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LINGUISTIC REVITALISATION AND THE DRAMA IN AFRICAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract
This paper explores the drama written in indigenous African languages across many countries in Africa. It highlights the intellectual snobbery suffered by drama written in indigenous languages, probing the reasons behind the critical marginalization. It equally probes the elemental compositions of drama written in indigenous languages, investigating how oral elements revitalize and fertilize the dramatic works. The theoretical framework for this study was anchored on *Ethnodramatics*, a theory of indigenous drama projected by Affiah and Osuagwu while the inspirations which substantiate indigenous African languages as viable and effective linguistic mediums for dramatic creativity are derived from Ngugi wa Thiongo's theoretical postulation on the language of African theatre in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). The paper reveals that traditional African drama in indigenous languages creatively utilizes oral resources and elements such as proverbs, riddles, mime, music, songs, dance, and other folk arts in ways that embellish and relive their drama. The paper concludes that by writing in indigenous languages, playwrights expand the resources and frontiers of African indigenous languages, a situation that nurtures and preserves them.

Keywords: African drama, indigenous languages, intellectual snobbery

Introduction
African literature written in indigenous languages has accumulated a rich harvest of scholarly works. The bulk of the works done in this area was carried out mainly by Western scholars and researchers: Cancel (1993), Gerard (1970 and 1993), O. R. Dathorne (1934), Mooneeram (1999), Ricard (1992), and Zaki (2004). These foreign scholars attempted extensive but not exhaustive study of African literature in indigenous languages, their concentration was on poetry and prose mainly. A lot of African scholars and critics shy away from researching this area. A few African researchers and scholars (Mugo, 1981; Mwaliwa, 2018; Olale, 2015; Sheriff, 2004; Zaki, 2014) who worked in this area covered mainly their national literature and like the Western scholars and researchers, concentrated mostly on poetry and prose written in indigenous languages.

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There is a profound disregard for the African literature written in indigenous languages especially the drama genre as a result of which this literature suffered and continues to suffer intellectual marginalization (Marzagora, 2015). Discussions about African drama are often confined to those written in foreign languages, forgetting that this is only a portion of the overall literature in Africa. Too often, playwrights who write in Kiswahili and other indigenous languages are neglected (Mugo, 1981). African literature is often regarded by critics and scholars as those published in colonial languages such as English, French, or any other. Often, they ignore the existence of literary works written in indigenous languages.

Mbughuni (1981) laments the subservient role to which literature written in indigenous languages is subjected. He reveals that literature in indigenous languages is used by African writers to fertilize the literature written in foreign languages:

> Even today drama written in vernacular or national languages in Africa is sometimes treated by both scholars and creative artists as merely a source of useful information and inspiration: fertile soil, with which to nourish international masterpieces. These masterpieces are, of course, written in the 'international' languages of French and English. (p. 85)

Mukoma (2020) equally deplores the neglect suffered by many South African writers, especially a writer like Sol Plaatje who produced masterpieces both in the English language and indigenous language: "And outside of writers writing in African languages, there were those writing in English such as Sol Plaatje (*Mhudi*, 1930). These writers are not usually discussed within the African literary tradition or read as having set templates of writing in African languages and translation…" (p.104).

Affiah and Osuagwu (2012) observe that the snobbism suffered by the literature in indigenous languages is a rooted mentality that is not limited to only scholars: "The fate of indigenous African drama (indeed literature) is not a strange or isolated case. The African student, whether of science, social science, philosophy, art or medicine is told that his culture has no philosophy; his race has no history." (p. 7). Students of African literature have indeed inherited this intellectual snobbery such that carrying out research in the literature written in African languages has been left to those studying Linguistics and African languages, many of whom approach the task with a lot of reluctance and trepidation.

