

Cultural Revolutionary Aesthetics and Violence in Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi and Hangmen Also Die*

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>Postcolonial Nigeria is characterized by enduring socio-political instability, entrenched corruption, and systemic marginalization. These challenges arising from the legacies of colonialism and subsequent misgovernance following independence are frequently manifested in Nigeria's drama. Esiaba Irobi, a distinguished Nigerian playwright, presents a notable response to these issues through the medium of revolutionary drama, which is fundamentally rooted in indigenous cultural practices. This study thus examines how Irobi's plays, <i>Nwokedi and Hangmen Also Die</i>, incorporate traditional Igbo performance techniques, including the Ekpe festival and masquerade rituals, as instruments of revolutionary transformation. Grounded in postcolonial theory, particularly the analytical frameworks of Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the study further investigates the convergence of indigenous traditions and revolutionary violence as mechanisms for addressing systemic corruption and oppression. The study adopts a qualitative methodology through content analysis of the texts, which reveals that Irobi's plays utilize indigenous cultural resources not as static elements of heritage, but rather as flexible instruments of resistance. The findings indicate that Irobi's revolutionary drama serves as a significant cultural critique, effectively repositioning indigenous performance as a mechanism for decolonization, socio-political transformation, and collective empowerment. The study concludes that the strategic adaptation of cultural traditions within contemporary political discourse often serve as a vital alternative to the governance models imposed by Western influences, which have possibly proven ineffective in addressing the needs of postcolonial societies such as Nigeria.</i> Keywords: Esiaba Irobi; Revolutionary Violence; Nigerian Drama; Postcolonial Theory; Indigenous Performance; Political Resistance
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Introduction

The postcolonial Nigeria has been profoundly affected by entrenched socio-political dysfunctionality, economic inequality, and institutional decay, all of which are manifestations of the enduring colonial legacies of the West. Since attaining independence in 1960, the country has contended with challenges such as corruption, elitist political structures, ethno-religious divisions, and widespread misgovernance. These factors have contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment among the populace and have spurred calls for alternative frameworks of governance and justice. Within this framework, revolutionary drama can be understood as a deliberate aesthetic and intervention that critically examines the

contradictions inherent in postcolonial Nigeria. It aims to explore transformative possibilities through the lens of indigenous epistemologies. Irobi, a prominent figure in Nigerian drama known for his radical approach, reconceptualizes the paradigm of revolutionary theatre by integrating activism into indigenous cultural practices. In doing so, he advocates for a locally grounded strategy aimed at fostering societal change. His plays, *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*, serve as examples of the utilization of traditional rituals and symbolic violence as instrumental mechanisms for the reclamation of rights and the confrontation of deeply entrenched power structures. Revolutionary plays, characterized by their explicit

challenge to dominant power structures and their foregrounding of indigenous knowledge, serve not only as forms of artistic expression but also as instruments for mobilization against entrenched corruption and oppression (Gbilekaa 285).

The idea of revolutionary aesthetics in Nigerian drama emerged from the unique political environment following independence, especially during the turbulent times of military rule from the 1970s to the 1990s. These dramas not only serve as artistic expressions but also function as tactical responses to Nigeria's postcolonial reality, characterized by what Olaniyan refers to as "the postcolonial incredible", which highlights the ongoing postponement of justice, fairness, and responsible governance (289). Innovative theatrical traditions in Nigeria occupy a unique space where artistic creativity meets political activism. They utilize indigenous performance techniques not just as cultural relics, but as vibrant tools for resistance and change (Nwahunanya 112; Ojaide 201).

In the context of postcolonial Nigeria, revolutionary drama arose amidst a complex array of crises, including the inability of successive administrations to deliver on independence promises. Oluwatoyin explains that growing socioeconomic inequalities intensified by neoliberal policies, pervasive corruption throughout governance, and the consistent exclusion of ordinary citizens from decision-making also enhanced the crises (100). He also cited former President Olusegun Obasanjo, who noted that corruption has infiltrated the Nigerian system at all levels, acting as a "cancerworm" that has led to deterioration and instability within both governmental and societal frameworks (Oluwatoyin 100). The nationalist leaders who championed independence ultimately morphed into oppressive entities, initially challenging the colonial administration but soon turning against each other as they prioritized regional over collective national interests (Egbefo 115).

The socio-political landscape that fostered revolutionary drama was further complicated by what Egbefo characterizes as a political framework in which "regional federal systems provided minimal recognition of Nigeria's complex ethnic diversities" (115). Instead of fostering an inclusive national identity, this structural arrangement exacerbated ethnic and regional rivalries, leading to a heightened fragmentation of political power along tribal and regional lines. During the First Republic, there was a notable emergence of influential regionally-based political parties, specifically the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the northern region, the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in the eastern region, and the Action Group (AG) in the western region. Each of these parties engaged in a competitive struggle for national supremacy.

Consequently, the political landscape evolved into a contentious arena characterized by ethno-regional supremacy, rather than prioritizing national development. In this context, alliances were predominantly established based on political expediency rather than on ideological consistency. For example, although the coalition between the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) attained dominance at the federal level, the Action Group (AG) and its allies in the Middle Belt were marginalized in the allocation of national resources and appointments. The perceived exclusion and the asymmetry in power-sharing arrangements exacerbated sentiments of political alienation, particularly among the factions that were defeated. Consequently, revolutionary drama emerged as a cultural response to the prevailing inequitable order. This genre served as a theatrical forum for the critique of governance characterized by elite dominance and ethnic polarization, simultaneously facilitating the exploration of alternative conceptions of justice and unity. Yacim refers to this as a source of "ongoing sociopolitical and ethno-religious strife that has dismantled and distorted the nation's political framework" (519). These circumstances generated a pressing demand for new forms of political engagement approaches capable of contesting existing systems while envisioning pathways for change.

