



**THE CENTRALITY OF THE NARRATIVE  
STORYTELLING PERFORMANCE STRATEGY  
IN SAM UKALA'S IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Uwem Affiah<sup>1i</sup>,  
Offiong Ene Amaku<sup>2</sup>,  
Kufre Akpan<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Department of English & Literary Studies,  
University of Calabar,  
Calabar, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>M.A., Department of Linguistics,  
Arthur Mavis University,  
Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>PhD, Department of English,  
Akwa Ibom State University,  
Nigeria

**Abstract:**

African literary drama draws its artistic materials from the numerous forms of Oral literature. Storytelling, an ancient but living oral tradition is one of such forms that some African dramatists have resorted to in expressing their various themes. As such, storytelling has created an orally rich variant of contemporary African literary drama as demonstrated in Ukala's dramaturgy. Primarily sourcing his plays from folk material, Ukala is known for reviving and sustaining the storytelling performance via his 'folkism' theory which thrives on spontaneity in performance. This paper investigates the centrality of the storytelling strategy in his *Akpakaland, Iredi War and Break a Boil* as located in his 'folkist' ideology. The paper draws attention to such defining characteristics of indigenous storytelling as the opening and closing formulae, improvisation, audience involvement, the pivotal role of the narrator, etc. In so doing, it locates storytelling as the central artistic requirement that not only imbues Ukala's plays with its aesthetic relevance but also drives its reflection of societal issues.

**Keywords:** storytelling, folkism, indigenous drama, performance

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [uwemaffiah@yahoo.com](mailto:uwemaffiah@yahoo.com), [offuene@gmail.com](mailto:offuene@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

This study, "The Centrality of the Narrative Storytelling Performance Strategy in Sam Ukala's Ideological Framework", uses three plays by Sam Ukala, viz: *Iredi War*, *Akpakaland* and *Break a Boil* to show how the singular strategy of using a narrator/storyteller is used to develop and project Ukala's ideology of Folkism and positive societal change through revolution.

Sam Ukala belongs to a crop of playwrights, known as the second-generation playwrights that emerged in Nigeria after the Nigerian civil war. Fuelled by the disillusion, despair and despondency of a fractured nation run by an inept military, this group of dramatists assumed a radical posture; a posture which was diametrically at variance with that of their predecessors. Other dramatists who belong to this group are: Femi Osofisan, Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Ahmed Yerimah, Tess Onwueme, Zulu Sofola and Tunde Fatunde.

Heavily veiling their radicalism under oral traditions and biting satires, these playwrights experimented with dramatic techniques to suit their purposes, which were:

- 1) to create and project an African identity, aesthetically, by advancing a communal ethos, and
- 2) as Julie Agbasiere puts it, to bring about "a radical change of society in which the masses will rise above their deplorable status" (80).

As such, this crop of writers supports the Marxist school of thought and projects a postcolonial populist approach which targets the masses through songs, poetry, diction, myths, stories, etc. These dialectical overtones are copiously used so as to reawaken proletarian consciousness via a realism they can readily identify with. In as much as this group of dramatists is Marxist-oriented, Dapo Adelugba et al. reveal that their theatre "is deeply rooted in indigenous performance traditions, from which the total theatre format evolved" (153). Significantly, this generation also ushered in female playwrights whose forte is, among other things, feminism. Tess Onwueme with *The Desert Encroaches* (1985) and Zulu Sofola with *King Emene* (1974) are examples.

Generally, Tunde Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom, Oga Na Tief Man*; Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed, Aringidin and the Night Watchmen*, Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, Bode Sowande's *The Night Before*, Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* are few examples of plays that align with the plight of the masses by rejigging traditional myths to suit Marxist ideologies. We should point out that presently there is a new crop of playwrights aptly called the third generation. For want of space, we will not discuss them but suffice it to say that in this group are: Arnold Udoka, Emeka Nwabueze, Bose Afolayan, Abdullahi Denja, Seffi Attah, Sunnie Ododo and some others.

From its inception, Nigerian drama has always been a signpost for not only advertising its cultural milieu but also providing insights into its socio-political concerns. From its humble beginnings in village squares, to church concerts/travelling theatres and onto national and international theatres, Nigerian drama has metamorphosed into a colourful canvas of indigenous and foreign aesthetics geared towards inspiring societal

change. Afam Ebeogu captures it this way; “*there is a marriage of interest between indigenous African dramaturgical traditions and Euro-derived patterns... occasioned by the colonial experience*” (7).

Vigorously representing Africa’s history, literature, philosophy and arts in an enthralling manner, indigenous features like the narrator/storytelling strategy have continued to lend contemporary drama the alluring and enduring appeal that it presently enjoys. The process of domestication has bridged the chasm between the elite and the masses; the audience and the actors, as it is principally bent not only on impressing memorable and symbolic experiences on the audience but also on boldly stamping African philosophies and worldview globally.