When in June 1962 some African writers and critics gathered at the Makerere University in Kampala to decide the fundamental qualities of what authentic African literature should possess, authors who wrote in African languages were tacitly excluded. The gathering showed a total disregard for literature written in indigenous languages. These sorts of errors of omission or/and commission point to the reason for the backseat occupied by the literature in African languages. Esslin (1987) queries the logic behind choosing foreign languages over African indigenous languages as mediums of creative writing by African writers in the first place given the richly layered and poetic nature of African indigenous languages: "I am, in my mind, not quite clear as to the reasons that prompt African playwrights to use English in preference to their own rich and highly poetic languages" (p. 283). One can only hazard an assumption behind this morbid attitude of some African

writers.

Some scholars have given reasons for the critical marginalization suffered by the literature written in African languages. Amongst the many reasons given, one that is niggling and preposterous is the supposition that indigenous African languages have not been developed into written form to serve as viable mediums of literary creativity. Eme and Mbagwu (2011) argue: "A serious factor…is undeveloped and underdeveloped African languages. Writers cannot write in languages that have not been developed to have a written form or languages that have not been developed to the level at which they could be used in literature (p. 121). This view is a farfetched excuse since a lot of studies revealed that prodigious works had been written in African indigenous languages long before the new sensibility to write in European languages gained meaningful expression. Gerard (1993) writes:

> In historical fact, important segments of sub-Saharan Africa had been introduced to writing and written literature long before the first white man-whether exploiter or philanthropist-reached her shores. One part at least of the continent had produced written works in its languages even before the earliest literature appeared in Western Europe in the Celtic and Germanic languages. (p. 147)

So, the argument that many African writers abandoned African languages in favor of foreign languages because indigenous African languages have not been developed to a written form does not hold much substance. The obvious fact is that many African writers turned to European languages to reach a wider audience. We shall review works done across several regions in Africa as a way of proving the viability of African indigenous languages as formidable mediums of dramatic creativity.

Generally, literature written in African indigenous languages is under-researched. Even with the bulk of work done on African literature in indigenous languages, a drama written in African languages suffers the most. The concentration has always been on poetry and prose written in African languages. For instance, Dathorne (1934) carried out extensive research on African literature covering the origins and growth of literature across several countries in Africa, yet his efforts concentrated mainly on poetry and prose. In the same vein, in *A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures* which seems like an encyclopedia on the origins and development of African literature, the articles on literature in African indigenous languages by Robert Cancel (1993) revealed very scanty information on drama written in African languages while it dwelled extensively on prose and poetry. This resounding neglect suffered by drama in African languages in terms of scholarly attention from scholars and critics is more perplexing given that indigenous drama as a genre of drama existed before the prose genre.

Therefore, in this paper, we will explore the dramatic works written in indigenous languages across many countries in Africa to probe the linguistic elements which make them proficient and robust mediums of communication and literary productivity.

Method

Indigenous drama in Africa has always interested scholars and they have advanced different opinions about its form and content. This interest was magnified by the nominal view of Ruth Finnegan that some writers have enthusiastically claimed that there is indigenous African theatre, but it may be more realistic to say that drama is not typically a commonly practiced or established form in Africa (1976, p.500). A lot of African scholars then swooped on Finnegan with pieces of empirical evidence of the existence of indigenous drama flourishing in several communities in Africa. Yet, there were a few African scholars (Echeruo, 1981; Uka, 1973) who towed her line of thought, a situation that has continued to fuel the debate around the literary merits of indigenous drama in Africa. It is important to take cognizance of the fact that this study is not another response to that debate. It is essential to know that there is a difference between indigenous African drama and African drama in indigenous languages. While indigenous African drama covers rituals, festivals, traditional rites, ceremonies, etc. that possess dramatic qualities, drama in African indigenous languages would mean those dramatic works written in African indigenous languages. This study adopts a qualitative research method since the data involved are narrative in form. The data were subjected to close reading while content analysis was adopted as the analytic tool for the evaluation of the linguistic competence of the African indigenous languages which serve as linguistic mediums for dramatic creativity. Ethnodramatics theory which outlines the cultural imperatives and structures peculiar to indigenous African drama was adopted aa s theoretical framework. Theoretical inspiration was also derived from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's seminal work on the language of African theatre titled *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. The study made use of books, journals, and internet articles.