Revolutionary drama surfaced as a significant form of participation. According to Gbilekaa, between the early 1960s and the late 1980s, Nigerian theatre showcased a multitude of plays that directly critiqued the nation's political structures, both civilian and military. These works specifically explored the influence of leadership quality on the lives of the citizens (285). These plays showcased exceptional foresight, as the societal critiques they presented in the 1980s and 1990s still echo the current circumstances in Nigeria. The enduring nature of these challenges illustrates what Abubakar and Salihu refer to in Nigeria's classification as "backward, underdeveloped, and still not reaching the level of a politically stable and developed nation" (197). A level that can be attributed to a lack of robust institutional and human resources for effective governance.

Esiaba Irobi's plays exemplify what Jeyifo calls "the radical tradition in Nigerian drama," which melds aesthetic innovation with clear political involvement (45). Irobi's plays emerge from a distinct historical backdrop characterized by opposition to military governance, pervasive corruption, and a sense of societal disillusionment in Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s. His striking methodology is characterized by a bold acknowledgment of indigenous Igbo performance traditions as a means to foster revolutionary awareness,

along with a clear support for revolutionary violence that brings social transformation as a justified reaction to systemic corruption (Adeyemi 156).

This study utilizes qualitative research methods to analyze how Irobi effectively uses indigenous cultural expressions and revolutionary violence in *Nwokedi* (1991) and *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) to convey a vision for societal transformation in Nigeria. Building upon Amkpa's insight that Irobi's plays serve as "sites of resistance" (123), this analysis investigates how these plays critically assess postcolonial power structures while promoting indigenous cultural wisdom and calling for transformative change. The study explores how Irobi harnessed Igbo ritual traditions as instruments for sociopolitical critique, emphasizing collective action and revolutionary violence as legitimate reactions to systemic corruption. Additionally, it examines how Irobi's theatrical techniques transform the interplay between performance art and political activism.

Irobi's drama presents a revolutionary aesthetic that transcends the simple portrayal of Nigeria's issues, engaging instead in the active re-envisioning of the country's future. His drama is a prime example of what Osofisan describes as "the performance of possibility", as it creatively combines traditional performance styles with progressive political ideas. This approach highlights potential social alternatives that could thrive where postcolonial governance has often fallen short (89). His creations make significant contributions to Nigeria's ongoing struggle with the complexities of postcoloniality, offering not only critique but also avenues for change by strategically revitalizing and redefining indigenous cultural traditions.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory serves as a conceptual framework that facilitates an analysis of the enduring legacies of colonial rule and their ongoing influence on contemporary African societies. A primary objective of postcolonial theory is to elucidate the enduring connections between the oppressions experienced during the colonial period and the subsequent inadequacies encountered in the post-independence era, particularly in the domains of political leadership, social frameworks, and cultural alienation (Olaniyan 289; wa Thiong'o 28).

At its fundamental essence, postcolonial theory posits that the attainment of political independence does not inherently culminate in cultural or psychological emancipation. Colonial governance frequently establishes enduring institutional frameworks, ideologies, and power dynamics that persist well beyond the withdrawal of colonial authorities. Frantz Fanon, a seminal theorist within this discipline, posits that decolonization constitutes not a subtle

reform but rather a violent and radical transformation of societal structures. Frantz Fanon posits that "decolonization is always a violent event" due to the assertion that colonialism is upheld through mechanisms of coercion and force. Consequently, he argues, the process of dismantling colonial structures must occur with a corresponding intensity (35). Fanon's theoretical framework posits that violence may serve a therapeutic and purgative function, especially for marginalized groups. This perspective underscores the potential of violent action to facilitate the reclamation of agency and to challenge exploitative systems (36).

Expanding upon this foundation, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theory of cultural decolonization emphasizes the critical significance of re-establishing indigenous languages, worldviews, and artistic expressions. Ngũgĩ posits that colonialism extended beyond the appropriation of land and labour; it also encompassed the colonization of the mind. This process entailed the suppression of indigenous knowledge systems through the imposition of Western education, religion, and language. Wa Thiong'o articulates that "the control of a community's language by the languages of colonial powers played a vital role in subjugating the cognitive realm of the colonized" (28). Consequently, he advocates for the reassertion of indigenous culture as an essential act of resistance and liberation (wa Thiong'o 33).

Additionally, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins contend that postcolonial theatre serves as a form of strategic resistance, providing a performance space that subverts colonial ideologies and reclaims local traditions. Gilbert and Tompkins (11) elucidate that postcolonial performance engages in the reappropriation of indigenous symbols and rituals as a means to interrogate imperialist power structures and to reconstruct historical narratives. Postcolonial drama serves not only as a mode of cultural expression but also functions as a political intervention that interrogates established hierarchies and affirms local agency.

An additional significant contribution is presented by Tejumola Olaniyan, who articulates the concept of "the postcolonial incredible." This term is employed to characterize the paradoxes and dysfunctions that continue to exist within post-independence African societies. He notes that, although these societies frequently retain the outward appearances of modern statehood, they are undermined by corruption, misgovernance, and systemic dysfunction. As articulated by Olaniyan (289), in postcolonial societies, extraordinary phenomena often become institutionalized as a manifestation of failure. Postcolonial drama frequently illustrates these

contradictions by highlighting the absurdities inherent in governance and the ethical vacuity of political leadership.

Sola Adeyemi underscores the activist dimension of African drama, contending that it frequently diverges from Western liberal ideals in its advocacy for revolutionary violence as a mechanism for social transformation. Adeyemi posits that Irobi's drama contributions are characterized by their portrayal of violence not merely as an expression of irrational brutality, but rather as "a fundamental catalyst for change" in circumstances where peaceful dialogue and reform have proven unsuccessful (156). This viewpoint corresponds with Jeyifo's assertion that African radical drama functions within what he terms "the radical tradition in Nigerian drama," wherein performance is characterized by both its political intensity and its aesthetic innovation (50).

