

History and Symbols in Juliana Okoh's *Throes of Leadership*

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Abstract

Semiotics is a topic on which much has been theorised, but the practical applications of semiotics to appreciation of drama appear to be very difficult for students of the humanities to comprehend. By using the opportunity of doing a review on a recent play premier at the University of Port Harcourt in March, 2017; as directed by Sunday Edum, effort has been made in this study to demonstrate the place of semiotics in drama appreciation. The play titled, *Throes of Leadership* is written by Juliana O. Okoh; a prominent female playwright, feminist and a professor at the University of Port Harcourt. The work exposes the inner meanings of the signs and symbols embodied in the play from a participant account of the historical events captured in the play, while appraising the playwright and director in the delivery of the dramatic peace.

Keywords: Performance, Semiotics, Meaning, Interpretation, Appreciation.

Introduction

This work is a study in practical applications of semiotic in drama presentation and it is imperative that the term semiotics be

adequately introduced before embarking on the study of the selected production. Semiotics in definition are signs and symbols that give insight into both artistic and literary works for the purpose of unravelling hidden meanings and helping communicate the artist's message with clarity of meaning. Wikipedia informs that semiotics started as an organised linguistics academic enquiry into the true meaning of words and then progressed to examination of behavioural patterns of people from both anthropological and psychological view points, leading again to its subsequent enquiry into culture and society, which are in the realm of sociology and philosophy.

Semiotics is therefore a study that spans both humanities/arts studies and the social sciences. It aids academic and social analyses of such creative works as films, literature, fine arts and music; constituting its self into an accepted critical theory of cultural products. Semiotics is a technique for ensuring that intended meanings are lucidly understood by the audience in the performing arts or the reader of a literature.

In recent developments, semiotics has evolved into a methodology for analysis and evaluation of consumer habits and impact of advertising. According to Wikipedia,

Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. Its origins lie in the academic study of how signs and symbols (visual and linguistic) create meaning. It is a way of seeing the world and of understanding how the landscape and culture in which we live has a massive impact on all of us unconsciously.

People on a daily bases apply semiotics in every day live. From traffic signs to such simple signs as a salutation, down to a wave of goodbye are all semiotics in use. We need to see the signs and

interpret their meanings instinctively and without duelling on the thought of it while noting that from a culture to another, meaning defers: while a hand shake in the culture of England is a greeting or welcome sign, the clasping of both palms of the hand and a bowing of the head serves same purpose in India. Wikipedia submits that,

Viewing and interpreting (or decoding) this sign enables us to navigate the landscape of our streets and society. *Everyone is a semiotician, because everyone is constantly unconsciously interpreting the meaning of signs around them – from traffic lights to colours of flags, the shapes of cars, the architecture of buildings, and the design of cereal packaging.* And signs don't only need to be visual – they can be aural or sonic signs too, such as the sound of a police siren, usually heard before the vehicle is seen.

Signs can be understood on a surface value (literary meaning) or by the deeper implications of the context in which they have been communicated and are expected to be comprehended so that a person is able to react to its real meaning. Wikipedia further informs that,

Semiotics, also called Semiology, the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. It was defined by one of its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as the study of “the life of signs within society.” Although the word was used in this sense in the 17th century by the English philosopher John Locke, the idea of semiotics as an interdisciplinary mode for examining phenomena in different fields emerged only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the independent work of Saussure and of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

The principal theorists of semiotics are Saussure and Peirce some other exponents of the Semiotics theory include [Gestalt](#) psychologists [Max Wertheimer](#), [Wolfgang Köhler](#), [Clive Bell](#) and [Kurt Koffka](#). Again in Wikipedia (2017, June) we are informed that, Peirce on the one hand basis his theory on,

pragmatism and logic.(and) defined a sign as “something which stands to somebody for something,” and one of his major contributions to semiotics was the categorization of signs into three main types: (1) an icon, which resembles its referent (such as a road sign for falling rocks); (2) an index, which is associated with its referent (as smoke is a sign of fire); and (3) a symbol, which is related to its referent only by convention (as with words or traffic signals). Peirce also demonstrated that a sign can never have a definite meaning, for the meaning must be continuously qualified.