Results and Discussion

Drama in African languages exists on a very large scale such that it is sufficient to constitute another genre on its own. Several writers have written great works in indigenous languages in almost every country in Africa, a situation which has expanded the linguistic frontiers of these languages. We will briefly review a few of these works in other to better appreciate the magnitude of the drama in indigenous languages in Africa.

Drama in indigenous languages

The ancient Egyptians are credited as the first to write dramatic literature. Zaki (2014) reveals that the earliest drama in the world appeared in Egypt as religious tracts:

> An example of the grand ceremonial religious drama first appeared in written form on the Shabako Stone, which is a late copy of probably the first drama in history, the Memphite Drama, indicating the rivalry between the cities of Heliopolis (On), the center of the worship of the sun god Amon Ra, and Memphis, the Nile port city situated on the border between the two lands, which had been chosen as the capital of the newly united country and whose god was nature, Ptah. (p,14)

An Egyptian document dating back to King Menes of the 32nd Century BC established the first dramatic text in history (Lichtheim, 2006). The document contains a philosophical dramatic dialogue between Egypt's ancient deities on the process of creating the world and the cosmic system of things and creatures.

In Nigeria, abundant dramatic works were done in Yoruba and Igbo languages. There are satirical anti-colonial plays portraying the Yoruba colonial experience, such as Bode Wasimi's *Gbadegesin* (1975), set in and named after Ladipo's home district in Ibadan; and *Oyinbo Ajele*, (*The White District Officer*, 1986), *Alagbara Ma Mero* (*Possessor of Zeal Without Knowledge*), *Ma Gbara Le Won* (*Do Not Rely on Them*), *Igberaga Ni Siwaju Iparun* (*Pride Goes Before Destruction*), *Ologbon Aye* (*The Wise Man of the Universe*), and *Omulemofo* (*Seeker of Naught*).

In Mauritius, a literary theatre in the Creole language also evolved although not officially acknowledged. Mauritius is a former French and British colony where English enjoys official status, and French a semi-official status. Creole, the most widely spoken language and the mother tongue of seventy-five percent of the population cutting across various ethnic groups is despised. The public then feels reluctant to read texts in Creole and publishing in the language is unattractive (Mooneeram, 1999). Yet theatre developed in Creole through the plays of Dev. Virahswasmy, Azize Asgarally, and Henri Farori. Virashswasmy was the first playwright to publish in Creole. Virashswasmy has translated the plays of William Shakespeare namely; *Macbeth, Much Ado About Nothing, and Julius Caesar* into the Creole language.

In Tanzania, Kiswahili has been spoken and written since the thirteenth century. Kiswahili which is the predominant language in East Africa is spoken by over twenty million people. Mwaliwa (2018) explores the regions in Africa where Kiswahili is predominant:

> Swahili is a term used to refer to a society of people living along the coast of East Africa whose native language is Kiswahili, a Bantu language spoken mainly in East Africa and beyond. It is spoken by well over 200 million people within Africa in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi. (p.120)

Tanzania offered a fertile seedbed for literature written in Kiswahili to thrive. At first, Kiswahili literature was written in the Arabic script employing the Arabic genres and later employs the Roman script adapting and modifying the Western genres. Susan Chebet-Choge (2012) reveals that literature written in Kiswahili existed as far back as 1663 AD. She claims that the "Earliest available written Kiswahili literature is *SiriI'Asirari* 1663 (A.D) by Binti Mwana Lemba" (182).