Lucy Nevitt's typology of violence elucidates the multifaceted nature of violence in postcolonial theatre, which encompasses various forms, physical, emotional, psychological, and symbolic. Each of these manifestations serves as a vehicle for protest, resistance, or catharsis. Nevitt (4) posits that violence in theatre functions not solely as a means of inducing shock, but also serves to unveil underlying truths, to serve as a vehicle for accusation, and to facilitate transformation. Irobi's employment of arson, public executions, sacrificial rituals, and psychological disintegration should therefore be interpreted as narrative strategies designed to elicit critical awareness, rather than as instances of gratuitous sensationalism.

This study affirms Irobi's contributions to revolutionary aesthetics and his advocacy for the decolonization of Nigerian theatre through indigenous performance and political imperatives. However, it neither advocates for the literal enactment of ritual killings nor promotes the elevation of masquerade cults as comprehensive substitutes for accountable governance. The dramatic elements in question, despite their significant symbolic resonance, warrant critical examination within the framework of contemporary ethical considerations. Any revolutionary vision should be predicated on a fundamental respect for human life and the principles of democratic inclusivity, rather than reproducing exclusionary or violent frameworks (Uzoh 267; Coomaraswamy 52).

Synopsis of *Nwokedi*

Esiaba Irobi's *Nwokedi* is a compelling political drama that delves into issues of revolution, sacrifice, corruption, and the generational conflict between traditional values and radical ideologies in modern Nigeria. The story centres on Nwokedi, a recent university graduate and political idealist, who grapples with profound disillusionment stemming from the widespread corruption, nepotism, and social

inequality in Nigeria. Set in a strikingly relatable postcolonial Nigerian context, the play opens with the preparations for Nwokedi's intended initiation into a prestigious local age-grade group, an occasion that his father, a well-off retired police officer, is eagerly looking forward to. Nwokedi surprises both his family and community by refusing to participate in the ceremony, along with the elitist ideals it represents. Rather, he becomes part of a collective of progressive young individuals' intent on dismantling the current oppressive regime. Nwokedi's act of defiance reaches its peak with a symbolic and literal rebellion when he offers his father, emblematic of the corrupt establishment, as a sacrificial rite aimed at cleansing and renewing Nigeria. This shocking act serves as a reflection of Irobi's incorporation of tragic and ritualistic elements to highlight the profound costs associated with authentic social change. Utilizing lyrical expression, conventional symbolism, and heightened dramatic tension, Irobi examines the intricate moral and political dilemmas surrounding revolution. Nwokedi invites audiences to reflect on the genuine implications of societal change and poses the question of whether the journey toward justice can ever avoid bloodshed and personal sacrifice. The play serves as a pitiful reflection on the dreams of youth, the weight of historical legacy, and the sacrifices inherent in visionary leadership within a nation marked by deep divisions.

Analysis of Revolutionary Violence in *Nwokedi*

To comprehensively analyze the application of revolutionary violence in *Nwokedi*, it is essential to establish a clear definition of the concept of revolutionary violence itself. Revolutionary violence, as conceptualized by postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, should not be interpreted as acts of senseless brutality. Rather, it is characterized as a politically motivated, symbolic, and redemptive force employed to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression. Fanon argues that "decolonization is always a violent event," positing that the structures of colonialism are fundamentally upheld by violence. Consequently, he asserts that the dismantling of these structures necessitates equally forceful measures (35–36). He posits that violence serves a therapeutic function by reinstating identity to those who have been colonized and by catalyzing a collective consciousness among them. Wa Thiong'o adds a cultural perspective, positing that colonialism encompassed not only the appropriation of land but also the colonization of the human mind. He advocates for cultural decolonization by promoting the revitalization of indigenous languages, worldviews, and artistic traditions as essential modes of resistance (wa Thiong'o, 28–33).

In this analysis, we view revolutionary violence as a culturally embedded and symbolic manifestation of political protest and collective empowerment, challenging the notion that it is merely a form of irrational destruction. Irobi engages with the theme of revolutionary violence by employing traditional ritual frameworks, particularly exemplified in the Ekpe festival. These frameworks serve as instruments for ethical critique and facilitate processes of symbolic purification. In *Nwokedi*, Irobi reinterprets ritual sacrifice as a political metaphor aimed at addressing corruption and facilitating the regeneration of Nigeria. The analysis illustrates the concept by showing how acts of violence depicted in the play are not only rationalized within the framework of indigenous ethical systems but also presented as forms of resistance intended to restore equilibrium to a disordered society. In this regard, revolutionary violence in *Nwokedi* is not merely represented; rather, it is reconceptualized as an act of liberation that carries significant cultural meaning and political intent (Adeyemi 156; Uzoh 267).

Theme

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi illustrates revolutionary violence as a culturally embedded and symbolic reaction to postcolonial injustices. This response is intricately connected to Nigeria's colonial past and its enduring repercussions. Informed by Frantz Fanon's claim that "decolonization is always a violent event," which suggests that the process of decolonization entails the dismantling of both the structural and psychological underpinnings of colonialism (35), Irobi conceptualizes violence not merely as an expression of disorder, but rather as an essential purgative force and a requisite component of political action. The central conflict of the play, Nwokedi's refusal to accept a symbolic animal sacrifice in favour of targeting human beings, exemplifies the concept of violence as simultaneously redemptive and revolutionary. Within this context, the enduring legacy of colonialism, characterized by dispossession, elitism, and authoritarianism, continues to manifest in the post-independence Nigerian state. This contemporary governance is primarily conducted by a corrupt indigenous elite, who have inherited, rather than dismantled, the colonial power structures that perpetuate these injustices (Olaniyan 289). Nwokedi's revolutionary act is situated in direct opposition to the persistent continuity of oppression.

The annual Ekpe festival serves as a significant metaphor for the manifestation of political resistance. Traditionally regarded as a ritual of purification and renewal, the representation of this practice within the play is reconfigured into a revolutionary theatre of violence and bloodshed. The immediacy and collective nature of the ritual are exemplified when the members of Nwokedi's age-

grade converge upon his familial residence, insisting upon his attendance at the shrine.