By implication, Peirce suggests that signs are giving a meaning by a society, community or fraternity and have no fixed universal meaning and so should be looked out from the point of view of who is giving the sign and who is expected to see it. In this view, the signs in Julie Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* may portend more meanings to those who were a part of the history being retold, than to others who have no previous knowledge of the history of the University of Port Harcourt, where the play is set. Saussure on the other hand postulated language to be a sign- system through his linguistic research endeavours; Wikipedia (2017, June) cites that,

Saussure’s distinction between the two inseparable components of a sign: the signifier, which in language is a set of speech sounds or marks on a page, and the signified, which is the concept or idea behind the sign.(The influence of the [Gestalt](#) psychologists is also apparent in works of

visual aesthetics; e.g., Rudolf Art and Visual Perception (1954), which explores the significance for our understanding of pictures of such well-known Gestalt phenomena as the figure-ground relationship and the perception of completed wholes.(Wikipedia)

Saussure opens up in-depth, the complexities inherent in trying to find a set of principles towards understanding signs or symbols as may or may not have been intentionally captured in a literary or art work by the author, painter or sculptor. He inferred that a clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding the creation of the work may be necessary to aid the understanding of the inherent signs and symbols locked therein. He opines that the signifier which is the sign or symbol may not always be seen on the surface value, but a deeper appreciation of the work may disclose the signified. It is in this vain that critics of art and literature source for other meanings that may be found in such work that are beyond the obvious. On the premise of the above understandings of semiotics and its uses, this study here attempts the appreciation of Juliana Okoh's play, *Throes of Leadership*.

Background to the study

The play *Throes of Leadership* by Juliana Okoh was directed by Sunday Edum and premiered on Thursday 23rd March 2017, and was re-staged from Wednesday 5th to Friday 7th April, 2017. The play is centred on the administrative experiences of the second Vice Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt, Professor Silvanus J.S. Cookey, who governed the university from 1982 to 1990. While the subject of the play is the leadership problems encountered by Cookey during his time in office. The play presents so many signs and symbols that make it relevant to the recent experiences of the present Vice Chancellor, Professor Ndowa Lale, suggesting that this

may be the object of this plays premiere at this time. The play was initially written in a smaller version, to celebrate the 80th birthday of Professor S.J.S. Cookey in 2016, before this premier of the full script in March 2017. It was however crafted and dated 9th April, 2014 and appears to be yet unpublished as of the premier date. As a student of the University of Port Harcourt from 1983 to 1990 on three different programmes and having been an active participant in the riots of 1985/86 due to misinformation at the time and also having saved the then Vice Chancellors life at the Delta park gate of the University in 1987 when a stab attempt was made at him, during his arrest by a student mob in the late evening hours, while returning from port Harcourt town in his private Volvo 760 car (for which I was commended by him publicly). On this background this historical play strongly attracts my interest to do a critical review.

The Performance

While the script presents a multiple setting, the Director of this performance pegged it to a mono set by setting the senate chambers upstage and the guest reception part of the Vice Chancellors' office mid stage. To make this work, he omitted several scenes in the script that require other sets. The play which was directed by Sunday Edum and first staged on Thursday 23rd March 2017, was re-staged from Wednesday 5th to Friday 7th April, 2017. The performance being addressed in this paper is that of 5th April 2017. The performance which began at 7:15pm and lasted an hour and eleven minuets at the University of Port Harcourt's Arts Theatre, Popularly known as The Crab; opened with a song titled, "Being a VC is not an easy task". Doki and Asen (2012, p.241) in reference to use of songs in African drama assert that, "It is due to the centrality of music and dance in the African way of life that these usually feature in African drama, enhancing the theme and enriching the aesthetic

of the play...” as was the case in the performance of Sunday Edum’s interpretation of Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership*. The singing which was repetitive at scene transitions was rendered by a backstage choir supported by stage hands on stage and was effectively utilised.

As lights came on to expose the set, the Vice Chancellor and Senate members were on set playing out “Situation II” of the play script, which marked the director’s choice for the beginning of the performance, but not the beginning of the script. Institute of Arts and Culture, University of Port Harcourt was the producing house for the play and actors were undergraduate students of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, accompanied by a staff of the institute. The performance was energetic with excellent performances put up by the actors. The idiosyncrasies of the then senate members were well-articulated in the character development of the individual actors.

