



An Analysis on Sam Ukala's The Placenta of Death: Director's Approach

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Abstract

This qualitative study critically examined the directorial elements in Sam Ukala's The Placenta of Death. The interpretation focused on the title, synopsis, plot and plot structure, characters, and themes in the play, as these are important elements a director must understand to make the script believable to his or her audience. The framework employed for the analysis is reader-response criticism (Tompkins, 1980). This approach to literary analysis suggests that the meaning of a text is not solely determined by the author but is created through the interaction between the reader and the text. The findings revealed that The Placenta of Death, just like similar plays as Iredi War, Mohammed Ben Abdullah's The Fall of Kumbi, and Ola Rotimi's The gods are not to blame, the director's elements employed by the author and the obscure manner he weaved his ways round the script makes it very difficult for staging. It is recommended that the analysis in this study will serve as a guide for directors who wish to stage this and similar plays. Furthermore, this study will be of a great value to directors, actors, designers (costumiers, set designers, makeup designers), and students in their analysis and interpretation courses.

Key Words: Script, Directors Elements, Sam Ukala, Reader Response

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I. Introduction

The director plays significant roles in every theatrical production. These directors can be seen as the manager, the supervisor or the leader of every theatrical production.

The significant role of the director in theatre production is one feature that cannot be compromised. The director's function in today's theatre keeps expanding as his art keeps improving. In recent times, the emergence of new trends in the theatre have made directors adopt new approaches to productions. However, one significant task that has remained basically constant with the passage of time is the director's overarching goal and responsibility is interpretation. He or she interprets a playwright's text and vision and harmonizes the ideas of the other theatre personnel to bring out the main artistic theme and vision of the production. Directing is seen as an interpretative art which incorporates the harmonization of other creative artists such as actors and designers in achieving the set goal. (Mensah & Yeboah, 2022)

According to Bablet (2019), directing requires a strong vision for the project, as well as the ability to collaborate effectively with a wide range of creative professionals to bring that vision to life. The director must also have excellent organizational and communication skills to manage the various aspects of the production and ensure that everything runs smoothly.

A theatrical director is "the person responsible for overseeing the creative and technical aspects of a production, from casting to stage design to rehearsals and performances. (TheatreMania, 2019).

The script is the backbone of any production, and it is the director's primary responsibility to ensure that it is thoroughly analyzed and interpreted. To achieve a successful production, the director must be meticulous and critical in their evaluation of the script. This may involve researching traditions and rituals to gain a deeper understanding of the play's themes. It is essential for the director to illuminate the vision and thought behind the script to guide the production's theme and vision. By understanding and interpreting the script, the director can shape the conceptualization, blocking, and design of the play and determine the necessary ingredients for its success.

1.1. The Script

A script can be defined as "a written text that provides a blueprint or plan for a theatrical, film, or television production" (Chua, 2019, p. 21). It typically includes dialogue, stage directions, and other information necessary for the production team to bring the story to life on stage or screen. According to Roth (2018), a well-written script is essential to the success of a production, as it serves as the foundation for the performances, design, and overall direction of the production. A script that is clear, concise, and engaging can capture the imagination of audiences and leave a lasting impact on the world of theater, film, or television.

Furthermore, as noted by Miller (2017), the script serves as a means of communication between the writer and the production team, allowing the writer to effectively convey their artistic vision and intentions while leaving room for interpretation and creative input from the team.

In theater, a script plays an essential role in the creative process as it outlines a plan for the production team to follow, allowing the writer's artistic vision to be translated onto the stage or screen. The script contains important details such as dialogue and stage directions and acts as a communication tool between the writer and the production team. Without a well-written script, it would be difficult to bring a story to life in a compelling and engaging way.

1.2. Synopsis of Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death*

The Placenta of Death is set in Owodo land, with Owodo III serving as the oppressive leader and the Oba of the Owodo Kingdom (an ancient Benin kingdom). The first wife of Owodo III, Ibo, the daughter of Emeni, a wealthy slave, was unable to bear children; as a result, the elders in council, including the Iyasere, the Prime Minister, Ihama, and the War Commander, Olotu, compelled the King to choose another wife. He selects the maiden that Iyasere suggests during the process. Omon is an impoverished freeborn who is the daughter of Osaze.