Obedike: Listen, woman, we have no time for trading words. The Night is performed with songs, and the ram is bleating at the shrine. At this potent moment, the spirits have gathered at the arena awaiting their spill of blood. Bring him out.

Ukadike: For this night, Nwokedi belongs to us. Bring him out. (She moves, hesitates, and returns.)

Amadike: Bring him out. Can you not hear the voice of the village thundering at your threshold? He belongs to our age grade. Bring him out. (She enters into the inner room). (Irobi 10)

This assertion demonstrates the manner in which the ethical and spiritual frameworks of the community are actively involved in the process of political critique. The engagement in ancestral spirit invocation and communal involvement in ritual violence serves to reassert indigenous authority, which has been undermined by colonial frameworks and their postcolonial successors. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that colonialism extended beyond the mere occupation of land; it fundamentally infiltrated the cognitive landscape of the colonized, leading to the erasure of indigenous epistemologies and their replacement with externally imposed moral frameworks (28). Irobi's employment of the Ekpe ritual in his theatrical works serves as a cultural counter-narrative that challenges both the colonial erasure of indigenous traditions and the moral shortcomings of the contemporary Nigerian elite.

This theme is further elaborated in Nwokedi's dialogue with Habiba, in which he articulates the sacred and political dimensions inherent in his role within the ritual.

Nwokedi: Right now! The bus is revving at the park. It will run throughout the night. By dawn I must be home.

Fingesi: What's the hurry for?

Nwokedi: Our annual festival. It takes place today. My age-grade is in charge.

Habiba: Surely they can do without you.

Nwokedi: They can't.

Habiba: Why not?

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

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

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

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

Nwokedi: The Ekpe festival is never deferred.

Habiba: Why not?

Nwokedi: Because it celebrates the death of the old year and the birth of the new. Today is 31st December. The old year dies today. And mine is the hand that murders it. (Irobi 37)

This discourse encapsulates the symbolic function of revolutionary violence within the play, illustrating it as both the dismantling of the deteriorated postcolonial order, referred to as the “old year,” and the concurrent emergence of a revitalized political vision. Nwokedi’s choice to murder his father and brother-in-law, who epitomize the corrupt establishment, instead of adhering to the customary practice of sacrificing a ram can be interpreted not as a repudiation of cultural traditions but rather as a manifestation of their radical potential. He rationalizes the action within a political framework: “That head-hunter and his generation have been a pestilence on the political landscape of this country for four years now. Why hasn’t God wiped them out? I must spill his blood” (Irobi 64).

This action corresponds with Frantz Fanon’s concept of the violent awakening of the colonized subject, characterized as an existential moment wherein the oppressed individual transitions into an active agent of change (Fanon, 36). In this context, violence is not devoid of meaning; rather, it is characterized by retributive motivations, political underpinnings, and cultural foundations.

By integrating these actions within the framework of indigenous ritual logic, Irobi challenges the notion that Western legal or moral paradigms alone are adequate for addressing postcolonial justice. As highlighted by Adeyemi, African revolutionary drama frequently deviates from Western liberal ideals by depicting violence as an essential rupture in circumstances where dialogue has consistently proven ineffective (156). Irobi’s innovative aesthetic articulates the argument that the shortcomings of Nigeria, characterized by corruption, social inequality, and the betrayal of the elite, can only be effectively addressed through concerted collective cultural action, which, at times, may necessitate extreme measures of blood sacrifice. Consequently, *Nwokedi* transcends the mere depiction of violence; it engages with the broader theme of how postcolonial societies can recuperate indigenous systems as a means of reconstructing a fractured political future.

Characterization

In *Nwokedi*, Irobi meticulously develops characters that function not only as distinct individuals but also as representations of the broader social, political, and ethical tensions prevalent in postcolonial Nigeria. At the core of the story is Nwokedi, a youthful radical and intellectual whose revolutionary perspective embodies a profound

disillusionment with the corrupt socio-political elite. His character is shaped by a confluence of moral conviction, cultural awareness, and existential urgency, rendering him a multifaceted agent of change. In contrast to passive youth, Nwokedi exhibits assertiveness and is driven by a clear ideological framework, as evidenced by his proclamation: “We must revolt against those disembodied godheads, those spotted scavengers of the Sahel Savannah who have plundered this nation like a conquered territory. We must revolt” (Irobi 28). His decision to decline the sacrificial offering of a ram in favor of human lives during the Ekpe festival, an act that symbolically critiques political corruption, illustrates his dedication to the eradication of societal ills through a form of revolutionary violence rooted in cultural significance.

Arikpo, the brother-in-law, embodies a caricature of avaricious political opportunism, characterized by ostentation, indifference, and a lack of ethical integrity. His hyperbolic lamentation regarding the devastation of his residence, “The walls were sprayed with terracotta... the side stools were silver-coated...” (Irobi 3), serves as a poignant reflection of the materialistic values inherent within the elite class. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the plight experienced by the unemployed masses, highlighting the disparities in societal values and experiences. His failure to comprehend the political implications of the youth’s anger highlights his disconnection from reality and the evolving moral framework within society.

In contrast, Nwokedi Snr. embodies a more complex character. Initially a beneficiary of the corrupt system, he gradually comes to realize its ethical deficiencies. His acknowledgment, “We failed because we were selfish... That is why we are clawing each other’s eyes out like blind vampire bats” (Irobi 78), demonstrates a significant degree of self-awareness and remorse, thereby distinguishing him from irredeemable characters such as Arikpo. Nonetheless, his moral awakening occurs too late to avert his symbolic sacrifice, ultimately portraying him as a tragic figure entrenched in the tension between paternal affection and historical culpability.