It was easy for any who knew the real people to attach names to the characters through the actors’ interpretations. Emeritus Professor Okiwelu, the then Dean of science at the time, was present at the performance and commented that he was truly represented. Also well represented were the registrar Chief Okogbule Wonodi, Dean of Management; Professor C.C. Nwachukwu, Dean of Arts; Professor Ola Rotimi and others. The actors when questioned after the play revealed that they had no idea who the people they represented were and that the idiosyncrasies displayed were given to them by the director of the play, who in turn revealed that he, got his information from people who met these people in the university and remembered their mannerisms.

Performance and script analysis

Theme: The theme of the play appears to be distrust. A leader who is celebrated and applauded by the people is easily condemned and attacked at any set back in his government by same people, because of distrust. This is a subject that can be easily related to the presidency of Nigeria or the present administration of the serving Vice Chancellor of the University of Port Harcourt; Professor Ndowa Lale, represented in the character of Professor Silvanus Cooky as presented on stage. Chukwu-Okoronkwo and Okoronkwo (2013, p.55) posit that, “Art, Society and culture are indubitably tripartite phenomena. It is this inseparability that has therefore necessitated the exploration of these rather composite concepts for their more appreciative comprehensions”. There is a correlation between the present and the past as a pull him down syndrome appears to be developing into a culture of Universities in Nigeria. To make this view clearer the following compare between past and the present administrations in the University of Port Harcourt provides an example.

Professor Ndowa Lale was almost ousted from office in his first year of his five-year tenure, for standing firm to implement a ‘no fee, no examination’ senate approved policy that led to student unrest and destruction of property by the students. He was further accused of fraudulent exotic wardrobe allowance and purchase of exotic SUV car for his office with a view to pushing him out of office, possibly for a sharper practices compliant replacement since he appears to have visible become an obstruction to the usual looting of university fund. Investigations turned up a council approval of funds allocation to him and that SUV (jeep) in contention was purchased for the office by the immediate past Vice Chancellor Professor Joseph Ajeyinka (but not put to use by same). In the experience of Professor Silvanus Cooky the major setbacks where the failure of an endowment fund drive which was collapsed by the

greed of some senate members that later turned around to also become his chief critics. The second was an investment for the university in Pan African bank, a means by which he had run the university and paid salaries as the military juntas of Generals Mohammad Buhari (1979-1983) and Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, (1983-1991) who took turns in heading the state of Nigeria at the period of his service as Vice Chancellor, both cut education funds. This action, for which he was praised after several successes, put him in a tight situation when the bank collapsed from over lending activities and political issues in 1986. Later in 1998 the bank, bounced back under a new name; 'Ecobank: The pan African bank'. The playwright however got this fact wrong as she attributed the event to Savanna bank which did not collapse until the year 2003, and which never had a branch in the University of Port Harcourt as stated in the play script. However, in my opinion a historical play must not necessarily be written to the last historical details but key facts should be retained, so that history does not get distorted.

Plot: The plot of the play builds from the achievements of the Vice Chancellor to his major challenges and eventual triumph over his problems through an investment in agriculture and is also a symbolic representation and call for patience to the Nigerian people as the present ruling President Mohamad Buhari led government has embarked on making agriculture the national major concern besides the fight against corruption. The play specifically reminds the audience of the Olusegun Obasanjo governments' 'Green revolution' and 'Operation Feed the Nation' (later discovered to be coined from Obasanjo Farms Nigeria; a private enterprise of the former military Head of State and later a former civilian President of Nigeria), The success of which at the time of the play is what the Vice Chancellor in the play draws from, on the advice of the Deputy

Vice Chancellor, which led to his investment in the Ethiopian researcher, Dr. Rusom and Nigeria's Dr. Odihirin, and the investment led to a positive change in the fortune of the administration. Other sub-plots in the play such as the Biafra war flash backs and the refugee situation at the time appear to be a reminder to the war and crisis agitators in the country to remember the consequences of the last war and pursue peace in the nation.

