. No power in Black Africa can subdue Nigeria. (*smokes*) But with Britain or the USA, we have to be very careful. Those two countries can overthrow and overrun the government of any African country in twenty-four hours (18).

In *Cemetery Road*, although colonialism has ended in theory, Africa’s political economy is manipulated from the capital in London. This is why Gayatri Spivak has argued that neocolonialism is premised more on economic than territorial control (Young, 1991:2). This form of control is achieved through secret agents and information gathered from African collaborators like Lawani and disguised espionage of BBC reporters like Douglas. However, it is the African collaboration with the enslavers that constitute the tragedy of repeated history:

Mazeli: So what do you do for the CIA and M16.

Lawani: I send them the deliberations of the Supreme Military Council everyday.

Mazeli: (*Gazing at him*) Lawani, How can you do this to us. To us and our children. How can you lend your fingers to the hands that rupture our future...What about the oath we swore? To fly our flags one day and look at it not like a rag, but with pride? (143)

It is this kind of pan-nationalism that characterises much of Mazeli’s attributes. Mazeli is very much like Nwokedi Jnr in accepting a messianic responsibility of championing and spearheading

the redemption of the country. Just as Nwokedi Jnr finds in the Ekumeku age-grade a communal and collective support for this redemptive assignment, so has the University community theatre troupe been a willing cohort for Mazeli's near-suicide but patriotic missions. Nwokedi Jnr and Jamike may be strong breeds in terms of the myth of their separate communities; however Mazeli is a strong breed in the contemporary sense. The endearing attempt at re-visioning of African history makes Mazeli a more insightful character than the volatile Nwokedi Jnr and neurotic Jamike. While I have argued that Nwokedi Jnr and Jamike are fashioned from the characteristic attributes of Ekpe cultic mask and Amadioha deity respectively, Mazeli is rather constructed from an ideological base that interprets populist views of Marxism to African political tradition. This is discernible from Mazeli's adoption of mixed attributes of Thomas Sankara, Che Guevera and Queen Amina as icons of his struggle. Mazeli embodies a pan-African application of Marxist ideology on both the colonial and class struggle. Mazeli's improvised documentary on the displacement of the peasant community of Bakalori farmers to the infertile land demonstrates class struggle as a corollary of the colonial struggle. The documentary typifies a struggle not just against the displacement of the peasant community, but also against fraudulent government attempt at compensation. Mazeli rebukes western reductive conception of class struggle in Africa as a reflection of the predominance of poverty:

It is rather about struggle. The struggle of the peasants of this country who are daily humiliated by the snobbery of the ruling class which is modeled on your own upper middle class. The military leaders who were trained in Sandhurst. The Beasts of Sandhurst. And the civilian politicians; the everlasting donkeys of democracy in a country where democracy means a government of demons by demons and for demons. (*He now has the tape*) It is about the mad mathematics of politics, the abuse of power and the determination of the dispossessed and the down-trodden to regain their dignity and self-pride because they now understand the chemistry of their suffering. No, it is not about poverty. Its theme is Struggle. Struggle and Regeneration. Its

title is ‘The beauty of resistance.’ Yes, (*Screaming*) ‘The beauty of resistance!’ (43)

It is instructive to note that Irobi has made theatre the pivot of Mazeli’s ideals and vision. As earlier observed, Mazeli’s theatre is a phenomenon constructed from the African ritual and mask idiom that must not be taken for granted or be perceived as a piece of entertainment. It is strongly premised on the engaging revision of African history and politics in a neocolonial environment. This is demonstrated in Mazeli’s obeisance and worship of the mask before performances. In this regards, the mask constitutes Mazeli’s deity. It represents for him the vital solution to the problems of the post-colony. Thus a performance signifies worship. The sacredness of the mask is highlighted in the engaging rituals that Mazeli performs before a performance:

Mazeli brings out some yellow power: odo, a piece of white chalk, an egg, some palm frond leaves and begins to chant ‘igbaala egwu ike mbu, iya ahaha’. The actors/actresses take it up and intensify the rhythm. At its peak, he changes the song into the even hotter “Arikonko ogu abiala”. It heats up. As the actors and the actresses stamp their feet furiously at the same spot, MAZELI kneels before the mask (113)

Mazeli’s obeisance demonstrates David Kerr’s assertion that “masquerades were usually based on ancestor worship where the ancestral figures provided ideological support for the status quo” (1995:6). Mazeli’s worship before performances suggests that the mask mediates the persistence of mystification and metaphysical mystery even in a secular performance. Through the implication of the mask, Irobi’s theatre continues an unbroken connection with its religious origin. Spanning a performance tradition that predates the colonial contact, the mask also constitutes what Kerr referred to as “teleological perspective” (41). The mask belongs to the indigenous performance modes which, as Kerr argues, “has asserted itself fairly independently”

(41) to survive and persist in the post-colonial literary theatre. This is perhaps why Anna Hlavacova has referred to the masquerade dance as a “carver of time” (2003:66). Aside from the persistence of spiritual mystification; Irobi’s adaptation of the mask represents a practical manifestation of the persistence of the indigenous mode across time.

It is noteworthy that Mazeli’s theatrical technique is improvised dramatisation of diverse topical issues on the continent. This mode of performance lays premium on the mobility of production which could become strategic if vexed issues generate political reactions from the military junta. This is evident during Mazeli’s arrest when the troupe of his drama class continued improvising even more portent and revolutionary skits in his absence. It suggests also continuity and survival of the performance tradition even after the death of the iconic Mazeli. At Mazeli’s death, the troupe goes on rampage, bearing the mask and stabbing Lawani to death in vengeance. The mask is a symbol of an undying, endless tradition that outlasts even the most iconic wearer.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues with the discussion of the selected plays of Esiaba Irobi. This is subdivided into three sections. While the first section discusses the knife as facilitator of the masquerade's transformative power with specific reference to the performance of *Nwokedi* at Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria; the second section will discuss the issue of language against the metaphysical world of the masquerade. The third section will focus on intertextuality in the selected plays.

4.2 THE PERFORMANCE OF THE MASQUERADE AND SEMIOTICS OF THE KNIFE IN ESIABA IROBI'S *NWOKEDI*.

It has been noted that Ekpe festival on which Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* is structured highlights the farming occupation of the people of Osisioma. Amakolor writes that Ekpe festival marks the climax of yearly ritual which begins "after crops have been planted and nothing is left in the barns" (1981:114). As farmers, the knife represents a significant semiotic of the farming occupation. Thus, in introducing the masquerade as a knife-wielding adjudicator and executioner of justice, Irobi connects a people's source of livelihood and life-renewing energy with their ultimate mode of justice. Similar phenomenon is discernible in Ngwa people who, like Osisioma community of Irobi's *Nwokedi*, eke out a living on subsistent agriculture. Amankolor expresses this view in an essay that describes the first all-Ngwa cultural festival as a prototype of Osisioma community:

They inherited rich agricultural lands, which stimulated the development of the knife-and-hoe culture to a large extent. The traditional Ngwa man loves his knife sharp and clean, and it accompanies him almost wherever he goes. The knife has therefore become the symbol of strength, industry and manhood for the people. It is employed in farming, ritual sacrifices and defense. Dexterity in its use distinguishes not just the single man but his entire village. Such skill is evident in the Ekpe festival or during the burial ceremony of an elderly person, when the goat or sheep is sacrificed by severing its head from the rest of the body with one clean stroke of the machet. Women are identified with the hoe in the same way that men are with the knife (1977: 37).