In the play, each character represents a distinct ideological stance within the overarching revolutionary framework. Nwokedi is portrayed as the radical redeemer, while his peers embody the communal conscience. Arikpo serves as a symbol of elite decay, and Nwokedi Snr is characterized as a conflicted elder wrestling with the implications of generational failure. Collectively, they embody Irobi’s concept of cultural revolution, wherein the intersections of indigenous ritual, youth agency, and moral reckoning serve to confront and critique the prevailing postcolonial inertia and betrayals.

Language

Irobi's use of language also reflects indigenous knowledge systems, as noted by Worugji, who describes it as "strategic code-switching between Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Igbo expressions" (112). This linguistic blending illustrates what Zabuz refers to as "the palimpsestic nature of postcolonial texts, where indigenous languages and thought patterns remain visible beneath the colonial language" (98). For instance, the conversation between Awado and Nwokedi demonstrates this language system.

Awado: (pokes him with the swagger stick) Make you no insult me, you hear? As a Regimental Sergeant Major, I get am for right and authority to ask you why you no follow your mates dey march!

Nwokedi: I don't believe in anthill mentality.

Awado: What? (irate) A tin of mentholatum! A tin of metholatum! Na me you dey call a tin of mentholatum?

Nwokedi: Block head! I said "anthill mentality".

Awado: Sharrap. And doesn't deny! Na me, Regimental Sergeant Major Edon Awado alias "Hannibal" you dey call a tin of mentholatum? (strikes his chest) Hannibal, I don chop cattle dung! (Irobi 26)

The language structure in the dialogue reflects the indigenous knowledge system through the use of pidgin English, a very familiar and seemingly general language, especially domiciled in the Nigerian military operations. The thought pattern indicated in the conversation applies to the illiterate urban population who manage to communicate their opinion and may not understand standard English or attain formal education training. Conversely, the play also introduced other historical revolts when Nwokedi attempts to stimulate other corps members to join him. He says,

Corper: Have you heard of the Agbekoya uprising?

Nwokedi: Yes, September 1965.

Corper: The farmers...

Nwokedi: They fought the government for seven months.

Corper: And what happened in the end?

Nwokedi: The revolt was crushed.

Corper: Do you know how many men, women, and children were murdered? How many lives were uprooted like cassava tubers?

Nwokedi: (Screaming) At least they dared.

Corper: Dared? My friend, it is not just enough to dare. Never start what you cannot finish. (pause) Have you heard of a country called Biafra?

Nwokedi: (pause, bitterly, slowly, between clenched teeth) I saw Biafra with the eyes of a child. (Irobi 28-29)

The significance of the conversation is to draw attention to other moments of dissatisfaction in the nation's history. The play carefully arranges the images of violence, destruction, and terror that follow revolts, especially against the government of the nation. Similarly, incidents of horror have continued with the Biafra agitation in contemporary times, where many people have lost their lives. Despite this, the play encourages those who are marginalized to protest. It says, "if the butterfly must fly, the caterpillar must die" (Irobi 79). It encourages a daring, sacrificial spirit of revolt for a rebirth of the nation.

Songs

The use of songs in the play enhanced the mood of violence by transforming and stimulating the ritual spirit for the festival in the Ekumeku youths, Nwokedi, and Nwokedi Snr. For instance, towards the climax of the actions in the play, the story indicates that,

(A dirge, "Udu m akuwala" wells up and dies out)

Nwokedi: (still in this rapture) And my age-grade came singing a war song. They came, their matchets unsheathed. The Ekumeku came chanting the resolve of my generation.

(The voice of the Ekumeku whirls in chanting "Evula agbaala oso") (Irobi 83)

The dirges evoke feelings of fear, anguish, and despair, engendering an atmosphere characterized by violent sensations. In another instance, the song in the play delineates the ceremonial actions of the youth as they prepare for the sacrificial rites. The text states that:

Ekumeku: The Sun is ripe.

(They burst into a new song: "Umu m o o Iyoo". They bring out the body-piece mask and dress Nwokedi, tying the three lengths of cloth around his waist, and across his chest like sashes. The head-piece mask with its wooden totem is now flung over his head. Nwokedi tries out dance-steps in his new costume. The Ekumeku explodes into "Agu naabia", Obidike puts a white cock in Nwokedi's left hand, and with the matchet in his right, he begins the last ritual dance for the festival. His father follows behind, suddenly...) (Irobi 85)

These song compositions propel the characters towards engaging in violent behaviors. It initially contributes to the establishment of the emotional tone by integrating with various theatrical components, including the ritual costumes and hand props discussed above. The integration of dance and song collectively enhances the dynamism of the performance and amplifies the portrayal of violence.

Synopsis of *Hangmen Also Die*

Hangmen Also Die is a sad and evocative tragedy that explores the profound impact of political oppression, the misuse of authority, and the recurring cycle of violence in postcolonial African societies. Taking place at the high court in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, under the oppressive rule of a harsh military dictatorship, the play centres on Yekinni, a skilled executioner tasked with performing government-authorized executions. Yekinni, the executioner, is a profoundly troubled individual, plagued by the spirit of those he has put to death and weighed down by the ethical corruption inherent in his role. Despite being state-employed, he finds himself ensnared by the very system he serves, constrained by a position he did not select or dictate. Yekinni's emotional and psychological decline deepens when the gang members tell him they murdered their victim because the victim confiscated the money meant for their welfare. This harsh turn of events compels Yekinni to face both his moral dilemmas and the oppressive system that has turned him into a tool against his community. The play reaches a touching and redemptive climax that underscores the human toll of political oppression, as well as the intricate moral dilemmas surrounding justice and resistance. *Hangmen Also Die* artfully combines ritualistic performance and lyrical dialogue to depict the psychological anguish and existential anxiety of life beneath authoritarian oppression. The title highlights the main idea that individuals who murder in the name of authority are not exempt from death, feelings of guilt, or historical accountability. In essence, it examines not only the nature of political violence but also serves as a philosophical exploration of obligation, humanity, and the potential for redemption in a world tainted by fear and violence.