These flash back scenes were edited out from the performance by the director, possibly because of the technicalities of staging presented by them. However, the scene of the Biafran leaders' decision making to flee the nation that was retained, suffers disconnect with the rest of the performance and was confusing to any audience yet to read the script. Situations 1, 3, 6 and 9 that were omitted by the director in the performance, appear to be intended by the playwright to reveal the side talks outside of the senate members. These scenes which were set in the class rooms and on the streets of the campus contain important lines that inform the audience about the public views at the time and the effects of limited information on the people. The crisis which arose from the mishandling of communication with the students by the Deputy Vice Chancellor at the time through lack of diplomacy in speech and led to over two months' police occupation of the campus. The play however did not capture the police molestations of staff and staff children after the students vacated the campus, with upwards of two hundred and eighty-five students in police custody.

Structure: The structure of the play is a simple one. It has a beginning, middle and an end and attempts to compress events that lasted over four years into an Aristotelian twenty-four-hour time by using a narrator, which in our view was not successfully achieved. According to Ademeso, (2012, p.112),

The structural import of a play is significant in determining the dramatic effect a playwright intends to achieve. An awareness, and a conscious utilisation of structural elements of dramaturgy heighten the creative and intellectual essence of a play. In Greek tradition these structural elements- physical division of plays acts, scenes, or movements and the use of language- were made as rules for a “good” play (see Aristotle’s Poetics) whereas the nineteenth and twentieth century playwrights saw this division, not in strict terms with the Greek theory, but as an ideological projection mode.

Perhaps a more elaborate use of the narrator or addition of a second narrator to discuss with the first may have made the play to have a titter packaging. The play is not written in scenes or acts, but rather in situations, a style more ideal for screenplay, dance drama and plays with loose structure that cover a wide time frame. The time frame covered by the play is really wide but could have been better articulated and reported by character recall or the narrator. The script appears not to have made considerations for the available stage types in Nigerian Universities, particularly the University of Port Harcourt, where a temporary Arts theatre has remained permanent after forty years of coming into use and has been over-run by the population growth of the institution over the years. The number of sets suggested by the script requires a multi-stage theatre, a very large stage like the national theatre cinema halls or main bowl at Iganmu in Lagos or a dragging of the performance through elaborate set changes between situations/scenes. The performance was more compact than the script in focusing the audience attention on the theme and purpose of the play.

Character: The character of the then Vice Chancellor, Professor Silvanus Cookey, as presented in the play is that of an ideal gentleman and a devoted Christian, a fact supported by his dedication to the university long after retirement, his knighthood of the Anglican church of Nigeria and his permanent appointment on the church council of St. Nicholas Anglican Church, Aluu, University of Port Harcourt, where he has continued to worship, coming all the way from his residence at Port Harcourt Phase two GRA. He is portrayed in the play performance as one who delegates duties and stoically accepts the outcome of such delegations without chastising the delegate. Despite this being the true character of the man, it is also a statement by the playwright to Nigerian leaders in all levels of government of who a good leader should be in terms of personality. The characterisations in the play are a true reflection of the complexity of characters in a nation or institution and the impossibility of pleasing all, as events are seen from varying perspectives.

Technical Perspectives

The performance aesthetics of Juliana Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* was achieved by using theatricalism for its design style, which in this case combined simplified realism, realism and symbolic setting. The office table of the Vice Chancellor also serves as his table at the senate; this makes this set piece symbolic of the seat of power. The senate seats which in real situation face the Vice Chancellor were theatrically placed in a curve on both sides of him to favour the audience. The play made use of levels by placing the senate chamber, and the office table of the Vice Chancellor at a one and half feet (1:1/2") higher level, with risers to aid climbing. The visiting area of the office that also doubled as the VCs lodge was on the floor of the stage. This placement of sets also showed the

importance of events as more serious matters were played on a higher level. The odd set however is the flash back of the escape plan by the defunct Biafran leader: Colonel Odimegwu Ojukwu in the company of his aid, the Vice Chancellor, many years earlier. The scene was played upstage right and the scene had no stage props, only hand props.