Osioma, the setting of Irobi's *Nwokedi* is very much like the Ngwa people described above. Both are agrarian communities and celebrate the Ekpe festival to re-enact its rites of agricultural renewal which constitute the main source of their livelihood. The knife is not only a symbolic tool of this agricultural industry and strength of the community, but also the symbolic tool of sacrifice during the rite of renewal. It is instructive that *Nwokedi* opens against the background of a symbolic stage direction where "a tethered goat crops cassava leaves: from a wilting stem" (*Nwokedi* 1). As peasants, the worship of Amadioha is central as the bringer of rain (Amadioha is the god of thunder, lightning and rain). Mrs. Nwokedi referred to Amadioha as the "most potent ikurube (god) in this village" (*Nwokedi* 9). The image of the community as a peasant and rustic society is clearly expressed in the Ufo-Bearer's trance-like invocation:

UFO-BEARER: Nwokedi nwa Nwokedi, I invoke your spirit with the potent power of the god whose ram you have slaughtered at this shrine these six years. I invoke you with a violent voice because the world is waiting at the threshold of a new life. The children are waiting, the parents are waiting. The farmlands are waiting, the barns are empty, the cooking pots are empty, the entire village is waiting to see the edge of the sharpened knife glint in the sunset, painted by the blood of sacrificial animal. Is it not so?

CHORUS: (*from all around*) It is so.

UFO-BEARER: Nwokedi, we are a peasant people. We live by the strength of our hands and the sweat on our backs. We know that what we owe the earth is toil and what the earth owes us is a smiling harvest. If in December the barns are bare and our rafters are filled with the husks of life; 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. Is it not so?

CHORUS: (*a thunderous answer*) It is so.

Wielded by the masquerade described as the chief actor of the Ekpe dance drama (Amankolor, 1980:120), the knife is the central arbiter of the communal renewal. Therefore the knife can be classified as a significant semiotics of the masking tradition. The emphasis on the strength and brute force of the masquerade as hero must collaborate with the image of the glinting knife. In Amankolor's view, "a sharpened knife" recreates a moment and time of "spiritual and emotional crisis" (122). Consequently, the knife is a significant tool of a hero who must resolve the communal conflicts and crisis generated by the 'inclement season'. It is into this circle of seasonal agricultural decay that Irobi introduces a parallel social and political rot. This view of the knife as a tool of the masquerade-hero is highlighted in the excerpt below:

NWOKEDI: (*possessed*) I am the spirit within the mask!

FINGESI: Nwokedi!

NWOKEDI: (*Slashing with his hand*) And slashes at the heels of an inclement season.

FINGESI: Nwokedi!

NWOKEDI: I am time. Time that trips tyrants!

FINGESI: Nwokedi!

NWOKEDI: Mine is the hand that murders the old year.

FINGESI: Nwokedi!

BAFINONE: (*Offstage*) Every hero has a thousand faces.

As Amankulor has noted above, the mode of handling of the knife on the sacrificial animal is of immense significance to the ontology of the Igbo worldview. For effective propitiation of the social and political evils plaguing the community, the wielder of the sharpened and glinting knife must sever the head of the sacrificial animal with a single stroke. It will have been characteristically incoherent for an indolent person to wear the mask. For failure to sever the sacrificial animal with a single stroke will have had to tragic consequences which will culminate in the failure of the communal propitiation and cleansing. It is from these mythological attributes that Irobi extracts and filters the enabling ingredients of a quintessential hero for his drama. Amankulor explains this phenomenon aptly:

When the actor takes the knife, he moves round and round the sacrificial goat tied to a peg on the sacrificial spot trying to make a decision. As in all traditional dance-drama and ritual the goings-on in his mind are those of the whole village. That he is re-enacting an ancient sacrifice by which the people recall an adventure by their forebears during which a human being was sacrificed to appease the gods, is known by all. If he succeeds in dispatching the goat with one stroke of his knife, there is hope that the village tradition is in progress. Otherwise, something is wrong somewhere which may need the consultation of the oracles. It is of dramatic significance that the sacrifice must be performed and cannot be shirked but there is the conflict as regards how the stroke is to be administered and the result (1981:122).

The process of administering the knife with a single stroke in the Ekpe festival is a prescribed ritual practice among the Igbos of South-east Nigeria. It echoes, however, in J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*. Since J. P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* is set against the Ijaw ethnic background of the Midwest of Nigeria, it could be argued that what Victor Okaegbu referred to as "aesthetic flexibility" is evident between Igbo provenance of the Ekpe festival and the Ijaw ethnicity.

Okaegbu has used the term “aesthetic flexibility” to describe the tendency of a cultural code to be understood outside its zone of origin. In J.P Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, Zifa’s description of the mode of sacrifice demonstrates aesthetic convergence and flexibility between J. P. Clark’s Ijaw community and Esiaba Irobi’s neighbouring Igbo Community. While this may be a reflection of what Eli Bentor classified as “dynamic exchanges between the southern Igbo and Niger Delta peoples” (2002: 26), it could be argued that this interaction suggests Clark’s influence on Esiaba Irobi. This influence is manifestly discernible in the following dialogue in Clark’s *Song of a Goat*:

ZIFA: You shall be satisfied with all that I do today,
Mother. Here, Tonye, hold the goat by
The feet and I will by the horns, And you,
My wife, see how with one stroke of my knife
I server the head from the trunk

ORUKORERE: A brave stroke, my boy, a brave stroke!
There was only one man in all the creeks
Who could do it like that, but he died many
Years ago...(*Goat* 36)

Most African scholars of masquerade theatre have over-looked the semiotic implication of the knife as functional and utilitarian in the discourse of Igbo masquerade tradition. Although Osita Okagbue acknowledges the masquerade as manifestation of communion with the metaphysical universe of Igbo ancestors and deities (2007:19), his investigations into the *mmonwu* (masquerade) theatre glosses over the semiotic detail of that transition. If the masquerade represents man’s material attempt to negotiate the tripartite universe (the world of the living, unborn and the dead) of the Igbo cosmology (Ukagbue, 2007; Okafor, 1991), then it is the knife which provides the strength and power of that numinous transition and negotiation. Describing the Knife, which the Igbos call *Ubejili*, as “the first gift of a man to his son” , Onwuzolum (1977)

observes that “ Ubejili is a strong knife with a sheath and symbolizes strength” (154). The knife is at the core of Igbo patrilineal agnate kin. Onwuejeogwu’s (1972) description of the wooden image of an Igbo man’s personal deity, Ikenga, as a figure seated with two horns and a knife reinforces the deictic and symbolic signification between a man and his deity. According to Onwuejeogwu, “ the knife in his right hand means that he must cut down any obstacles on the way ”(92). Wielding the knife at the point of sacrificial cleansing and expiatory rites, the masquerade represents the communal deity. Using the knife in the process of sacrifice, the mask purportedly “cuts down” obstacles in the world of Igbo existence.

Significantly, the transfer of power and strength from father to son in the Igbo material world which is the symbol encoded on the Ikenga wooden surface, juxtaposes an equally empowering transmission of the masquerade through the supernatural world. The knife is the symbolic conduit of that two-worldly transmission. It is the knife, as it were, that enables what Okagbue described as “facilitating process of interchange and co-existence between the spiritual and material” (2011: 90) world. The primacy of the knife is highlighted in communities where the masquerade performs the ritual sacrifice. The role of the knife as the centre-force of the masking tradition is reinforced in Irobi’s *Nwokedi*, “I am the spirit within the mask...the hand that wields the glinting knife” (39). This role is evident in the performance of Esiaba Irobi’s *Nwokedi* at the Comassie Theatre of Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. A production of three-hundred level students of the Department of Theatre Arts, the performance represents a replication of the phenomenological experience of the Igbo masquerade culture on the University stage.