Therefore, totally convinced that the storytelling dramaturgical strategy has the ability to convey his intentions vividly to all, Ukala quarries deeply into the reservoir of oral traditions to bring to the fore topical issues that provoke critical thinking and deep questioning. Perhaps, prompted by Ossie Enekwe’s remark that: “*Nigerian (African) dramatists must study the aesthetic habits of our people so as to create a relevant and viable theatre*” (64), Sam Ukala has painstakingly put together, in content and in form, enthralling plays that can sustain audiences’ attention because they identify with them culturally, and at the same time have the ability to effectively convey their thematic preoccupation.

Furthermore, perhaps, inspired by J. N. Amankulor’s assertion that “*what the contemporary theatre in Africa should concentrate on is the creative experimentation areas ... achieved after a firm grasp of the traditional background whose symbols and images can be translated into contemporary significance*” (98) Sam Ukala has come up with plays that are oriented towards the local audience in content and techniques. The search for a popular oriented literary drama and theatre has inspired scholars, like Uwem Affiah with Ethnodramatics, Sam Ukala with Folkism and Sunday Ododo with Facequerade, to come up with critical models, and concepts that advance a unique and authentic African dramaturgy. We will conclude this section by noting that whereas the imperialists should be credited with foisting the Euro-America model of drama on Africans through church and school, as part of the ‘civilizing’ process, Hubert Ogunde’s travelling theatre of the 1940s inspired a cultural revival that has seemingly shaped Nigerian drama.

## **2. Sam Ukala: The Man and his Ideology**

Born on April 18, 1948 in Mbiri local government area of Delta State, South South, Nigeria, Samuel Chinedu Ukala is not only a dramatist with a strong advocacy for ethnic traditions in Nigerian drama and theatre, but is also a renowned poet, short story writer, critic, director and professor of drama. His first play, *Whiteness is Barren*, was staged in 1976 while he was an undergraduate in the English Language Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Upon graduation in 1977, Ukala proceeded to the University of Ibadan from where he obtained his M.A and PhD degrees. He immediately began his career as an academic

thereafter. Driven by a strong passion and advocacy for the transfer and application of indigenous forms onto the contemporary stage, Ukala assiduously began working on an Afrocentric concept of drama which privileges the folktale and its aesthetic principles over Western techniques and aesthetics of drama. This effort gave rise to the concept of 'Folkism' as a national aesthetic principle for Nigerian dramaturgy. This is espoused in an essay, "'Folkism': Towards a National Aesthetic Principle for Nigerian Dramaturgy," published online in 2009 by Cambridge University Press.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the tenets of Folkism dot his dramaturgy. Ukala also believes that the dramatist should use his work to sensitize the masses about their plight and rouse them to effect a change in the status quo. His plays include *The Slave Wife* (1982), *Akpakaland* (1990), *Break a Boil* (1992), *Skeletons* (2002) to mention a few.

As a film producer, playwright, theatre director, screenwriter, actor and academic, Ukala has won several accolades for his acumen, including the prestigious NLNG Prize for Science and Literature. In 1993 he won the Commonwealth Fellowship at the University of Leeds. He is, also, a recipient of the 1989 ANA/British Council Drama Prize and ANA Prize for fiction in 2000. He is a strong advocate of the socio-political change via mass revolution.

In view of the foregoing, it would seem correct to say that Sam Ukala's drama ideology rests on two pillars: Folkism and socio-political change via mass revolution - inspired by the instrumentality of sensitization through drama. This is because as Kufre Akpan asserts, the social environment "has become a fountain from which many African writers, across literary genres, draw their inspirations and themes" (31).

It appears to us, to be useful now, that we take up some time and space to review what some scholars say with regard to the projection and manifestation of Ukala's ideological underpinnings in his plays.

Emmanuel Eregare's "Folkism and Modern Nigerian Theatre: A Study of Sam Ukala's *Iredi War*" engages the folk underpinnings of Ukala's most recent play, *Iredi War*. In his analysis, Eregare identifies eight defining characteristics of Folkism, one of which - the narrative storytelling performance strategy - is the focus of this study. Eregare shows, not extensively though, that eight defining characteristics of Folkism form the fulcrum of Ukala's dramaturgy and indicate a "bold attempt at addressing...the gap between the traditional forms and literary theatre" (156). It does appear, as Eregare's analysis shows, that folk motifs have significantly characterized much of Ukala's plays.

Idaevbor Bello's "Sam Ukala: African Tradition in his plays" elaborates on the folk motif in three of Ukala's plays. Bello's work is a comparative study of the traditional elements deployed in *The Slave Wife*, *Break a Boil* and *Akpakaland*. Bello engages the folk content of the plays through Ukala's Folkism concept. It takes an incisive look at the plot layout, mode of characterization and the setting of these folk-scripted plays. Bello asserts that the plays strongly showcase the characteristics of the African folktale and African experiences and by so doing have "effectively created aesthetically relevant entertainment" (129). Bello concludes that the synthesis of African and Western aesthetics gives Ukala's drama a deserved uniqueness.

Stephen Okpadah, in "A Study of Neo-Folkist Aesthetics in the Dramaturgy of Sam Ukala" differs from Eregare and Bello as he argues that there is a shift from Ukala's Folkism to what he terms Neo-Folkism (6). He asserts that among the tenets of neo-folkism found in *Iredi War* are: the use of members of the audience and the use of double narrators.