Emeni and her daughter Ibo were successful in persuading Owodo III to turn against Omon's family in their effort to crush the underclass. They succeeded in their goal by turning a gift of yam, palm wine, and a goat intended for Omon when she gave birth to Oba's son into a package of vultures. Omon, who was dissatisfied, retaliated by adding his son's dried placenta to the Oba's soup, which he then ate alongside other slaves who had come back from his field. When they realized the meat in the soup was actually a placenta, they puked until one of the slaves died. In order to ascertain who was responsible for the incident, Owodo III convened all of his subjects, which sparked a terrifying conflict between Owodo III and Iyasere.

1.3. Profile of Sam Ukala

Sam Ukala was a Nigerian poet, dramatist, short story writer, film producer, director, and academic. He was born on the 18th of April, 1948, and died on September 13, 2021, in Delta State, Nigeria. He was seventy-three (73) years old. He was the Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at various universities in Nigeria, including Edo State University. In 1993/94, Sam Ukala researched and taught at the School of English Theatre Workshop of the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, where he was serving as an academic staff fellow.

Until his demise, he was a Professor of Theatre Arts and Drama at the Delta State University, Nigeria, and the Chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Delta State Chapter. As an academic, he propounded the theory of 'folkism, the tendency to base literary plays on indigenous history and culture and to compose and perform them in accordance with the aesthetics of African folktale composition and performance, thereby employing the role of a narrator who comes in the beginning, middle, and end of the play to give the audience a hint on what will happen in the future (foreshadowing) as well as the breaking of the fourth wall, where the audience is made to really feel the action, making them participants in whatever is being said, which is one main feature of African theatre.

Ukala has received several awards for his contributions to Nigerian theater and literature. In 1989, he won the ANA/Noma Award for Publishing in Africa for his play, "The Slave Wife." In 2006, he won the NLNG Prize for Literature for his play, "Iredi War." In 2014, he was awarded the Nigeria National Merit Award for Creative Arts in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the development of theater arts in Nigeria. Sam Ukala has written many poems, plays, and short stories, and some of the notable ones amongst them are *The Slave Wife* (1982), *The Log in Your Eyes* (1986), *Akpakaland* (1990), *The Trial* (1992), *Break the Boil* (1992), *The Last Heroes* (1993), and *Iredi War* (1993).

II. Statement of the Problem

The play *The Placenta of Death* poses various challenges for directors due to its complex and interconnected nature. The title serves as a symbolic and metaphorical representation of the play's deeper meaning. The script is abundant in cultural references and language that demand a nuanced interpretation. The plot structure is non-linear, including flashbacks and dream sequences, which require careful handling to avoid

confusion. The characters are multifaceted and dynamic, necessitating an in-depth comprehension of their motivations and relationships. Additionally, the themes of tradition, power, trust, and prejudice need a thoughtful and sensitive approach to fully convey their complexity and resonance. Therefore, a thorough and comprehensive approach to analyzing the play is essential to creating an authentic and impactful performance that does justice to the play's themes and cultural context.

2.1. Research Question

This study seeks to provide answers to these questions:

1. How does the title of the play, *The Placenta of Death*, relate to the themes and motifs presented in the play, and what significance does it hold?
2. What are the director's elements present in the play?
3. In what ways does the script of *The Placenta of Death* engage with traditional African performance practices or storytelling techniques, and how does this contribute to its meaning and impact as a work of theater?

III. Theoretical Framework

Reader response theory (Tompkins, 1980) is a theory employed by this study. This theory emphasizes the role of the reader (or audience) in the interpretation of a text and suggests that the meaning of a play is not fixed but rather is created through the interaction between the reader and the text.

The theory of reader-response criticism was developed by a group of literary scholars in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and Norman Holland, among others (Tompkins, 1980). This approach to literary analysis suggests that the meaning of a text is not solely determined by the author but is created through the interaction between the reader and the text.

Stanley Fish, one of the most prominent proponents of reader-response criticism, argued that literary texts are not self-contained objects with fixed meanings but rather "interpretive communities" that are created through the reader's engagement with the text. According to Fish, readers bring their own perspectives, experiences, and cultural backgrounds to the reading process, and this shapes the way they interpret and make meaning from a text (Fish, 1980).