Owerri, the home-town of Imo State University is home to Ikeji festival described as “carnival of masquerades”. Ikeji is associated with Ekpe masking (Bentor, 1994: 325). It is therefore the nuance of this festival culture that was brought to the performance. In connecting the

performance to Ekpe, the implication of dance drama was established. As Bentor puts it “ Ekpe is a dance because if you do not know what is Ekpe, all you see is the dance” (324). However, in consonance with the carnival nature of Owerri festivals, the director, Akunjobi Adaobi, has introduced the Agaga¹³ masquerade from the Ikeji festival repertoire to dance alongside the Ekpe masquerade. *Agaga* is a huge, fiery- looking masquerade nicknamed *ajipussu* (Fig.2). The carnival-style simultaneous performance of the two masquerades suggests the influence of Ikeji festival on the director. Only the Ekpe masquerade, however, wields the symbolic knife for the sacrifice.

AGAGA/AGIPUSSU MASQUERADE



Agaga or ajipussu; so-named because of the raffia-nature of its body, dances to the chant of the Ufor-bearer played by Obialor Chinwendu. Photo taken at the Imo State University performance of Nwokedi, 2012

Figure 2

¹³ The Agaga masquerade, which means “that which must not be allowed to pass-by”, is a huge masquerade that represents a tendency to withstand impediments. In Igboland, it is nicknamed “Ajipussy”, which translates to the hair of a pussycat because its body is made of hair raffia. The reference to pussycat is only physical since it has not the felinity of pussycat. Rather, it shares the ferocity of the Ekpe Masquerade.

EKPE MASQUERADE



Masquerade displaying the bloodied knife (Ubejili) after a sacrificial action in Irobi's Nwokedi wherein both Arikpo and Nwokedi Snr are slaughtered before the Osisioigu deity. Photo: Imo State University, 2012

Figure 3

Simon Ottenberg (1973), in reviewing the Afikpo masquerade performance in Igboland, notes that the understanding of masquerade theatre in Africa requires close observation of the audience (33). The performance at the Commassie Theatre is an enactment of the experience and tradition peculiar to both performer and audience. Joining the choral rendition of the Ekumeku age-grade and Osisioima villagers with songs adopted mostly from the Ikeji festival repertoire, the audience participation suggests what Ottenberg described as “conspiracy” between the masquerade performer and the audience.

Ottenberg’s theory of “conspiracy” may have resulted from the contrastive signs of fear, shock, awe, excitement and other “mask-plus” effects which Ini Ebong referred to as “unseen forces that surround [the mask]” (1984:4). These effects are heightened when the Ekpe masquerade descended on the sacrificial ram with the knife, brutally slashing several times before eventually

beheading the animal. The enactment of Nwokedi-bearing mask is as exciting as it is fear-inducing.

HUMAN SACRIFICE



The lifeless bodies of Nwokedi Snr (Okoroigwe Uzoma) and Arikpo (Okafor Christian) slaughtered by Nwokedi Jnr sprawl across the blood of the ram at the Commassie Theatre.

Figure 4

ANIMAL (RAM) SACRIFICE



The Ekpe masquerade (Nwokedi Jnr played by Onumajuru Valentine), lifts the slaughtered ram while the Ekumeku members chant the incantation of the Ekpe rites.

Figure 5

Ini Ebong has argued that the unseen forces of the masquerade constitute phenomenological experiences that are absorbed by the audience in their encounter with the mask tradition:

the phenomenon is surrounded by taboos, sanctions, and sacrosanct rites and rituals for the protection of those who more directly handle, communicate, and commune with the mask and the unseen forces that surround it. Therefore, when worn or displayed, the completed mask usually becomes a complex apodictical suffusion of strange, metaphysical powers which its wearer absorbs and is directly felt and experienced by the audience. (1984:4)

My argument is that if the masquerade radiates signs that are absorbed by the audience as suggested by Ini Ebong, then the image of the glinting knife imbues the masquerade with heightened effect of fear and terror. Undoubtedly, the knife adds a physical force and threat to the metaphysical power of the masquerade and aids the “psycho-physical powers” of the masquerade medium. It could be advanced that in a masquerade theatre in which the audience is perceived to have absorbed the unseen forces of the masquerade, the presence of the knife will radiate more fear capable of alienating the audience. While the knife may strengthen and facilitate the masquerade in its ritual assignment, it could further alienate the audience with shocks produced in blood-spilling sacrifices. The blood-letting slaughter of the sacrificial ram at the Commassie Theatre during the performance of *Nwokedi* affirms the strength of the masquerade, but also produces shock and horror in the audience. That the head of the ram was decapitated, not with the mythic single stroke, but with administration of several strokes, exacerbates the fear and horror of the audience. Thus in semiotic terms, the significance of the knife in the Igbo masquerade theatre is that of being symbolic and psycho-physical facilitator of the ritual action, yet that which alienates the audience. It could be argued that in alienating the

audience, the knife functions to prevent any distraction of the masquerade from its role as mediator.

The Ekpe religious prescription for the slaughter of the sacrificial ram with a single stroke could not be accommodated in the pragmatism of performance at the Commassie Theatre. Although the mask-bearing Nwokedi Jnr demonstrated the characteristic strength and aggression of a possessed masquerade, his inability to sever the head of the ram with a single stroke reinforces the gap between theatre and ritual. While every extra stroke of the knife invalidates the perceived oneness between ritual and theatre, it also stimulates shock in the audience.

4.3 LANGUAGE OF THE MASQUERADE IN IROBI'S DRAMA.

In appraising the language of *egugun* masquerade performance of the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria, Joel Adedeji writes that “the artistic basis of this theatre is poetry” (1978:62). Amankulor talks about the entry of Odo masquerade into the performance ground “with chants of praise and heroic rhetorical invocations (1982: 49) and Keith Ray and Rosalind Shaw observe that fearful *Mgbedike* masquerade cannot emerge from the depth of sacred forest without “elaborate secret invocations of Omabe” (1987:657). It is therefore in the vocabulary of poetry, invocation and chants that one can locate a mode of communication with the masquerade. Describing the process as “highly structured” (262), Ray and Shaw discern the effect of invocation on masquerade as efficacious and immediate. Analysing *Echaricha*¹⁴ masquerade specifically and the process which brings about its ceremonial return of the dead to the shrine, they write that:

¹⁴ One of the many types of Omabe masquerade ; an ancestral spirit which returns annually to the family in masked form.

During this period the priest in charge of each *Echaricha* **invokes** Omabe to bring strength and life to the embodiment. The effect is like that of slowly applying an electric charge to the masquerade which begins to stiffen, then hum, then to stagger, and finally to strut, leap, and pirouette out from its making-place, back towards its village shrine.(263)

The invocative and efficacious chants associated with the masquerade implicate a mode of communication implicit in a metaphysical world that produces the masquerade. Chinyere Grace Okafor refers to this world that necessitates supernatural existence as “a microcosm of the cosmic ontology” (1991:43). The masquerade language can be understood against the social reality of this cosmic background.