In "Folkism as Schema in Contemporary Theatre Practice: An Analysis of Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland*," Lilian Agogbuo and Clive Krama identify the use of elements of folkism in the play to include indigenous theatrics like storytelling, songs, dance, etc.

Focusing on the revolutionary underpinning of Ukala's ideology, Ifeanyi Ugwu examines two of Ukala's plays in "The Poetics of Revolution, the Logic of Reformation and Change Management in Nigeria: Sam Ukala's two folkscripts." He argues that oppression, injustice and class discrimination are pointers to the reformists' demand for justice, equal rights and fair play, which lead to societal change. Ugwu's argument is built upon the Readers Response theory which factors in close textual reading and analysis. Ugwu concludes that the plays' reformist outlook is a suitable ideology for change management in Nigeria.

In a work similar to Ugwu's, Raphael Ogu's "The Revolutionary Tendency in Sam Ukala's *Akpakaland*: A Nigerian Home video film," articulates the Marxist slant of the play. He submits that through this play, Ukala "has systematically called for the eradication of all bourgeoisie forms in our society and an enthronement of an egalitarian society advocated by Karl Marx and others" (169). Therefore, using *Akpakaland* as a frame of reference, Ogu x-rays the socio-economic inequities projected in the play and their unhealthy effects on society from a Marxist perspective.

### 3. The Narrative Storytelling Strategy in the Three Plays

This section is an exploration of the storytelling technique in the selected plays. It discusses the pivotal role of the narrator and the opening formulary in such storytelling performances and the participatory role the audience plays in the realization of these plays. It is clear that Ukala does not fail to adopt the enthralling effects of indigenous theatre into his stagecraft.

The play, *Iredi War* hints at a moment in Nigeria's history when the imperialists reigned supreme. War and the literary imagination are no doubt catalytic and symbiotic as they feed on each other. War provides literature with raw resources which literature processes for its creative needs (James Tar Tsaaior, 45). Nonetheless, history, itself is an integral part of postcolonial texts and Ukala rekindles it in this play to question the hegemonic influence of the West on former colonies.

As a matter of fact, the main conflict that inspires the title and thrust of *Iredi War*, is hinged on the 1906 uprising of the Owa kingdom against the British Army. The overriding theme of *Iredi War* is the wanton destruction and humiliating denigration of Africans by the colonial authority. The setting, Owa kingdom, therefore becomes a microcosm of this cultural resistance and political tension that spread across colonized

territories before independence. *Iredi War* is a historical play that unpacks disturbing issues like the unjust power relations between the colonized and their colonial masters, betrayals by compatriots, greed, exploitative labour, wanton violence, injustice and theft.

Running on a linear plot, the beginning of the play, exposes us to the ill-disposed meeting between the greedy and rapacious acting District Commissioner, Crewe-Read and the King of Owa kingdom, Igboba. The meeting ends in a bitter argument as King Igboba refuses to oblige Crewe-Read's request for more carriers and a two-shilling increment levy on the Owa people. This is no doubt, the inciting force that leads to the conflict in the play. Ropo Sekoni admits that "*as with other forms of fiction, conflict is the major source of tension in oral narrative-performance*" (143). Thus, it is this passive but firm resistance of the Owa people against extortion that causes Crewe-Read and his cohorts to stage an attack on Owa kingdom – demolishing its sacred places and taking its men hostage. In return, the Owa people stage reprisal attacks, killing Crewe-Read and his sergeant, Lawani. Embittered by the death of Crewe-Read, the British Army engages and defeats Owa in a fierce battle. King Igboba and the 'insurgents' are taken hostage, tried and sentenced to death. The play ends on a tragic note.

Amidst the grim storyline, Ukala, dexterously vivifies this historical drama with ritual scenes, dance, music, magic, mime and storytelling by recruiting the services of the traditional narrator. However, Ukala utilizes two narrators to tell his tale. Ukala's use of double narrators advances dramatic actions, dialogic and reportorial aspects of the play:

NARRATOR II: *We tell parts of the story-*

NARRATOR I: *and enact parts. And when we enact -*

NARRATOR II: *we summon them from our bowel (Iredi War 13).*

As narrators, their orality stands out forcefully as Ukala pulls the audience into the narrative sequence by entertaining questions and responses from the audience. These questions, comments and reactions are geared at the narrators for clarification, as with moonlight tales. Right from the exposition of the play, the audience is implicated in the script as illustrated in the directorial approach of the opening lines:

NARRATOR I: *Rises, and with her right hand, casts imaginary white chalk powder at the AUDIENCE.) E ye m onunzun! (I give you white chalk!)*

AUDIENCE: *I gwo, ore-re! (If you concoct, may it be efficacious!) (The above arousal call and response is done thrice as NARRATOR I approaches the performance area. Once there, she raises a song.)*