The lighting was fair, when taking into consideration the limitation of the thrust design of the Crab theatre and the few lanterns totalling nine, which were used to light the play by Patrick Agha; the technical director. Costuming and makeup were convincing as adequate efforts were made in dating the play through dress fashion and hair styles. Griffiths (1982, p.109) informs us that “Actors wear more than just clothes on stage. Their costumes have an important role in the production- they are like three dimensional paintings”. Costume was indeed a major tool for identifying the characters in Okoh’s *Throes of Leadership* with the real people being represented. The first impression on the audience on entering the theatre and beholding the set before the house lights went off is that of coming into a board meeting room or a court room. The emblem/logo of the University of Port Harcourt that was pasted on the front of the VCs table up stage- centre instantly situated the play.

Summary and evaluation of the Performance

The performance was articulate and captivating in my opinion, however; having been an eye witness or as I have already implied earlier in this review, a participant. Distortion of some facts of the historical events being represented tended to hold my attention and may have subtracted from my appreciation of the work as my preoccupation was in finding signs and symbols that could truly relate the performance to the historical facts being recreated and

connect them to relevant recent developments in the campus and the country. According to Shaka (2012, p. 84),

One of the major contributors to national economy is Nigerian Literature. The honour which our writers have brought to our country is unrivalled. Much of what is known about Nigeria by the rest of the world can be adduced to our literary writers. Beside Wole Soyinka who is reputedly the first person of African descent to win the Nobel Prize for Literature..., the land has also been blessed with more than two dozen world class writers.

The play was most informative to the university community who constituted the audience and the executive of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Academic (SONTA) who were visiting the university on that day. At the end of the production, the audience did not rise and leave, but remained seated in discussion groups as they tried to confirm if the history presented as art before them was true. Responses to the production were therefore invited from the audience and from the comments gathered and the reactions of listeners; it became evident that the performance had put them through a quality theatre experience.

However, I would want to correct one last misinformation in the play before resting my pen and that is on the playwright's information in the play of "students building a coffin, making an effigy of the vice Chancellor and burning it at the senate building". The coffin that was used was hijacked from the then medical cadaver room, located at Choba Park. The effigy of the Vice Chancellor was a real person in costumes who after making a caricature of the VC, dramatised death, was put in the coffin and carried as far as delta park gate, where he was replaced by stones. The coffin was then buried in Choba River (by Choba-Emeohua bridge) by a mock priest

(played by the writer of this work; which role I have long been publicly pardoned for playing, during my studentship, by the fatherly gentleman; Professor Silvanus J.S. Cooky), the dramatics of the day being orchestrated by theatre arts student from the Crab theatre in Delta Park. The demonstrations were more of a dramatic carnival until the radicals from Uni-Park marched down to Delta Park with stone throwing. Only used car tyres were burnt in front of the senate building and most of the property destroyed in that riot were by the mobile police force of over two hundred man strength, which was composed of and sent in from both the mopol 19 unit of Rivers State and some units from northern Nigeria.

The occupation police force maintained their communications in Hausa language as they occupied the university campus for about six weeks, in which time even staff and their families were treated like captors in war. These police men made sure every window in student hostels and the administrative buildings received a canister of tear gas and smashed down doors and a said two hundred and eighty-seven students were arrested. Most of the arrested unfortunately were medical and science students in Choba Park who were passive to the demonstrations and the mostly female students in Delta Park. Only one student (a pastor) was abducted in his room in Uni-Park, were the radicals who rioted came from. This was extended to the staff boy's quarters a week later, as they extended their occupation of the campus. It took the police three days to push their way into Uni-Park hostels and class rooms. The Uni-Park students' suspected confraternity groups organised a gorilla counter attack which destroyed the first police water canon van to arrive the park and kidnapped eleven policemen, who they abandoned in the bushes three days later without their arms, giving reason for the police to become extremely brutal and extend their stay.

The riots were unfortunate and a perfect example of the impact lack of information or misinformation can cause in an educational institution. The play; Okoh's *Throes of Leadership* serves as enlightenment for the students as well as the management of the University of Port Harcourt, represented that day by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic who was present at the performance. On the whole, the play crafting and performance can be best addressed as a presentation of signs and symbols portending warnings to prevent a repeat of history. It was in our view an intellectual success by the playwright and artistic success by the director.

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