The masquerade belongs to the supernatural world in which symbols and archetypes are integral. The appearance of masquerades in indigenous performances results from the metaphysical necessity for divine transaction on earth. In the metaphysical world, distance is broken and bridged through trance. This is evident in *Nwokedi*. Though at the Bakalori Youth corps camp in the Northern region of Nigeria, Nwokedi Jnr is transported through trance to witness the events of the impending festival in his native Osisioma village. It is a journey of drums and songs transmittable only to the initiates in the cosmic world. As Nwokedi Jnr states, “The drums are rattling now and those who have ears can hear the blast and last gaps of a dying year. In the distance, the night is perfumed with songs” (38)

It is a language comprehensible only to those initiated into the cosmic world of the masquerade and metaphysical realm of existence, “those who have ears”. This is why Nwokedi Jnr is able to see and hear the chain of events culminating in the Ekpe festival:

They are singing the old year away. My village is singing the barren year away. They are dirging for this desecrated earth. (*He peers into the distance , his feet moving with his eyes*). I can see the procession of men, women and children thronging from house to

house, throwing ashes into the streets while gusts of dust burst under the thunder of their stomping feet. (*The drumming and singing swells hugely*) And now they besiege our house. They lay a siege at the threshold, asking the empty rooms why, on the eve of the festival, the flesh of an ancient spirit is still flitting like a ghost in a distant land. (38)

Soyinka's suggestion that the mask idiom "hints at the archetype of transition" (1976:155) is immediately evident in the communal passage in *Nwokedi* as the mask-wearer, Nwokedi Jnr, slaughters the sacrificial ram in the regenerative ritual. In this sense, the mask is a metalanguage of the communal passage and transition. This indicates that the ritual symbols and archetypes are the accessible mode of correspondence in the metaphysical world of the masquerade. Consequently, the embodiment of the ancestral spirit in the masquerade demonstrates a method of expressing the power of the supernatural forces for communal benefit. For instance, Mazeli's reference to the mask as "father", in *Cemetery Road*, is an irreducible suggestion of the supernatural essence of the mask as a representation of the ancestral being. In assuming representation of the ancestral spirits, the mask negotiates and bridges the human and supernatural worlds. In this numinous assignment, the primacy of the masking idiom is the efficacy of the invocation, chant and poetry. Soyinka explains this phenomenon as language associated with sacrifice, power and symbols. The tragic mask, according to Soyinka, functions from:

the archetypal essences whose language derives not from the plane of physical reality or ancestral memory . . . but from the numinous territory of transition from which the artist obtains fleeting glimpses by ritual, sacrifice and a patient submission or rational awareness to the moment when fingers and voices relate the symbolic language of the cosmos (155).

The metaphor of ritual and sacrifice pervades Irobi's drama. *The Other Side of the Mask* dramatises Jamike's correspondence with Amadioha, the Igbo god of thunder and lightning whom he invokes against the members of National Award Committee for denying him national recognition and award. In *Cemetery Road*, Mazeli invokes the 'ancient spirit' as he plans to assassinate the president of Nigeria as means of purging the country of corrupt and filthy leadership. And in *Nwokedi*, the Ufor-bearer continually invokes the Osisiogu deity through the Ekpe masquerade for the purgation of year-long accumulated guilt and evil. These invocations are manifestations of traditional worship poetry which forces reside in the mask. The potency of invocation as ritual language is demonstrated in Ufor-bearer's transportation of Nwokedi Jnr from the Bakalori camp to Osisioma village:

Nwokedi nwa Nwokedi, I invoke your spirit with the potent power of the god whose ram you have slaughtered at this shrine these six years. I invoke you with a violent voice because the world is waiting at the threshold of a new life. The children are waiting, the parents are waiting. The farmlands are waiting, the barns are empty, the cooking pots are empty, the entire village is waiting to see the edge of the sharpened knife glint in the sunset, painted with the blood of the sacrificial animal (38-39).

The language and idiom of sacrifice intimates the supernatural realities of the masquerade world against which the plays are set. Though *Cemetery Road* engages with modern and sophisticated issues, its adoption of symbols and archetypes connects it to ancient myths and traditional rites. The assassination of the president is as much a rite of expiation as any based on religious myths. As the troupe rehearses the assassination of the president, Mazeli's invocation of the mask as "ancient spirit" in preparation for the sacrificial performance suggests religious enactment. At this point the effigy with which the troupe rehearses the role of the president for the assassination could be perceived as telepathic medium of symbolic magic: " [*He leads the procession towards*

the effigy of the president. As they cross the proscenium arch, just before the president's seat]" (114)

Irobi's invocation of effigy recalls Soyinka's use of same archetype in *The Strong Breed*. In *The Strong Breed*, the effigy is a symbol of sickness and accumulated evils of the old year. It represents physical and spiritual burden that must be destroyed before healing can be restored. The Girl goes about "*dragging an effigy by a rope attached to one of its legs.*" (84). The fate of the effigy is ultimately shared with the ill of the community as the Girl says to Ifada, the village idiot, "You will hang it and I will set fire to it" (87). It is in the same sense that Irobi has adopted the effigy in *Cemetery Road*. The "effigy of the president" represents the symbolic image of the Nigerian Military ruler who must be destroyed for the postcolonial nation to be healed of its corrupt and filthy state. The adoption and destruction of the effigy, what James Gibbs referred to as "symbolic substitution" (1978:434) is vividly portrayed in the stage-direction:

[Once more the song goes up and the mask sways menacingly in measured dance steps to the effigy and, with indescribable fury, falls upon it stabling it three times. As he raises his hand for the fourth, blood drips from his hand and stains the blade of the knife...] (115)

The language of sacrifice, blood, purgative and expiatory rites also pervade Irobi's *Nwokedi*. The character of Nwokedi Jnr is constructed out of a communal need for sacrifice. As a symbolic child of sacrifice, Nwokedi Jnr connects a people's existential belief with their other worldliness or universe. Nwokedi Jnr's responsibility as the gate-keeper, negotiator and communicator between the different worlds in Igbo cosmology constitute one of the most basic actions of Irobi's *Nwokedi*. Noting that the spiritual pattern of the universe is categorized into gods, spirit, humans, animals, plant and inanimate objects with which humans have become implicated in the

universe, Okafor observes that humans "invoke gods and spirits by means of rituals, myths, and performative enactment" (40). Undoubtedly, this view of ritual as medium and metalangue of communication has far reaching implications in *Nwokedi*:

ARIKPO: How does an old year die?

MRS. NWOKEDI: It dies when the land is cleansed with blood.

ARIKPO: Blood? Whose blood?

MRS NWOKEDI: The blood of an animal.

ARIKPO: Man is an animal.

MRS NWOKEDI: Yes. Man is an animal. But time is past when the village purged the land with the blood of human beings. (*She glances at the wall clock*) It is past midnight. Today is 31st December. The old year dies today. It dies with its thousand calamities. It was an evil year. A year in which the rafters in our barns were filled with shrivelled tubers and the husks of life. (16)

The language of music and drum is also central in Irobi's drama. In *The Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike talks about the affects of Mozart's Jupiter symphony as "possession by the power that ends in rituals, the rituals that ends in magic, the magic that re-enacts the birth of life from the fingers of the cosmos" (113). Irobi's adoption of music is ultimately a recreation of Soyinka's assertion that music is the expression of the tragic will:

If we agree that, in the European sense, music is the 'direct copy or the direct expression of the will', it is only because nothing rescues man (ancestral, living or unborn) from loss of within this abyss but titanic resolution of the will whose ritual summons, response, and expression is the strange alien sound to which we give the name of music. (1976:149).

In *Cemetery Road* where the masquerade is Mazeli's pivotal actor, chants and songs are supplications to the "Ancient spirit" (114). The songs, therefore, convey power as "*the mask sways menacingly*". Jamike, possessed by what Irobi called "intoxicating music" (2007:903), will rather fill the terror of silence "with some other music. The music of the

chisel on the wood...when that music caresses my soul, I have a vision of things that never existed. Music draws back the veil across new delights” (*Mask*, 113). However, it is in *Nwokedi* that the power of the drum language is conveyed as the ultimate inducement to the tragic will:

[They face each other, poised in fear and murderous anger. The drums are progressively louder and thunderous. Nwokedi is in the throes of a trance, possession.]