*Luniilu*

*Ilu I-gboba*

*Do n'udo*

*Udo Kpirikpiri (Iredi War 11).*

This is a joint performance between the audience and narrators – an interface that is one of the most prominent folk aesthetics of *Iredi War*, *Break a Boil* and *Akpakaland*. Located as a tenet of his afrocentric concept, Folkism, Ukala posits that Folkism is “the tendency to base literary plays in the history, culture, and concerns of the folk (the ‘people in general’...), and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale” (*Iredi War* 6). As such, Ukala’s audience, like in a folktale performance, is neither silent nor passive. For one, Ukala’s first law of Folkism entails an Opening which thrives on the arousal of the audience by an opening formula or greeting that is indigenous. Witness again, how Ukala employs the law of opening to stimulate audience reaction in the expository scenes of *Akpakaland*:

<i>Lu n’ilu</i>	<i>Tell a tale</i>
<i>Ilu Nwokoro</i>	<i>Tale about Nwokoro</i>
<i>Do n’udo</i>	<i>Tug at the rope</i>
<i>Udokpiri-Kpiri</i>	<i>Rope Kpiri-Kpiri (Akpakaland 13).</i>

Thus, the narrator’s song rendition is arched to inspire and awaken audience participation via call-and-response patterning. In his treatise, “Politics of Aesthetics” Ukala elucidates the law of opening as:

“...a convention for opening a folktale performance in Black Africa. It serves three functions: Arouses the audience; offers it an opportunity to encourage or stop a prospective narrator, depending on the audience’s rating of the narrator (casting!); introduces major characters and/or the temporal and spatial settings of the story. The audience may be aroused by a call, to which it responds, or by a song which it joins in...” (33).

Clearly, Ukala’s folkscript plays like *Akpakaland*, *Iredi War*, *The Slave Wife* and *The Placenta of Death* are self-contained *Ika* aesthetic structures known for the utilization of the opening formula. Thus, through this folktale device, Ukala reveals early in the plays, the aesthetic potentials of indigenous theatre. Thus, the interactive relationship between performers and the audience reawakens the essence of community life.

So, in essence, Ukala forcefully invites his audience to the stage to creatively participate not only in songs and dances, but also in dialogic exchanges. Invariably, this is his second law of aesthetics: the law of joint performance. For Ukala, the audience must be absolutely committed. As such, the law of joint performance requires that “the traditional audience co-performs...asking questions or making comments to remove vagueness, playing roles in the enactment of parts of the story and taking over the tale from a failing narrator” (34).

Ukala, believes in the audience’s frequent interjections in the plot structure, thus he makes provision for VOICES, Members of the Audience (MOA) and AUDIENCE and weaves in their frequent comments, reactions and questionings into the dramatic narrative. We witness this in *Akpakaland*:

MOA: *All to show that they had no tails?*

NARRATOR: *All to show that they had no tails. Of course. The exhibition disgusted Iyebi... (Akpakaland 30).*

And also, in *Break a Boil*:

Nkanka: *(to AUDIENCE) So, I am more dead than a seven-day old corpse? (AUDIENCE reply). Then Nkanka faces some who replied in the affirmative.) Is that what you say?... (Break a Boil 65).*

As well as in *Iredi War*:

NARRATOR I: *(to AUDIENCE) Now, you be the judge. Chichester, the District Commissioner on leave, for whom Crewe-Read was acting, could not have behaved like this. He worked as Assistant District Commissioner with Governor Ralph Moor during the Benin Massacre. Now as District Commissioner, he visited Igboba, and carefully explained to him how indirect rule worked. He respected the traditional institution, at least, in public. From what you've seen. Ladies and gentlemen, what would you say was the matter with Crewe-Read? (Hands are raised in the audience, and the narrators recognize some people to speak, one after the other. Note: narrators should give the first opportunities to members of the public audience and, like their traditional folktale performers, skilfully weave whatever they say into the process of the play. It is in the event that they do not speak that rehearsed MsOA are recognized.)*

MOA I: *I think Crewe-Read was power-hungry and power drunk.*

NARRATOR II: *Just like Vice-Consul Philips, who, also in acting capacity, caused the Benin Massacre in 1897, and was beheaded by Bini warriors, along with six other whitemen in his company. (Recognizes another MOA.) Yes?*

MOA II: *Crewe-Read was pompous. He had a very low opinion of Blacks. He seized every opportunity to tell them how inferior they were to the whiteman.*

MOA III: *He was a racist.*

MOA IV: *He was young and inexperienced.*

NARRATOR I: *Though he sometimes claimed he was a Captain, British Army records show that he was only a yeoman in the Wiltshire Imperial Yeomanry during the 1900-1901 war in South Africa.*

MOA II: *What is yeoman?*

NARRATOR I: *A farmer who was used as a foot soldier when necessary.*

NARRATOR II: *(to AUDIENCE) My people, whether he was a Captain or a yeoman, Crewe-Read was White. Every white man was wise enough to rule Blacks, abi?*

NARRATOR I: *So sad! ... Well, back to our story. Onyela was dragged to Crewe-Read's feet and Crewe-Read promptly dispatched him to Agbor prison. (Iredi War 37).*