Wolfgang Iser, another important figure in the development of reader-response criticism, focused on the role of the reader in filling in the gaps and ambiguities in a text. Iser argued that the act of reading involves a process of "negotiation" between the reader and the text, in which the reader must actively participate in constructing the meaning of the text (Iser, 1978).

Norman Holland, meanwhile, emphasized the psychological and emotional aspects of reader response. Holland argued that readers often identify with characters in a text and project their own feelings and desires onto these characters, which can shape their interpretation of the text (Holland, 1975).

Other scholars who have contributed to reader-response theory have explored topics such as the role of emotion, the relationship between the reader and the text, and the ways in which different readers can interpret the same text in different ways (Bleich, 1978; Tompkins, 1980).

IV. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach. Specifically, textual analysis was employed in the analysis using the reader response theory. Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* was read and analyzed based on the director's elements prevalent in the text.

V. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Question 1: How does the title of the play, *The Placenta of Death*, relate to the themes and motifs presented in the play, and what significance does it hold?

Originally titled *The Placenta Soup*, the play's current title, *The Placenta of Death*, is a symbolic title that uses metaphorical or symbolic language to convey a deeper meaning; hence, it holds significant importance. Across many African tribes, including the Benin tribe in south-eastern Nigeria, the *placenta* is believed to hold supernatural powers, making it taboo to touch with one's mouth under any circumstance. The play's storyline centers on the Owodo kingdom, which faces a severe tragedy when the Oba consumes the placenta of his own son, leading to the kingdom's downfall.

The play portrays the strong belief that the placenta has the power to cause death and destruction, not just on a personal level but on a grander scale that can impact an entire kingdom. Through its title, the play brings to light the gravity of the taboo and how it can result in disastrous consequences. A fundamental component of African culture and tradition that has been passed down through the years and is still firmly held by many tribes is the belief in the placenta's power.

For decades, the human placenta has been handled traditionally by various cultures around the world. In western medicine, the human placenta is typically viewed as just human waste. However, in many African

societies, the umbilical cord and placenta are viewed as holders of extraordinary power (Adamson 1985), and therefore they are handled carefully. The placenta is referred to as a "traveling companion," which assists the ushering of the new baby from one world to the next, as shown in a historical ethnographic study of the Sahel-Niger community (Cooper 2019). For the Ugandans, the placenta is regarded as another baby and therefore given a formal burial (Beinempaka et al. 2015).

The title *The Placenta of Death* is an appropriate choice for the play given the events that unfold after Owodo III consumes the placenta. It accurately reflects the belief in many African tribes that the placenta holds great power and that breaking the taboos surrounding it can have severe consequences, leading to death and destruction. Moreover, the title is compelling to the readership as it invokes a sense of mystery and intrigue, making them curious about the play's themes and storyline.

5.2. Question 2: What are the director's elements present in the play?

The director's elements in plays are the setting, plot, characters, themes and, spectacle.

Setting: The setting of a play refers to the time, place, and physical environment in which the action of the play takes place. The setting can have a significant impact on the themes, characters, and plot of the play, and it can be a powerful tool for creating atmosphere and establishing mood.

The play is set in Edo State, Nigeria, specifically in the Owodo Kingdom. The action of the play takes place primarily in and around the palace of Owodo III, the village square, Osaze's quarter, and Emeni's quarter.

The setting of the play is significant because it reflects the larger social and cultural context in which the story takes place. The rural setting is an important element of the play, as it highlights the tension between traditional and modern ways of life. Overall, the setting of *The Placenta of Death* helps to create a vivid and compelling portrait of life in an Edo state during the post-colonial era, where there were a lot of power struggles, and also explores universal themes that are relevant to audiences on the African continent.

Plot: Plot is the sequence of events that make up a story, while plot structure refers to the way those events are arranged or organized to create a narrative (Foster, 2011). Plot structure typically includes the introduction or exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or denouement (Stanton, 2010).

The plot is very important to the director, as it is the foundation of the story they are telling through the performance. The plot provides the framework for the characters, themes, and overall message of the play. The director's job is to bring the plot to life on the stage, using their artistic vision and technical expertise to create a compelling spectacle or visual and sensory element that engages the audience. The director's interpretation and presentation of the plot can also have a significant impact on the success of the production. A well-crafted plot can capture the audience's attention and keep them engaged throughout the production, while a poorly executed plot can leave the audience feeling confused or disengaged.