ARIKPO: What is wrong with him?

NWOKEDI: It is the drums.

ARIKPO: The drums?

NWOKEDI: Yes, the drums. They get into the head. In my

Youth, I used to do what he will do this evening on behalf of the entire village. It is a rite that is our family right. That's why we are called Nwokedi (79)

It could be argued that Irobi's integration of the potency and efficacy of ritual in his drama invalidates Ossie Enekwe's assumption that ritual must lose its potency to become drama. In the *Other Side of the Mask*, Jamike's invocation of Amadioha demonstrates the transcendence of the efficacy of ritual and magic into the theatre:

[He roots out an egg from a corner, swings it round his head seven times, and over the wooden effigy. Dons his former mask and begins to mutter incantations, which the playwright cannot put down here for fear of repercussions of sacrilege. The incantations taper into a chant.]

Jamike: Agawala m ori-igwe (D.C.)

Mbila!

Gwere egbe nye nwa-ugo

Mbali!

Gwere ugo nye-ugo

Mbila!

L'ugo mbu eze nnunu

Mbila!

Okpuntuwo
Mbila!

O gala ikpoko
Mbila!

Tuturum origwe
Mbila!

(*Mask*, 101-102)

[He flashes the egg on the face of the effigy. Immediate lightning flashes. Thunders rumble. Jamike fishes out a strange-looking stone. Palms it. He turns to an ashen and shaken Njemanze.]

The entire ritual and incantation belongs to a symbolic language of the Igbo traditional religion. Irobi's transposition of this symbolic ritual into the play and performances contextualises the immediacy and efficacy of incantatory poetry as a metalanguage in communicating with the mask and the embodied spirit of Amadioha. Once the ritual is completed, the rumble of thunder is the physical manifestation of the abiding presence of Amadioha. Irobi's restraint with the incantation and his fear of sacrilege suggests a caution against what Alain Ricard referred to as "creative treason" (1972:52). Warning that translation of religious codes and symbols amounts to betrayal, Ricard has argued that religious symbols "cannot be transposed into a written play, and be performed on demand, before a public whose members do not belong to the particular society" (52)

However, between Ricard's caution against creative treason and Irobi's restraint, one may locate an artist's respect for a cult into which he was initiated and which not only stimulated, but also provided the poetic and metaphysical resources for his drama. In negotiating the deep-reaching resources of the cult of the masquerade, and transposing the potent components into performance

narratives, Irobi's drama seeks to "recuperate" (to use Diala's word) an endangered cultural tradition.

4.4 THE SEMIOTICS OF OTHER TEXTS: INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE DRAMA OF ESIABA IROBI

I have argued in chapter four that much of Irobi's drama suggests appreciable self-portraiture. A cursory character analysis of the dramas, for instance, will reveal a case in which the discerning presence of the dramatist's life is the resource for the construction of the pathos, temperament and character traits of the protagonists. This is why Irobi's initiation into the Umuagwu masquerade cult of the Ngwa people (*Nwokedi*, iii), the expressive denunciation of the older generation for non-recognition of his work (Oguibe,2010:1) and his life as theatre lecturer, actor and director has compelling presence in *Nwokedi*, *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Cemetery Road* respectively.

Irobi admittedly has external influences and inspirations. Isidore Diala has identified Irobi's mythic and ritual properties as undeniable product of Soyinka's influence. It is also discernible that though Soyinka may have inspired the mythic plot and ethos of Irobi's drama, the influences of Igbo masquerade tradition, festival and the distinct paradoxes of Amadioha have equally decisive impact. It is in this sense that Irobi's drama can be read as an eclectic of internal and external forces, and as dialogic with these forces of influence. Julia Kristeva, who is generally credited to have coined the word intertextuality based on Mikhail Bakhtin's study of this phenomenon, states that "in the space of a given text, several utterances taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize it" (1980: 36).

In Irobi's drama, intertextual references intersect mostly with texts from African history, oral poetry, ideological treatises, cinematography and the performance texts of Igbo festivals and carnivals. Kristeva's assertion that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66) is particularly significant with regard to *Nwokedi* which addresses itself as a riposte to Soyinka's notion of purgation and human sacrifice as a means of social and political regeneration. *The Other Side of the Mask* and *Cemetery Road* also have significant traces and references to other texts. It is this phenomenon which makes Irobi's texts deictic signposts of other texts that makes his work very engaging.

Much of *The Other Side of the Mask* consists mainly of references to European, African, Asian and South American historical texts. Indeed the play is dedicated to "The Castaway", a poem written by the Caribbean poet and dramatist, Derek Walcott. Thus drawing on the diverse events of global histories, *The Other side of the Mask* is conceptualized as a dialogue with Derek Walcott's poem quoted in the dedication page of the play:

We too are actors, who behold
This ceremony; we hold
Our breath, defying dissolution,
Faith, we are told, like art,
Feeds on illusion. (3)

Significantly, *The Other side of the Mask* also engages the leitmotifs that run through the arguments of the poem in order to negotiate global histories. Thus the concept of faith in ritual ceremonies and the illusion of art are at once discursive in the poem as it is in the play. The play is an eclectic drama of artistic experiences, combining diverse historical texts as copious references are made to Fidel Castro, "Bolshevik hobbledehoy" (55), Khmer Rouge, and Mungo Park. There are significant references to iconic artists and their masterpieces. These include

Michelangelo's "Madonna", Henry Moore's "Reclining Woman", Picasso's "Guernica", Van Gogh's "The Sunflower", Leonardo da Vinci's "The Virgin of the Rock" and Franz Kafka's "The Castle" and "The Trial". The conversation between Jamike and Animalu proceeds from the discourse on symbol and reality premised on Carl Jung's book, *Man and his Symbols* published in 1964:

Animalu: Who puts the symbols in the subconscious? Is it reality?

Jamike: It is not reality. We have a collective unconscious even before we are born. Haven't you read *Man and his Symbols*?

Animalu: Man and his Symbols? By Who?

Jamike: Carl Jung

Animalu: I haven't. And I don't think Carl Jung is relevant here.
(61)

The reference to these iconic masters of art and letters exemplifies Jamike's assessment of his own greatness. Historical texts provide Irobi with the resources to conceptualise a character who, beyond equating himself with the deity, also aspires to the lofty ideals of these historic masters. Through the character of Jamike, Irobi dialogues with the history that produces the masters of classical and modern art. Thus Jamike's exclamation "I am the next! The very next! I am a genius. Everything I touch turns to gold. Everything I create is the ultimate masterpiece" (87) connects Jamike as taking over from these masters. Jamike situates himself as the African version of these masters. At another instance, he insists "I am the next! I am the next! I am the next great artist to emerge from this continent". (87)

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi dialogues with Soyinka and Osofisan on the notion of human sacrifice. Soyinka's notion is expressed most particularly in his plays, *The Strong Breed* and *Death and The King's Horseman*. That Soyinka's view of human sacrifice privileges the preservation and

perpetuation of the feudal system of the old Yoruba civilization stimulated a lot of criticism. Biodun Jeyifo accused Soyinka of being reactionary (1985:60). However, it is Nigeria's most *intertextually* conscious dramatist, Femi Osofisan, who responded to Soyinka with the play, *No More the Wasted Breed*. Acquiescing with Soyinka on the logic of the human sacrifice, but departing on the choice of the victim for the human sacrifice, Osofisan, later in an interview with Iji, justifies his disagreement and re-interpretation of Soyinka's view:

We must demand that the sinners are sacrificed, and stop wasting these talents or the young people who offer themselves. We must stop wasting them. That is why I call them the "Wasted Breed". No more the wasted breed. Those who have brought us to these consequences must be made to die for them: (Iji, 2001:31)

Osofisan interpreted Soyinka's assumed elitist and reactionary view of Yoruba worldview by creating a more radical dramatic oeuvre that mobilises a marxist ideological approach. Elesin Oba, Emma and Biokun come from a lineage of carriers designed as scapegoats to carry the evil of the society in *Death and The King's Horseman*, *The Strong Breed* and *No More the Wasted Breed* respectively. Nwokedi Jnr, however, comes from a lineage of expungers designed to dispense of the guilty. Both perspectives ultimately lead to social and political regeneration. Osofisan's view about the carrier tradition is summed up by Saluga, allegedly the playwright's mouthpiece:

Tell me, why is it always us who give our lives? Why is it always the poor who are called to sacrifice? Why is it always the wretched, never a wealthy man, never the son of a king, who is suddenly discovered to bear the mark of destiny at difficult moments, and pushed on to fulfill himself in suicidal tasks? Why?... And who decided that chest moles are the mark of identify for carriers? Why not fat cheeks like yours for instance? Or a rotund overblown belly? I would have thought that a more juicy meal for your cannibal gods. (*Wasted Breed*, 105)

The disposition of Irobi's intertextuality in *Nwokedi* is to provide an antidote to Osofisan's confrontation with Soyinka's vision. Instead of persisting in the perpetuation of the tradition of a carrier, Irobi intimates the tradition of the dispenser of justice implicit in Igbo masquerade tradition. Notably, Irobi's treatment of Marxist ideologues in his plays suggests disagreement with Osofisan's ideological apparatus. At best Irobi demonstrates caution with Marxism. Leon Onyewuchi's argument that Irobi's drama proposes "some Marxist ideological progression" is too sweeping since the play privileges the mobilisation of the age-grade system for communal political and cultural services in Osisioma community. It does not endorse Marxism. Therefore, Irobi's intertextual dialogue with Soyinka and Osofisan on the carrier tradition endorses not only the displacement of the tradition of the carrier within the same purgative ritual, but also emphasises the age-grade vanguard as a suitable political system.

Irobi's intertextual dialogue is not limited to reworking the ideology and context of mythic plots of his dramas. *Cemetery Road*, for instance, demonstrates audacious references to Pan-African political and economic philosophies. The play engages and produces responses to some African thinkers and ideologues. In a polemical conversation between Lawani and Douglas which centres on western reductive perception of African intelligence, Lawani's statement is a direct quotation from Chinua Achebe contained in a lecture note presented to the Royal Society of Arts in 1990.¹⁵ Exasperated with Douglas's opinion that intelligence is race-related and that scientists have proven that African intelligence is "nearer our first cousin: The Apes" (122), Irobi locates Achebe, one of the precursors of African post-colonial literature, for response. Lawani's response to Douglas significantly recalls Achebe's:

¹⁵ This information appeared in Irobi's (2006) essay "A Theatre for Cannibals: Images of Europe in Indigenous African Theatre of the Colonial Period" in which he quoted Achebe equally arguing the misrepresentation of African history in European literature.

When you seize a people and seize their land, seize their history
and their art, you don't compose hymns of praise for such people
because that would amount to calling yourself a bandit, do you?
(124)

The response is a symbolic acknowledgement of Achebe's post-colonial advocacy. Apparently, Irobi's recourse to Achebe highlights the existence of African containment of western hegemonic epistemologies. The statement is typical of Achebe whose anti-colonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958, is a riposte and intertextual response to Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's portrayal of Africa is as dismissive and pejorative as Douglas's in Irobi's *Cemetery Road*.

We must observe also that Irobi's intertextual references indulge a great deal on cross-references. These cross-references are often used to replicate and express similar ideas and thoughts across texts. For instance, the concept of time as it relates to revolution and political change cuts across *Nwokedi* and *Cemetery Road*. During the campaign which displaced Nwakenrenmadu Nwokedi from the parliament, the Ekumeku candidate and member, Ozoemena, invokes the concept of time as privileging the emergence of a new generation that must take over from the tyranny of the old and corrupt generation:

Our time has come. And time is not the tick-tock of your
wristwatches. Neither is time the rising and setting of the sun.
Time is event. Time is decision. Time is action. Time is made
when young men flex the muscles of a new resolve and decide to
change fate. Decide to change the world. Change the course of
history. Create new order. That, my generation, is how time is
made. And that, Mr Nwakenrendu Nwokedi, is how Time trips
tyrants (13)

Confronted with the decision to assassinate the president of Nigeria during a commissioned performance at Nikon Neo Niga Hotel, Mazeli invokes the same concept of time and revolution,

saying “It is time that trips the tyrants. That time has come” (*Cemetery*, 141) In *Nwokedi*, after the military coup was announced on the radio, Arikpo speaks about the future ruptured by the military “like a virgin’s hymen” (89). However, it is the Nwokedi generation that is most obsessed with “ruptured” and decimated future. According to Nwokedi Jnr:

My generation gave you the future to hold in trust for us. You turned it into handkerchief, used it to wipe the mucus of greed dripping from your wretched nostrils. After that you rumbled it, crumpled our future and squeeze it into your pocket. But your pocket was full of holes. So our future fell out to the ground. And with your leprous feet, you quarried it into dust. Arikpo, that is why this matchet must spill your blood today. (73)

In the *Cemetery Road*, Irobi engages more with the future of a nation and continent plagued by western neo-colonising influence. Thus, in realising that Lawani his friend and university mate, has joined the CIA and M16 secret services to sabotage the national and continental interests, for greed, Mazeli interrogates the loss of patriotism to personal greed within Irobi’s reoccurring concept of the future:

Lawani, How can you do this to us. To us and our children. How can you lend your fingers to the hands that rupture our future...What about the oath we swore? To fly our flag one day and look at it not like a rag, but with pride? (143)