Invariably, this performance structure allows for robust audience participation and extempore responses. Significantly, the thematic underpinnings of the play, *Iredi War* are unpacked in this discursive format between the narrators and the audience. The themes of European hegemony and the clash between the colonized peoples and their masters are brought to the fore. Again, notice also how this indigenous communal framework aids in the clarification of the message:

MOA: *From where?*

IWEKUBA: *They'd have crept on us last night; they'd have overwhelmed us like sinister ants on defenseless chicks!*

MOA: *Who?*

IWEKUBA: *White men! (Iredi War 70).*

The above dialogue, although couched in metaphors, vividly captures how the Europeans invaded Africa. Nnimmo Bassey gives us a much clearer insight to this horrendous rendezvous when he states that: "...the overrunning of Africa did meet with resistance, but it was overpowered through sheer firepower or the subtle deceptions of the invaders and betrayals by compatriots" (9). Of course, Ukala's play also zooms in on the betrayals of compatriots (in this case, Gilpin and Lawani) who having become Christian proselytes stand with the colonial oppressors to desecrate their own indigenous values and malign their kin.

Furthermore, notice how the MOA comically plays alongside the narrators, by responding as soldiers:

NARRATOR II: *By July 2<sup>nd</sup>, half of Rudkin's troops were casualties. Then the remaining half adopted new tactics: advance, strike... (NARRATOR I joins in)... and retreat. Advance, strike* –

MOA, AUDIENCE: *-- and retreat!*

NARRATOR II: *The warriors of Owa didn't suspect that white men also play tricks like the tortoise. So, when they retreated, many warriors of Owa thought they had run away. They looked at the countless corpses of the White man's soldiers on the ground and said, "Who could blame them for running for their dear lives?" but the tortoises drifted back like a silent wave and attacked Owa warriors at rest. They killed some.*

NARRATOR I: *Advance, strike –*

MOA/AUDIENCE: *-- and retreat! (Iredi War 82).*

Not only does this comical antic attract derisive laughter, it also playfully and subtly plunges the audience into the inner workings of the story. Their response is anticipated and forms part of the collective and communal experience the playwright outlines in his law of joint performance.

The ethnodramatic storytelling approach confirms Chukwuma's stance when she articulates that "*the oral audience...is a questioning audience, compelling and committed*" (236).

Indeed, audience commitment can be espied in several scenes of the play. Notice once again, how the VOICES and MOA have been stylistically integrated into the dramatic construction:

VOICES/MOA: *Yaa!*

EBIE: *Our gods and ancestors will go with us.*

VOICES/MOA: *Iseh!*

EBIE: *Obi Agun says "Iyare!" We shall go and return.*

VOICES/MOA: *Iseh! (Iredi War 75).*

Yet another ethno stylistic crafting of *Iredi War*, is the location of Narrator II. In true folkloric manner, Narrator II emerges from amongst the audience; "...Narrator II, spotlighted in the audience chin-in-hand, hurtles forward and stops the music" (*Iredi War* 12). Even so, he is often times spotted in their midst as the following stage direction depicts: Narrator II: *Spotlighted on the left side of the town square*" (58). Apparently, the second narrator plays an auxiliary role by offering support to Narrator I, as seen when he clarifies meaning.

NARRATOR II: *He left Asaba June 11, 1906, with 180 African rank and file and 54 unwilling carriers and 20 more from Iselle-Uku.*

NARRATOR I: *(Hailing NARRATOR II) Master of dates and figures!*

NARRATOR II: *Thank you my sister. Rudkin lost nearly twenty percent of those numbers to Ekumeku at Umunede (Iredi War 72).*

Therefore, true to his indigenous roots, the narrator assumes the role of a historian; a mobile library, rich in the knowledge of the lore and historic accounts of his people. Again, Chukwuma reiterates that; "*all the data are stored in the performer's brain as a storehouse...that is why he is a repository of communal knowledge, a culture bearer and preserver*" (221). Furthermore, Narrator II is known for instigating the audience's reaction and constantly engaging Narrator I in dialogue:

NARRATOR I: *Yes. Obi Igboba of Owa was sitting in his palace and he crushed his... Say it, if you dare.*

NARRATOR II: *That's why I said it's a sad tale.*

NARRATOR I: *But there's also hope in the song we danced to. They tugged at Igboba, the rope, but he couldn't be snapped (Iredi War 12).*

Again, Narrator II's strategic location in the audience, is to depict that there is no division between the stage and the spectators as gleaned from secular indigenous performances. Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* toes a similar path as we see a member of the cast- the "*handsome man dancing round the stage within the audience*" (*Farewell*

to a *Cannibal Rage* 142). Accordingly, Harold Scheub comments revealingly that in indigenous African drama:

*"There is full participation, by the members of the audience in the unfolding story. No proscenium arch exists, and there is no safety in distance or darkness. Everyone is known: the artist emerges from the audience and, her narrative complete, is again swallowed up by the audience"* (12).