Analysis of Revolutionary Violence in *Hangmen Also Die* Theme

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi conceptualizes revolutionary violence not merely as arbitrary aggression, but as a politically driven response to systemic injustices that are deeply anchored in the persistent legacies of colonialism and the shortcomings of the postcolonial state. The play shows the trauma experienced by a society in which colonial mechanisms of exploitation, namely, land dispossession, coerced labor, and authoritarian governance, have been inherited and repurposed by indigenous elites. This continuity reflects Frantz Fanon's assertion that post-independence governments frequently reproduce the oppressive structures characteristic of colonial rule, thereby perpetuating the use of violence as a mechanism of governance (Fanon 38). The Izon Delta community, profoundly impacted by environmental degradation and economic marginalization, serves as a locus for the

perpetuation of colonial extractive paradigms, which are now manifested through neoliberal exploitation. This exploitation is facilitated by local political actors in concert with foreign oil enterprises.

This contextual framework positions the collective insurrection of the suicide squad not merely as a capricious act of criminality but rather as a legitimate political uprising. The emergence of revolutionary violence can be understood as a reaction to the disillusionment prevalent in postcolonial contexts. In this regard, state actors such as Chief Erekosima, who appropriates compensation funds designated for victims of oil spills, exemplify a continuity of exploitation reminiscent of the colonial elite that historically extracted resources from Nigeria. This dynamic aligns with Tejumola Olaniyan's notion of "the postcolonial incredible," which posits that contemporary corrupt power structures, despite being locally administered, perpetuate the same logic of exclusion and exploitation that underpinned colonial governance (289). Irobi's staging of the masquerade, which involves the usurpation of the throne during the coronation ceremony, serves to dramatize not only a protest against a corrupt chief but also a ritualistic reclamation of communal identity that was previously diminished by the impacts of colonialism.

Furthermore, Yekinni's psychological anguish as a state-sanctioned executioner serves to illuminate the lingering colonial influences present within postcolonial institutions. The justice system that engages his services fails to uphold human dignity; instead, it perpetuates a mechanism of death reminiscent of colonial forms of coercion. Yekinni's internal conflict serves as a poignant illustration of the persistence of state-sanctioned violence, which can be understood as a colonial legacy that has been recontextualized within contemporary frameworks. His question, "Can your useless government protect me from the faces of the dead...?" (Irobi 17) serves not only as a personal lament but also functions as a comprehensive critique of a postcolonial state that perpetuates violence without being held accountable. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o posits that genuine decolonization necessitates the eradication of both the psychological and institutional remnants of colonialism, rather than simply the transfer of political power (28). The play critically examines the constraints of political independence in Nigeria, positioning revolutionary violence as both an urgent and essential response to the enduring legacies of oppression and neocolonialism.

By situating protest within the context of indigenous performance traditions such as masquerade, ritual, and song, Irobi aligns revolutionary action with cultural continuity instead of associating it with external ideologies. As observed by Gilbert and Tompkins, postcolonial theatre

serves as a strategic effort to reclaim marginalized traditions, thereby contesting the hierarchies established by both colonial and postcolonial paradigms (11). In *Hangmen Also Die*, revolutionary violence is portrayed not merely as a reaction to localized corruption but also as a symbolic denunciation of the enduring colonial epistemologies and governance practices that continue to influence post-independence Nigeria.

Characterization

The characters in *Hangmen Also Die* are crafted as symbolic figures of revolutionary struggle, representing a unified opposition to systemic injustice and political corruption. At the heart of the story is Yekinni, the executioner who defies the state's orders to hang the sentenced young man. The play portrays him as a revolutionary agent, and his defiance represents not only a personal moral position but also a repudiation of the corrupt legal system. His bold interaction with the prison doctor showcases this defiance.

Yekinni: I went in and asked them, "what did you do?" They said they killed a man. I asked them "why did you do it?"

Doctor: And what did they say?

Yekinni: They said, "we did what we did because we believed in it. We have no regrets."

Doctor: No remorse?

Yekinni: What remorse? Defiance! (Irobi 11)

Yekinni is a tragically intricate character whose evolution from a passive instrument of state violence to a potent emblem of moral resistance exemplifies profound psychological complexity. As a government-employed executioner, he initially performs his duties without objection. However, he gradually becomes afflicted by haunting recollections of the individuals he has executed. He articulates his distress when he confesses, "Can your useless government protect me from the faces of the dead... the death masks I see every second in my sleep." (Irobi 17) His eventual refusal to execute the condemned youth constitutes a significant act of defiance against an unjust system, thereby recontextualizing him as a revolutionary figure who challenges and opposes injustice from within. Yekinni's internal conflict, characterized by guilt and a moral awakening, positions him within the archetype of a tragic hero. He embodies profound flaws, yet he possesses the capacity for redemption through deliberate acts of rebellion against his circumstances.

In stark contrast, the Warden embodies blind loyalty to the state and a system of nepotism in justice. He advocates for the execution not based on legal protocols, but rather because of his ties to his brother, Chief Erekosima, who was the victim. This situation highlights the decline of

institutional integrity and how justice can be distorted to benefit personal agendas, a theme frequently addressed in Irobi's plays.

The play also portrays 'The Suicide Squad' as revolutionary agents. Their facing of capital punishment is depicted not as mere delinquents but as ideological participants reacting to deep-seated systemic marginalization. The situation of unemployed graduates highlights the neglect of Nigeria's youth by the socio-political system. Their aggressive resistance arises following unsuccessful efforts to pursue opportunities through official means, particularly a disappointing visit to the Directorate for Employment. Their drastic shift is depicted as a consequence of societal betrayal rather than a fundamental inclination toward criminality.