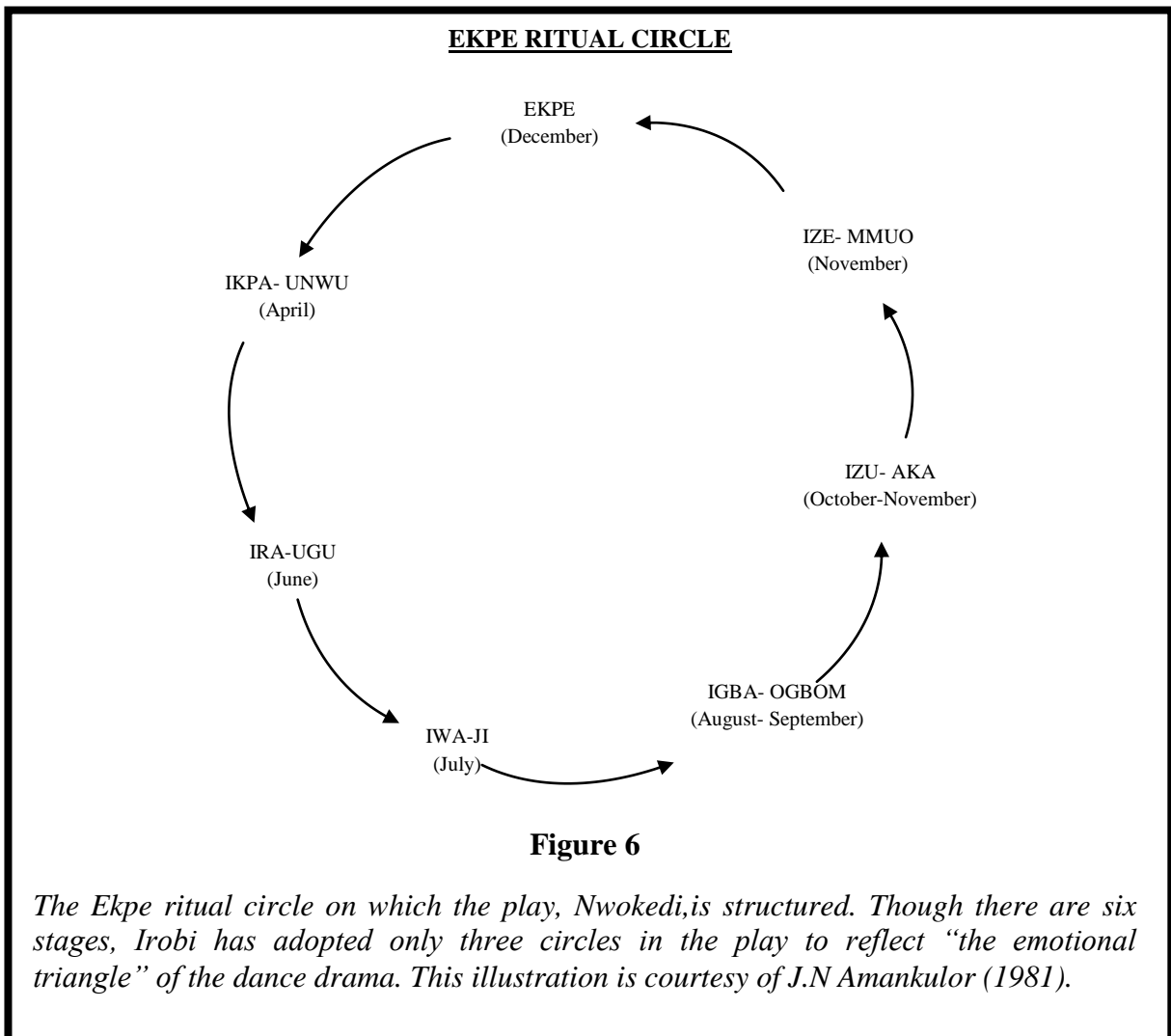
The denial of acknowledgement and recognition of the creative works of the younger generation places the future in perspective in *The Other side of the Mask*. In one of his rare hopeful moments about the future, Jamike exclaimed: “ I can hear the future howling my name in deafening decibels into the ears, the wings, the corners and the ceilings of the hall of fame” (114). However, it is his anguish of a decimated future that is the play’s central concern. Irobi’s

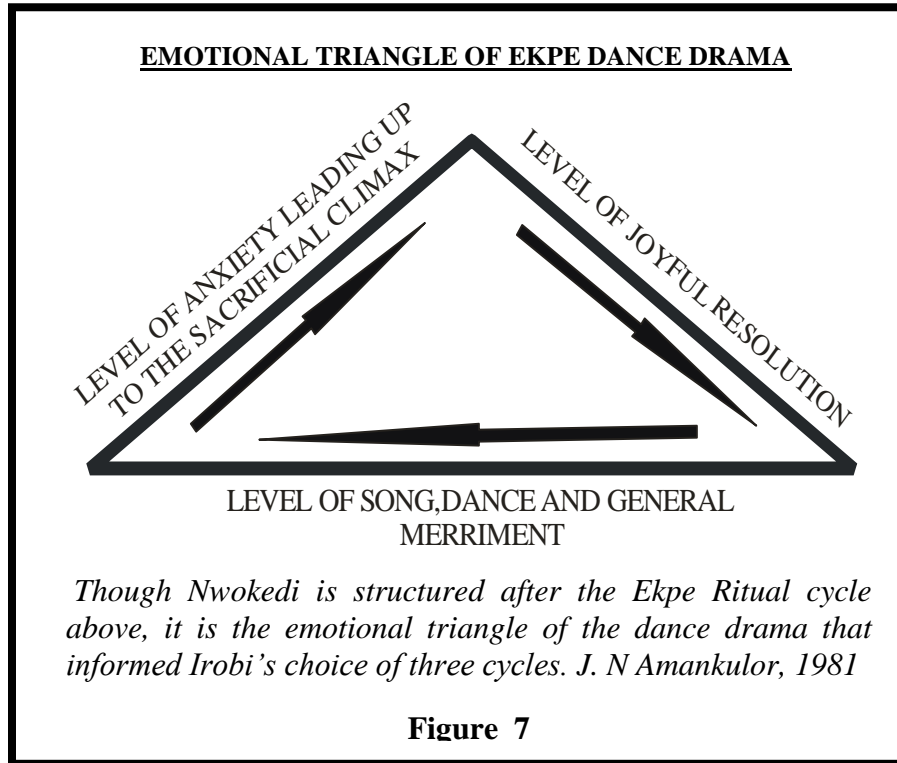
obsession with the future has far reaching revolutionary implications in *Cemetery Road*. This is evident in Mazeli's exclamation before the planned assassination of the president "Yes. We want a future even if it is wombed from blood" (114).

Describing Nwokedi's preparation for the Ekpe ritual and his responsibility as the masked spirit who must decapitate the sacrificial ram, Mrs. Nwokedi informs the inquisitive Arikpo that "you will know today, before the sun goes down in blood" (71). The "sun going down in blood" as a sign of an impending foreboding is cross-referenced in *Cemetery Road* just before Mazeli's plan to assassinate the president:

Tonight, the sun will blow its fuse. Yes (*almost to himself*).
Tonight, the sun will go down in blood. But by dawn, a new cock
will crow. By tomorrow morning, the future will rise like a
phoenix out of the ashes of this meeting. That is the meaning of
this ritual. This encounter between North and South. (140).

The body of discourse which perceives the context of text as consisting only of typographic literacy is shifting its canonical boundary to accommodate non-graphical, non-typographic and other performance and embodied texts (Drewal & Drewal, 1997:2; Mark, 1988:139; Irobi, 2009:16) It is in this sense that one can view Irobi's drama as embodying an integration of African ritual, festival and masquerade performance texts. *Nwokedi*, a play in three cycles, is shaped by the circular pattern of Ekpe yearly cycle. Though the Ekpe festival evolves through six ritual cycles which culminate in the seventh-the grand finale of the year's activities, Amankolor identifies the grand finale as consisting of three phases of the Ekpe dance drama (114:1981). *Nwokedi*, conceived strictly as dance drama, may have been structured on what Amankolor referred to as emotional triangle. So while the idea of the cycle in *Nwokedi* is informed by the structural premise of the festival, it is the dance drama that inspired Irobi's three-circle play.





The *Other Side of the Mask* is equally structured on the three-dimensional nature of the wooden mask. Since the play is two-phased (the play consists only of “Side one” and “Side two”, it could be argued that Irobi’s structural concern in the play is the symbolic experimentation with the duality of meaning. This observation is discernible in Jamike’s statement that “Art, as a mask, has only one face. A beautiful face. Beyond, is a side. The other side. And that side is ugly” (66). This integration of the structure of the play with meaning becomes more evident when “side two” opens immediately after Jamike killed Animalu. It is the sense in which side two may be perceived as the “dark side” of the mask:

Zhipora: What have you just done?

Jamike: (*wiping his hand with a rag*) carved my finest masterpiece.

Zhipora: Jamike, What have you done?