Ukala further adopts yet another dramatic device in this play, and that is role-playing. While Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, adopts a replacement of actors playing Titi and Narrator, Ukala's *Iredi War*, on the other hand, allows both narrators to assume other roles (Jamba and Afopele) and revert to their original roles as narrators. Quarried from indigenous drama, this improvisatory device aids in advancing the plot and pushes aesthetic delight. Indeed, the thin disguise of the female narrator impersonating as a male provokes laughter as depicted in the directorial comments:

Crewe-Read: *Jamba!*

*Jamba: Sir! (Runs from among the carriers/runners to Crewe-Read. She is actually NARRATOR I thinly disguised as a man (Iredi War 46).*

Obviously, to stimulate laughter and amusement, the text simulates narrators from the traditional milieu who are flexible enough to assume any role. Osofisan's chameleonic character, Igunnun in *Many Colours* also exudes this trait as he assumes several roles in the course of the play. So also does Aafa in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, who doubles as medicine man and imam. The aesthetic energy of *Iredi War* is its infusion of indigenous theatrics, albeit, there are also palpable influences from the Western model of drama. Western influences can be gleaned from the structuring of its unified plot.

Unlike Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* which is divided into six parts, Ukala's *Iredi War* and *Akpakaland* both adopt an Aristotelian plot structure of a beginning, middle and an end, where causes spiral into effects. In that sense, his plays (*Iredi War* and *Akpakaland*) can be said to be a continuous stretch of syllogistic actions derived from principles of neo-classical drama. In any case, Ukala's handling of the plot of *Iredi War*, reveals the syncretic nature of contemporary African drama where Western and African forms mingle.

As with the other plays of Ukala selected for this study, *Iredi War* is not marked off by acts and scenes rather it operates a simple, non-rigid but the progressive plot, where there are neither scenic nor costume changes. Although the play contains no flashbacks, the play itself is a flashback to the Owa uprising of 1906. However, to tighten the scenic changes in the plot, the fade and dissolve technique comes to the rescue, as well as, the song renditions and visual spectacle which also aid in the transition between actions. Boemer explains that:

*"...postcolonial fiction therefore gives structure to, as well as being structured by history... The space-time framework and patterns of causality in a narrative work not only impart coherence to a fragmented history but also help organize and clarify foundational moments in the anti-imperial movement: the initial emergence of political self-consciousness, say or the explosion of resistance" (189).*

*Akpakaland*, another play by Ukala presents the evils of corruption, intimidation, thuggery and injustice as problematic realities Nigeria grapples with. In this play, Ukala is concerned with unmasking the agony and desperation of the poor. Like *Iredi War*, the play's ethnodramatic content is easily glimpsed by the narrative constructs adopted, regardless of its revolutionary posturing. Ukala brings all the amenities of folk theatre-music, parades, dance, songs, and etcetera to bear on this folk script. Ukala employs the services of the folk narrator. This time, Ukala's narrator does not alternate between roles as Osofisan does with Aafa in *Once Upon Four Robbers* or as with *Iredi War*; his role as narrator remains so from the beginning to the end of the play. The narrator's traditional opening of the play is captivating. Hear him:

NARRATOR: *There was, there was, if not in a folktale, they do not tell it. There was Akpaka, the President of Akpakaland (Akpakaland 13).*

His speech functions as a cue to setting up the scene, because, as soon as he begins narrating the tale, the actors emerge drowning out the narrator's voice with their dialogue and actions. Albeit, by and large, the narrator repeatedly steps in to recount chronological events and inundate the audience with background information or past events. Therefore, it appears that in *Akpakaland*, the narrator replaces the flashback element. For this reason, the narrator's oral and paralinguistic acumen comes alive in true folkloric manner. Hear him bring his audience up to speed:

NARRATOR: *Our story flies, it flies. It perches on Akpaka and his ministers. Akpaka told them of the allegation that one or two wives had a tail. That shocked them. But it shocked them more to hear of the impending public striptease of the president's wives. "It is unprecedented, it is scandalous," they cried. "It is an abomination!" But Akpaka couldn't be stopped. So, it was agreed by the ministers, except Aseki, that the president's wives will walk naked on Sunday. Everyone sharpened his ears against that day (Akpakaland 29).*

Again, notice how the narrator also gives the audience details of the actions that took place previously:

NARRATOR: *That Saturday night, Iya Fulama tried to smuggle Fulama out of the state house, but vigilant guards retrieved her... (Akpakaland 43).*

Ukala is constrained to do this, as a result of the plot structure he adopts – the linear. Hence, *Akpakaland* is not marked off by acts or scenes. It is, rather, a seamless flow of actions backed up by narrative comments. Alternatively, we also catch a glimpse of the spontaneity of the indigenous African theatre, as Ukala's narrator engages the Members of Audience (MOA) and Voices, with thought provoking questions and answers that stir up critical thinking:

NARRATOR: (*Reappearing*) *What did you expect? When there is a dispute between the influential rich and the wretched poor, who supports the poor?*