Overall, the plot is a crucial element of any production, and directors must carefully consider how to use it to create a compelling and meaningful story that resonates with their audience. *The Placenta of Death* is a simple plot-structured play with exposition through to the denouement amidst foreshadows and forebodings that makes it a bit complicated.

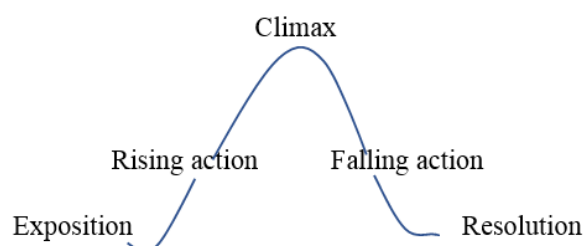


Figure 1: Plot structure of the play, *The Placenta of Death*

Characters: Character analysis is a fundamental aspect of literary criticism that involves examining and evaluating the traits, motivations, and actions of a character in a story or play (Gardner, 1983). It is a process of understanding a character's personality and how it influences their behavior, relationships, and role in the plot.

The analysis of character has been a key element of literary criticism since the time of Aristotle, who argued that characters should be complex, realistic, and morally ambiguous (Aristotle, 1984). Over time, scholars and critics have developed a range of methods for analyzing characters, including psychoanalytic, feminist, and cultural approaches (Brooks, 2014).

Character analysis is a crucial tool for the director in play analysis. This is due to the fact that when characters are well-analyzed, it helps the audience understand the themes and messages of a piece as well as characterization during rehearsals because the director is aware of each character's traits and can easily have an impact on the actors' interpretation of those traits. An analysis of some major characters.

Narrator

The narrator in the play is a sixty-five-year-old woman who appears in the beginning, middle, and end of the play. In the beginning, she alerted the townspeople who had come for the evening story-telling session to give way to the folklore. She is an important character in the dramatic piece.

The narrator was responsible for the exposition of the play and as such was responsible for giving accounts as the story unfolded, telling us about things that happened in the past, that is to say, moments before, as well as exposing the geographical setting of the play, the mood of the characters, and giving hints on what to expect, creating suspense. The narrator in the play *The Placenta of Death* can be said to be the backbone of the play. In the opening scene, for instance, it was the narrator who described Owodo Land as it appears in the dialogue below.

NAR: Hmm! That was more like it. Like a dirge for a nation shredded by riches and strife, such as Owodoland, the setting of tonight's story. That nation was rich. And riches beget power and injustice, enjoyment and anguish. Riches became a high fence between brother and brother. Nature strangely welded opposites in order to level them up. But leveling-up created charring frictions. Should the giant be cut in two or the dwarf stretched out of his joints? Such was the situation when it was proposed that Owodo, the third, marry Ibo (pronounced I:bor). Owodoland didn't like the proposal. (p.3&4)

Owodo III

One important character, or the main character, in the play *The Placenta of Death* is Owodo III, thus the King of Owodoland. Owodo III is a forty-year-old energetic man who is very rich, arrogant, very brave, and a royal with a very high social status. Owodo III again can be described as a very careful man on one side and careless on the other, as well as someone who is in a position of power but still feels insecure as a result of mistrust. This careful attitude of his was portrayed when she asked that Omon, his second wife, swear by Ogun.

OWODO: (Nodding.) Ihama warned me! It's my fault. But we'll see who rules. Owodoland: Iyasere or I. (To OMON.) Now, you Come to the shrine and tell our gods how innocent you are. (Dragging OMON.) Come on! You will swear by Ogun. (Fetches two short and flat pieces of wood from the roof of the shrine and places them before the shrine) Swear that, if you ever know what could kill Ibo and let it in, may Ogun cut off your neck... Do you baulk?

Themes: According to Lunsford & Connors (2016), themes are ideas or concepts that emerge from a text and provide a lens through which to understand its meaning. Themes can be identified through analysis of the plot, characters, setting, and language of a text.

Power and arrogance leading to doom

One of the play's main themes is power and arrogance leading to disaster. It can be claimed that this moral subject is focused on Owodo III, the King, who believes he is so powerful that he can do whatever pleases him. The King was so conceited that he told Iyasere, who was asking for his assent on the matter, that "that issue was more private and as such carried malice with him" when Omon, his second wife, complained in the play that the King finds it difficult to come to her bed because Ibo is pregnant.