Jamike: (*removing the mask*) Gazed on the dark side of the moon.
(74)

Though *Cemetery Road* begins with “Opening Glee” and ends with “Closing Glee”, the recourse to “Cut” (the play consists of ten cuts) privileges cinematographic text in the structural composition of the play. That Mazeli, the protagonist, is a lecturer of film and theatre studies, suggests that film and theatre are both significant media for the revolutionary requirement of the play. However, while the film medium is viable in checkmating the reductive images of Africa on British/western television and cinema, theatre, as it were, is more apt in confronting the domestic affront of African corrupt political leaders. The preference for cinematographic structure in the play may be explained in terms of Irobi’s growing fascination with the filmic genre.

Essentially, the plot and compositional structures of Irobi’s drama have ostensibly been shaped through interaction with other texts. Generally, this phenomenon is a reflection of the festival and carnivalesque mode of Irobi’s performances with its implicit composite nature which draws on varied indigenous texts. This is what Irobi himself referred to as the “mythopoeic complexity and polysemic sophistication” (2008:2) of African theatrical creations. Apparently, signs of other texts in Irobi’s drama distinguish his work as demonstrably adaptive and dialogic.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A significant concern of this research was to subject Esiaba Irobi's use of Igbo masking tradition in his drama to a semiotic investigation. It also sought to explore the contribution of Esiaba Irobi, a third-generation Nigerian dramatist, to the development of Nigerian drama and theatre. In so doing, the research recognised that the Irobi generation has made an equally distinctive and invaluable contribution to the development of Nigerian and indeed African drama and theatre as have the first and second generations.

In Chapter two, I outlined relevant studies on semiotics and the mask tradition. It was important to appraise the definition of semiotics in order to include and accommodate diachronic and historical objects. This is largely because classical semiotics of the Saussurian tradition originally excluded diachronic perspectives. This shifting of the boundary is significant because African dramatic tradition is predominantly historical. Equally significant is the need to put the mask in theoretical perspective as embodying paradigmatic potential in the assessment of African drama and theatre. Being an element of indigenous festival performance, the adoption of the mask in modern drama represents persistent presence of traditional element in modern African theatre experience. The categorization of Nigerian writers into generational markers sets Irobi's drama apart as representing an appreciable part of this theatre experience

Having expanded the scope of semiotic studies to accommodate historical perspectives, in-depth analysis of the three selected plays followed in chapters three and four. The analysis used mainly historical exegesis to examine the cultural codes and symbols inherent in the mask

tradition of the plays under discussion. In chapter three, the categories of the discussion cut across “semiotics of the mask” as a common denominator. However, the applications of the semiotic references in the selected plays differ. Thus we have “The dialectics of apotheosis in *Nwokedi*”, “Metaphoric utility of mask in *The Other Side of the mask*”, and “The persistence of the mask in performance and revolution in *Cemetery Road*”. Suffice it to say that a common strand of semiotics runs through the plays in the sense in which the masking tradition signifies diverse historical, social and political realities of post-colonial Africa.

My invitation to Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria, to watch the production of *Nwokedi* translated into a performance review in chapter four. It was a significant experience in the sense that it provided an opportunity to see the masquerade in movement. This is very important because the performance text or *mise-en-scene* is the primary concern of semiotic investigation. The exploration of the language of the masquerade is an invaluable part in the research of a dramatist whose language Ola Rotimi likened to “listening to music”. Irobi’s penchant for intertextual referencing is highlighted in last section of chapter four. This sets his drama apart as one that is extensively eclectic.

This study of Irobi’s drama revealed that his plays and performances demonstrate abundant and infinite semiotic possibilities. The masquerades of Ekpe, Amadioha and other smaller deities represented in Irobi’s drama embody cultural codes and symbols discernible through the exegesis of ethnographic and historical interpretation. As this research has revealed, Irobi’s recourse to myth and pantheons of the Igbo tradition is not an uncritical influence from his mentor, Wole Soyinka. Rather, the appropriation of masks provides Irobi with an opportunity to interrogate Soyinka’s dramatic vision. This is recognisable from my interpretation of the Amadioha myth

which unifies the attributes that exist separately in Ogun and Obatala. Through the mobilisation of the myth of Amadioha, Irobi has conceptualized a tragic vision that is distinctively Igbo.

In the light of the above, my study of Irobi's use of Igbo mask tradition in his modern dramas is significant. It suggests that indigenous performance elements can be harnessed into contemporary drama and theatre. Irobi's drama proposes transcendence of the masquerade theatre into the modern drama without losing the efficacy of the ritual components. The performance of *Nwokedi* at the Commassie Theatre of the Imo State University, however, invalidates this view as, without the enabling metaphysical powers of the Osiogwu deity, the mythical knife decapitated the head of the ram only with several strokes. In the secular environment of the University stage performance, it was a shock-inducing enactment that can only alienate an African audience celebrated for total participation in a carnivalesque theatre experience.

Previous studies of the drama of Esiaba Irobi emphasised its tendency to recuperate Igbo myth and ritual into the aesthetics of modern drama (Diala, 2005; Leon, 2003). They have also insisted that his drama is essentially a product of Soyinka's influence. I have agreed with both views to some extent, but I have argued further that Soyinka's influence has been as far as Irobi can mobilise in order to interrogate it. Reading Irobi through the semiotics of the Igbo masquerade tradition, the departure from Soyinka's influence is clear-cut. My study has also revealed that Irobi's recuperation of Igbo myth and rituals is not only to over-stretch the limit of ritual in an aesthetic, postmodern drama. Rather, Irobi's drama demands the transcendence of magic and the potency of the ritual even in a dramatic circumstance. The Ufor-bearer's telepathic invocation of Nwokedi Jnr. to the urgency of the community's numinous mediation in *Nwokedi*, Jamike's invocation of magical powers of Amadioha in *The Other Side of the Mask* and Mazeli's intra-

theatrical supplication before the “ancient spirit” in *Cemetery Road* evidence Irobi’s desire for magic. This is, perhaps, Irobi’s abiding strategy for sustaining an endangered Igbo masquerade tradition and save it from the bleak prospect confronting its counterpart in the Yoruba of South-west Nigeria as described below by Joel Adedeji:

The future prospect of the Yoruba masque theatre is bleak. There is hardly any other cultural manifestation that reflects the society in which it appears so fully and accurately as the theatre. The factors of change in the Yoruba society are affecting the institution of the traditional theatre. Islam has spread rapidly throughout Yoruba creating new ideas and tastes hostile to the *egungun*, focusing on new concepts and introducing new cultural patterns into the society by its own form of education. Even more powerful has been the spread of Christian education and enlightenment through churches and mission schools, undermining belief in *egungun* (1972: 263).

Having explored the Igbo mask tradition, with its peculiar attributes of power and transformative resources, it is my hope that other masquerade cultures can be investigated likewise for their performative possibilities. The transformative potential of the mask opens up further possibilities for discourse. For instance, I have supported the argument which affirms the contribution of African mask to early European modernism. I have, however, not explored the argument which would be fertile ground for further research on counter-discourse within post-colonial enquiry.

Indeed Irobi’s life and works represent a testimony of counter-discourse and contestation of Western imperialist history. Thus, in examining the tradition of Igbo masquerade through the prism of Irobi’s drama, the result reveals that Irobi’s drama is an aesthetic project that seeks to perpetuate one of Africa’s covert, but resourceful and engaging traditions. That this tradition is endangered in the post-colonial milieu clearly necessitates the urgency and violence that courses through Irobi’s dramatic oeuvre. Yet he engaged with much more. Beyond his post-colonial

legacy, his life was a restless search for the aesthetic limits of art. His experiments, though limited within the ontology of Igbo worldview, were boundless. This is the reason his works are worth studying. This thesis, therefore, is a tribute to the life and works of Esiaba Irobi whose contribution to Nigerian and African drama will continue to stimulate critical discourse.

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