Additionally, Tamara, a widow and the mother of one of the young individuals, is also portrayed as a revolutionary agent; she emerges as a central figure within the revolutionary narrative. Instead of dissuading violence, she validates the youths' struggle and encourages them to intensify their fight. Her position confronts traditional patriarchal and maternal norms, affirming women's role in revolutionary political movements. She proclaims: "Why are you hiding among these timid individuals, you cowards. Your peers in other regions are out there as guerrilla fighters, striving for their nation's freedom" (Irobi 62). Tamara presents revolutionary violence as both essential and honorable. She contextualizes the local struggle within a wider narrative of global anti-imperialist liberation, emphasizing the play's ideological complexity.

Ultimately, Chief Isokipiri Erekosima represents the epitome of exploitative authority, an oppressor encompassing both political and economic dimensions. He epitomizes the betrayal of postcolonial ideals, having misappropriated 3 million Naira meant for community development from oil compensation funds. His hubris, evident in his derogatory remark, "impurities! Periwinkles! Mudskippers! The children of the swamp" (Irobi 80), highlights the contempt that political elites hold for the general populace. Though the youth's execution of him is outside legal bounds, it is portrayed as a form of poetic justice, something Uzoh highlights as the play's adherence to "communal values that emphasize justice and the well-being of the community" (267).

The play, *Hangmen Also Die*, encompasses a diverse array of character types that significantly enhance its revolutionary message. The characters within the play include symbolic representations such as Yekinni, who epitomizes the tormented conscience of the state; allegorical figures such as Chief Erekosima, who embodies the themes of political greed and betrayal; and archetypal revolutionaries, including the unemployed youth and

Tamara, who symbolize the collective resistance of the oppressed populace. The characters within the story function not solely as individual personalities; rather, they serve as representative archetypes that exemplify broader social, political, and moral conditions prevalent in postcolonial Nigeria.

Language

In *Hangmen Also Die*, Irobi skillfully uses language as an essential tool for revolutionary defiance. By incorporating Nigerian Pidgin, Standard English, and local dialects, he enables his characters to authentically portray the experiences of the marginalized and confront elitist language standards. As Worugji observes, this strategy of code-switching allows Irobi to engage with various social classes while preserving a sense of political urgency (112). Yekinni's confrontation with the Warden, "You wan make I damage your life?" (Irobi 6), illustrates a bold act of resistance, transforming common language into a means of protest.

The linguistic expressions employed by the youth in *Hangmen Also Die* are significantly imbued with revolutionary rhetoric. They invoke aggressive ideologies and articulate them with both clarity and intensity: "Terrorism is a legitimate tactic of all downtrodden," and "revolutions do not start in the head. They start in the stomach. With starvation and hunger" (Irobi 25). These declarations underscore a pronounced commitment to armed insurrection, framing violence as a justifiable, and potentially unavoidable, response to systemic oppression. The radicalization of language that advocates for acts of mutilation and public retribution exemplifies how rhetoric can be instrumentalized as a weapon in response to systemic disintegration. In this context, it is imperative to consider the concerning parallels that exist with current militant movements in southeastern Nigeria, notably the Eastern Security Network (ESN). In recent years, these groups have reportedly employed violent tactics purportedly in response to perceived state neglect, military occupation, and political marginalization. Even though Irobi's characters are fictional and operate within a symbolic dramaturgical framework, their employments of a language of resistance arguably prefigure actual societal agitation. This phenomenon raises significant inquiries regarding the enduring implications of valorizing revolutionary violence within artistic contexts.

Conversely, the language employed in the play elucidates the underlying class tensions and highlights the dehumanization experienced by individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Chief Erekosima characterizes the youth using derogatory terms such as "impurities," "periwinkles," and "mudskippers," describing them as "the offspring of the swamp" (Irobi 80).

This language serves to illustrate the elite's contempt for the lower classes. Tamara initially reflects this disdain by labeling individuals as "never-do-wells" and "good-for-nothings" (Irobi 62). However, her perspective subsequently evolves, as she reframes her derision into a compelling call for action, urging these individuals to pursue empowerment through resistance. However, the transition from insult to incitement, when contextualized within the contemporary framework, assumes a concerning significance. Do these calls, which are dramatized and justified within the theatrical context, inadvertently legitimize the rhetoric and strategies employed by contemporary insurgents? The focus of Irobi on sacrificial violence and retaliatory justice warrants a critical examination, particularly about the prevailing instability in the Eastern region of Nigeria. While his plays intend to interrogate oppressive systems and to foster a sense of communal consciousness, this endeavour does present the potential for co-optation by individuals seeking to justify political violence. This dynamic complicates the moral clarity associated with revolutionary aesthetics. The implication is that revolutionary drama, although it possesses the capacity to empower ideologically, must concurrently uphold a commitment to ethical accountability concerning the realities it may evoke or reflect.

Songs

Irobi incorporates music, mourning songs, and ceremonial chants that are deeply rooted in indigenous customs. For instance, during the coronation ceremony, the play describes that the M.C. "bursts into song. A hot praise song for Erekosima. The people join. The orchestra follows. As the song pitches higher, he dances, then calms the song. (Irobi 72). These musical components stir emotions, foster a sense of community, and underscore themes of revolution. Songs of war utilized by 'The Suicide Squad', along with mournful dirges reflecting on lost dignity, transform into shared manifestations of sorrow and resistance. As Anuonye points out, traditions rooted in performance play a crucial role in preserving both the spirit of protest and cultural memory (45). Just after the songs of celebration and praises for Erekosima, the dirges and songs of violence also follow midway into the ceremony. The play describes that, "the crowd explodes in applause. Then, Alagba fie fie, the war song of "The Suicide Squad" wafts in, Ogbunabali freezes momentarily (Irobi 75). The raising of the war song on the occasion for the first time was a warning indication of the danger that was to follow. But the ceremony continued until the song came up again for the second time, with the youths surging into the arena. The play indicates that,

(Regal drumming and dancing ensue. Erekosima steps out regally with Ekineba. The Chiefs paste money on

their brows. Just as the women enter with trays of rice and cartons of beer and crates of mineral water and begin to distribute bottles of minerals to people, The Suicide Squad, singing and led by Dimeari, descend on the scene. They are bare-bodied and armed with matchets. A thin strip of cloth covers their waist. Their faces are smeared with charcoal, their shining skulls with chalk. As the crowd takes to their heels, they matchet about four people and smash the throne into pieces....). (Irobi 77-78)

The use of songs in accompaniment of other elements of characterization establishes the mood and act of violence in the play. Irobi cleverly uses songs to create a transformative aesthetic that integrates the oral tradition, performance, and revolutionary thought, which Gilbert refers to as “the postcolonial refraction of reality through performance” (67). These tools bring the play’s protest message to life and highlight the transformative potential of indigenous expression.