Vengeance is a tool for distraction

Another theme in the play that talks about vengeance serving as a tool of destruction was well established in the play, serving as a statement as well as a moral theme where Omon, the second wife of Owodo III, exhibited it. In the play, Omon became so raged like a fire when she and her family fed on the "king" of all meats (a vulture) and by so doing violated the customs and traditions of her tribe (adding placenta to the Oba's meal) in quest for revenge, which caused a lot of destruction and led to the deaths of Odogbo as well as the king.

Prejudice and its bad effect on society

Pre-conceptions about people in our societies are on the rise, and they're serving as a dangerous tool that should not be encouraged. In the play, the playwright laid emphasis on this criticism theme using the King, thus Owodo III, whom out of insecurity starts to prejudice his Iyasere for sleeping with his second wife, which creates that enmity between them.

Spectacle: Spectacle is an essential element of play in theater that is designed to create a visually stunning and captivating experience for the audience. According to Eric Bentley (1967), "spectacle is the branch of theater that deals with visual appearances, the aspect of the stage that the eye takes in" (p. 137). Spectacle includes elements such as lighting, scenery, costumes, and special effects and can be used to enhance the drama and impact of a play.

Spectacle has a long history in theatre, dating back to the ancient Greek plays that used elaborate masks, costumes, and scenery to enhance the performance. In medieval theater, spectacle was often used to represent religious themes and convey moral messages to the audience. In modern theater, the use of technology and special effects has taken spectacle to new heights, with productions that feature elaborate set designs, multimedia displays, and other visual elements that create an immersive experience for the audience.

However, some critics argue that the focus on spectacle in modern theater has led to a decline in the importance of other elements of play, such as character development and storytelling. They argue that spectacle can sometimes overwhelm the other elements of a play, leading to a shallow and superficial experience for the audience.

Despite these criticisms, spectacle remains an important and powerful element of play in theater that the director should look out for when doing analysis. It can create a sense of wonder, awe, and excitement, and it can be used to convey complex emotions and ideas as well as the mood in a way that is both memorable and impactful.

5.3 Question 3: In what ways does the script of *The Placenta of Death* engage with traditional African performance practices or storytelling techniques, and how does this contribute to its meaning and impact as a work of theater?

The Placenta of Death is an epic play and a total theater experience that paved the way for audience participation and the breaking of the fourth wall. The play engages with traditional African performance practices and storytelling techniques in several ways. Firstly, the play incorporates music, dance, and movement as integral components of the performance. This is consistent with many traditional African performance practices, which often include music, dance, and ritual elements to create a sense of community and participation among the audience.

Secondly, the play draws on traditional African storytelling techniques, such as the use of fables and allegories, to explore complex themes and ideas. For example, the play employs a narrator who is considered to own the story and gives accounts on issues that may happen or have already happened.

Thirdly, the play incorporates elements of audience participation, such as call-and-response and direct address, which are also common in traditional African performance practices. This creates a sense of community and engagement among the audience and encourages them to become active participants in the performance rather than passive spectators.

Overall, the use of traditional African performance practices and storytelling techniques in *The Placenta of Death* contributes to its meaning and impact as a work of theater in several ways. It creates a sense of connection and participation among the audience, allowing them to engage with the themes and ideas of the play on a deeper level. It also highlights the importance of African cultural traditions and heritage and reinforces the idea that these traditions have value and relevance in contemporary society.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* presents a challenging and multi-layered work for directors. The play explores various themes and issues that are relevant to African societies, including cultural traditions, post-colonial struggles, and issues of prejudice. The use of symbolism, such as the placenta, adds a layer of complexity to the work, requiring careful consideration by the director in terms of how to incorporate these symbols into the production. Additionally, the play's non-linear structure, which includes flashbacks and dream sequences, presents a unique challenge for directors in terms of maintaining the coherence of the narrative. In order to effectively bring out the play's themes and symbols, directors must have a deep understanding of the work and be able to approach it with nuance and sensitivity. Ultimately, *The Placenta of Death* offers a rich and rewarding text for directors who are willing to take on the challenge of bringing it to life on stage.

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