MOA: (*Dismally*) *No one!*

NARRATOR: *Yes, no one. Several people pay them lip service. They spit fire during political campaigns, "I will stamp out poverty. I will uplift the wretched and support the weak". Or they write fiercely in newspapers: "Equitable distribution of wealth," "Probity, Accountability; Probity". All lip service! For as soon as they are in the corridors of power, they put the treasury in their pockets, lock the corridors against the poor and ask them to be self-reliant.*

MOA: (*Raising hand*) *Storyteller, I have a question.*

NARRATOR: *Please, ask it.*

MOA: *How may the poor unite and seize power?*

NARRATOR: *By cultivating self-esteem and refusing to be bribed with crumbs from the oppressor's table. By being dedicated to the course of self-liberation and self-humanization. By looking among the poor for a true, selfless leader...but...well, what will the poor do with power? I'd like to know that. (Takes answers from the public audience.) If they get the power, will they not oppress the powerless just as they are now being oppressed? (Akpakaland 34).*

This interactive session succinctly captures Owen Seda's views when he theorizes that: "*community theatre, like the oral narrative, becomes participatory, allowing greater scope for actor-audience interaction. Because of this closeness, there tends to be immediate interaction and feedback between performer and audience*" (96). Invariably, the storytelling pattern gives ample opportunity for self re-examination and awakens moral and ethical consciousness in the hearts of the audience. Apparently, from the above excerpt, the narrator is also an intellectual participating in the search for justice and change.

Accordingly, the revolutionary stance of the play is geared towards raising the consciousness of the masses against exploitation from the elites. Hence, not only does the storytelling approach avail Ukala the opportunity to inform through local reconstructions of folklore sessions, but also to reform society by decrying the outrageous levels of injustice and corruption in the polity. Ukala belongs to the second generation of Nigerian playwrights, hence his ideological underpinnings are anchored on positive change through revolution. It is this same theme of corruption that Ukala tackles in his *Break a Boil*.

*Break a Boil* revolves around truth and justice prevailing over the evil machinations of power-drunk leaders and selfish individuals. Aptly titled, the play focuses on breaking away from customary practices and norms which are injurious to societal development, akin to a "boil full of pus" which has to be broken for societal growth. Once again, Ukala implicates his audience into his narrative plot by incorporating them in questions, songs, etc.

The play sharply focuses on the power-drunk leader of Gidiland, Gidi; who has cunningly usurped power from the rightful heir to the throne, Uwa his elder brother by making him insane. When Uwa recovers, he soon realizes that he has been outsmarted by his own brother, and seeks revenge by sleeping with Gidi's new bride, Uki. They are soon caught by Nkanka, the storyteller; Ison, one of Gidi's wives and Eririnma, Gidi's war minister. Just before the case goes on trial, a can of worms is thrown open about Gidi, and in a twist of fate, old customs are suspended and Eririnma emerges king. With this turn of events, the play's title shines with clarity. The play proposes a break from moribund customs which could be threats to societal well-being and positive development. The Gidi community calls for change by disbanding their monarchical system of government and embracing democracy, hence, Eririnma, a morally upright man, and a stranger to the land is crowned king. Thus, through this tale, Ukala shows that the collective will of the people is vital in advancing ideal socio-political values. Riddled with the aesthetics of indigenous drama (traditional wrestling contests, dirges, gaming, drumming, dance, poetry) that are familiar to his audience, the play not only delights but also informs via these ethnodramatic elements.

*Break a Boil* is devoid of acts and scenes as with the rest of Ukala's plays investigated in this work. Perhaps, this can be attributed to its folk scriptic moorings. Significantly, *Break a Boil* does not begin with the familiar *Ika* storytelling opening formula as evinced in *Akpakaland* and *Iredi War*, neither does it begin with the Yoruba storytelling chant of 'aloo' as depicted in *Once Upon Four Robbers* nor with the opening festivities of *Many Colours* and *FCR*. It, however, begins with a sonorous love lyric emanating from the palace. This, not only sets the mood and atmosphere of the play, but also gives the members of the cast their cue, who "in common village wears and without particular stage make-ups, begin to appear in groups from different entrances to the arena" (*Break a Boil* 63). Without the opening salute, Nkanka, the yaws-stricken storyteller who has been eavesdropping but pretends to weave a basket, initiates the play by addressing the audience:

Nkanka: *You're particularly lucky tonight. When such a song begins the morning of a story, then your ears are in for a sumptuous meal. And tonight's story is about one great kingdom called Gidiland...* (*Break a Boil* 64).

And:

Nkanka: *Gidiland! So, take your seats quickly and let's take off...Are you all seated now?*  
(*Break a Boil* 64).

Thus, in a true folkloric manner, the members of the audience “*move into the public audience, greeting people as they go along. They soon settle down*” (64), waiting for a story. This singular action of moving into the public/audience foretells that Ukala's stage will be shared by both members of the audience and members of the cast. In contrast to all of Ukala's plays selected for this study, it is only *Break a Boil* that replaces its narrator with another member of the cast. As *Break a Boil* unfolds, Ison assumes the role of the narrator, thus, replacing Nkanka who was murdered. Accordingly, she explains that, “*...when a storyteller dozes off, someone else tells the story to the end*” (*Break a Boil* 108). So it is that Ison pilots the tale to its end.