Comparative Analysis of *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*

Irobi’s plays, *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*, depict revolutionary violence as a communal reaction to postcolonial injustices, employing native rituals and theatrical elements as means of political resistance. In both plays, violence is purposeful and calculated, deeply embedded in communal values and designed to challenge and dismantle corrupt institutions. Okagbue highlights that Irobi harnesses “the transformative power of embodied performance to drive sociopolitical change” (145), turning ritual into a form of revolutionary action.

In *Nwokedi*, the Ekpe festival ritual transforms into a political cleansing, culminating in the sacrificial assassination of a corrupt politician. This resonates with Götrick’s concept of “violence as a crucial interruption of postcolonial complacency” (123). Similarly, *Hangmen Also Die* uses the elements of disguise and the public execution of Chief Erekosima to represent a symbolic uprising, denouncing both political treachery and foreign oppression. Uzoh highlights that Irobi “frames violence within indigenous ethical structures that prioritize community well-being over personal benefit” (267), a key tenet in both plays.

In each play, the chorus serves as a unified voice, emphasizing shared agreement within the community. In *Nwokedi*, the age-grade chorus demands justice by means of sacrifice, whereas in *Hangmen Also Die*, the community legitimizes the militants’ actions with traditional songs. This resonates with Okoye’s insight regarding the “intentional emphasis on communal expression rather than individualistic stories” in African drama (178).

Both plays confront traditional Western narrative conventions by employing non-linear formats that intertwine ritual, memory, and action. Mbonu refers to this as Irobi’s “decolonization of dramatic time” (78), highlighting how the cyclical nature of indigenous time influences the structure of the narrative. This theatrical innovation challenges what Jeyifo refers to as “teleological narratives of nation and progress” (134), highlighting the shortcomings of postcolonial statehood.

In the end, as Olaniyan posits, Irobi’s revolutionary drama combines innovative politics with innovative aesthetics (290). *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die* serve not only as artistic critiques but also as “aesthetic expressions of ongoing political struggles” (Jeyifo 190), highlighting the effectiveness of indigenous cultural resources in addressing contemporary injustices.

Contemporary Relevance and Reception

Esiaba Irobi’s revolutionary artistic vision is still highly pertinent to Nigeria’s present sociopolitical landscape, especially in the context of large-scale movements like the #EndSARS protests in 2020 and the ‘End Bad Governance’ demonstrations in 2024. As Adeyemi observes, the theatrical aspects of these demonstrations, including music, visual displays, and collective performances, resonate with “the protest aesthetics highlighted in Irobi’s plays” (234). Olaniyan contends that Irobi’s drama acts as a pivotal challenge to the fundamental epistemological principles of postcolonial governance (302), questioning not only the nature of leadership but also the very systems of oppression in place. Garuba characterizes this as “the prophetic role of revolutionary theatre” (245), highlighting how Irobi foresees modern discontent with political ineptitude. Ogunleye highlights the lasting impact of Irobi’s revolutionary drama on current political discussions in Nigeria, indicating that his themes still play a significant role in national dialogues. Uzoh emphasizes that *Nwokedi*’s depiction of political betrayal is driven by genuine and contemporary dissatisfaction rather than merely historical grievances (56). As Jeyifo encapsulates, revolutionary drama, such as that of Irobi, serves dual purposes: it acts as a mirror that exposes injustice and functions as a hammer that calls for change (190, 256).

Conclusion

This study highlights that Esiaba Irobi’s plays, *Nwokedi* and *Hangmen Also Die*, portray revolutionary violence as a justified and culturally rooted reaction to political corruption, social exclusion, and pervasive injustice in postcolonial Nigeria. In both plays, violence is depicted as purposeful and collective, deeply rooted in cultural practices like the Ekpe festival and masquerade events. These acts of violence illustrate a profound discontent with

ineffective leadership, rampant youth unemployment, and the exploitation of public resources by the elite.

Irobi's approach to drama highlights that transformative change can be sparked by reimagining traditional cultural practices. He views ritual not as a fixed tradition, but rather as a fluid instrument for political expression and change. The acts of violence depicted in both plays, be it through sacrifice, uprising, or collective insurrection, are contextualized within moral frameworks that emphasize the importance of communal survival and social equity. Notably, Irobi's innovative blending of English, Pidgin, and Igbo, combined with traditional music and ritual songs, serves as a compelling way to connect with a wide range of audiences while strengthening the revolutionary message. However, this study distinctly asserts that it neither advocates for nor endorses ritual killings or the institutionalization of masquerade cults as acceptable alternatives to accountable governance within the context of contemporary revolutionary discourse. While these elements possess symbolic and theatrical significance within Irobi's dramas, it is imperative to critically evaluate them through the framework of contemporary ethical standards and principles of human rights.

The study suggests that contemporary playwrights should shift the focus from glorifying sacrificial violence and mystical authority to embracing revolutionary aesthetics that promote non-violent and transformative expressions. These expressions should advocate for civic engagement, transparent leadership, social justice, and institutional accountability. Revolutionary drama should persist in utilizing indigenous cultural instruments; however, this engagement must be conducted in a manner that fosters constructive dialogue, facilitates peaceful protest, and encourages the moral awakening of both leaders and citizens. Thus, drama continues to serve as a crucial medium for ethical resistance, facilitating healing and contributing to the conceptualization of a just society.

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