Significant also is the role the Town-Crier plays. He amplifies the voice of the narrator by re-echoing the situation of things to the primary as well as to the proscenium audience. Hear him:

Town crier: *Gidiland, Gidiland!...*  
*A rude hand is poking*  
*At the Lion's lair*  
*Gidiland, Gidiland!* (*Break a Boil* 92).

Like the narrator, the Town-crier helps in the advancement of the plot. Even so, *Break a Boil*, as with the other plays selected for this study, highly engages its audience. For one, Ukala enlists the aid of members of the audience who are both cast and the same time audience members. Not only do they come out on stage to act:

MOA I: *Someone fetch some water.* (MOA II dashes off.)  
MOA III: *Fan her.* (MOA IV rushes to the stage to fan her with her wrapper.) (*Break a Boil* 100).

They also mingle with the audience, at times, even sitting in their midst. Apparently, apart from acting, their function is also to spur the audience into active participation. Their comments, songs, shouts, questions and reactions are all improvisations which enliven the play and deepen the conversation. They are keen followers of the play's actions and never fail to express their views. Hear them:

MOA: *Eh-henn! Tell him.* (*Break a Boil* 78).

MOA: *Yes, let him swear. Let him swear and die. Liar!* (*Break a Boil* 81).

MOA: *Mm-Hm. Trouble has come now.* (*Break a Boil* 81).

MOA: Nkanka, run!... A murderer behind you! (*Break a Boil* 89).

MOA: Hmm! He will drum you-o! (*Break a Boil* 91).

These playfully improvised dialogues draw the larger secondary audience into the story which generally heightens the intensity in the auditorium. Indeed, the MOA is an artistic necessity that contributes to the development of the plot. The MOA ensures a dismantling of the principle of the fourth-wall, a dramatic convention that seemingly 'ignores' the audience. Thus, right from the beginning of this play, the audience is implicated into the fabric of the play. Notice from the stage direction, how Eririnma reprimands them:

ERIRINMA: (...*Deliberately Eririnma pulls up the spear, dripping with blood, and approaches the audience menacingly.*) *I will impale any tongue that honours evil with a song!..* (*Break a Boil* 108).

In any case, the suspension of the fourth wall goes *pari passu* with the storytelling approach. This has been identified in all the plays selected for this study. The folktale session ends with Ison the narrator addressing the audience directly:

Ison: (to AUDIENCE) I ask you, can one actually end a story?

MOA: *I wonder.*

Ison: *Can't you see another beginning of the story from where we stopped?*

MOA: *I think I can.*

Ison: *Well, there's always a tomorrow. For today, I have gone and I have returned-o.*

AUD: *Welcome-o!*

Ison: (*With a genuflection*) *Ee* (*Break a Boil* 117).

The closing coda is no doubt an important part of every storytelling session. It formally dismisses the audience.

From the foregoing, Ukala employs the narrative technique of the folktale narrator - an indigenous convention, which thrives on improvisation, audience interaction, role-play and storytelling to project the cultural richness of contemporary African theatre.

This projects the narrator as a link between the audience and their emotional values, for he reflects their philosophical vision. He also represents the image of communal coherence and solidarity in African society. From time immemorial, Africa has been a continent of storytellers, and by adopting the storytelling model, Ukala seeks to remind us of its tremendous narrative power to enlighten and entertain.

The dramatic qualities of the storytelling structure allow this playwright fluidity and flexibility to imaginatively communicate his ideologies. So far, the storytelling model



has proven to be an integrative and innovative style that allows for new forms of expressiveness that showcase the richness of African theatre.

#### 4. Conclusion

In all, this study shows that the storytelling/narrative performance strategy occupies a central position in these texts as it becomes the dominant frame upon which the playwright's ideologies are woven. Stylistically, the plots of the selected plays weave in a good deal of such devices as flashbacks, role-play, audience participation, mimetic expressions, digressions, play within a play and allusions. These devices are not just for the aesthetic effects but also as identity markers that stamp the ethnic affinities of the texts. In all, the tremendous narrative power of the narrator in the storytelling approach creates a rich dramatic experience for all.

#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

#### About the Authors

**Uwem Affiah (PhD)** is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria. His research is mostly in African Drama and African Oral Literature. He is on Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia and Orcid. His Orcid number is [orcid.org/0000-0002-5825-1473](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5825-1473).

**Offiong Amaku, M.A.**, is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics, Arthur Jarvis University, Cross River State, Nigeria. Her research interest is in African Drama. She can be found on ResearchGate, Academia, Google Scholar and Orcid. Her Orcid number is [orcid.org/0000-0003-1970-8060](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1970-8060).

**Kufre Akpan (PhD)** is a Lecturer in the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. His research interest is in African Prose and African Oral Literature. He is on ResearchGate, Academia, Google Scholar and Orcid. His Orcid number is [orcid.org/0000-0002-5989-1077](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5989-1077).

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