After its independence, writing in Kiswahili became a national policy promulgated by Julius Nyerere. He translated a few of William Shakespeare's works into Kiswahili himself: *Julius Caesar* as *Julias Kaizari* and *Merchant of Venice* as *Mabepari wa Venice* published by Oxford University Press. Ricard (1992) reveals that: "In 1988 the Association of Tanzanian Writers numbered 85 members; only five of them wrote in English. It is difficult even to recall a single English-language literary work by a Tanzanian writer. This Africanisation of Tanzanian literature represents a remarkable achievement… (p.175). Nyerere

adopted a pan-African system of government and encouraged writers to produce literature in their indigenous languages. Ricard further reveals: "The *Arusha Declaration* and the original socialist way adopted by the country inspired graduates from the University of Dar es Salaam to launch themselves into the production of national literature in the national language" (p.175). Thereafter, many writers keyed into this policy and produced remarkable works of literature.

Ebrahim Hussein is an excellent example of a writer who made writing in Kiswahili attractive. He worked extensively for the perfection of Kiswahili as a medium of literary creativity. Olali (2015) remarks that Hussein "goes further in modernizing Swahili drama by introducing "the theatre in the theatre" and blends dreams, fantasy, and reality" (p.2). At the time that Ngugi wa Thiong'o returned to writing in Gikuyu, Ebrahim Hussein had written widely in Kiswahili in Tanzania, yet his contributions did not receive serious critical attention like that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ricard observes:

> Whereas Tanzanian literature has failed to receive the critical attention it deserves, Nguigi's theatre experiments in Gikuyu have been treated to a superabundance of critical commentary, and unlike Kiswahili, Gikuyu is not even a national language in Kenya, where Hussein continues to be widely read. (p.178)

Ebrahim Hussein wrote several dramatic works in Kiswahili: *Kinjeketile* (1969) which explores the Maji Maji Uprising, *Mashetani* (*Devils*) 1971, *Wakati Ukuta* (*Time is a Barrier*) 1970, *Alikiona* (*He Got it*) 1973, *Arusi* (*Wedding)* 1979, *Ngao YaJadi* (*Shield of the Ancestors*) 1976, etc. The bulk of his works deals with how to combat colonialism and imperialism.

Another prominent Tanzanian playwright who wrote in Kiswahili is Penina Muhando. She wrote great dramatic works such as *Hatia* (Guilt), her first play which appeared in 1972, *Tambueni Hakizetu* (*Recognise Our Rights*) in 1973, and *Heshima Yangu* (*My Dignity*) in 1974, *Pambo* (*Decoration*) in 1975, *Jogoo Kijijini* (1976), etc. Her plays always have oppression as their central theme.

Some translated works into Kiswahili. There were translations of western plays from English to Kiswahili. For instance, *Mkaguzi Mkuuwa Serikali* (*Government Inspector*) by Nikolai Gogol was first translated into Kiswahili in 1979 by Christian Mwakasaka and a second translation was done in 1999 by Joshua Madumulla. Farouk Topan made significant contributions through plays like *Mfalme Juha* (1972), *Aliyeonja Pepo* (1973), etc. There were others like A.S. Yahya who wrote *Masaibu ya Ndugu Jero* (1979) (a translation of Wole Soyinka‟s *Trials of Brother Jero*), *Mafarakano na Michezo Mingine* by Zachariah Zani and Jay Kitsao, *Tone la Mwisho and Watoto Wetu* (1981) by Emmanuel Mbogo, etc.

In Kenya, a rich corpus of plays written in Kiswahili and Kikuyu exists as well. However, Wafula (Olali, 2015) reveals that in Kenya, "Kiswahili drama in its written form is fairly recent and came with the advent of the colonialists" (p.1). He further reveals that Graham Hyslop, who arrived in East Africa in 1936, pioneered the production of plays in Kiswahili in 1944. According to Olali, Graham did more than produce plays in Kiswahili:

> In 1944, he directed a play, *Akili Mali*. Later, he wrote two short plays in Kiswahili in 1957 namely *Afadhali Mchawina Mgeni Karibu*. Indeed, Hyslop's prowess in writing the Kiswahili play was further

> proved when he wrote two more plays in 1974 namely *MchimbaKisima* and *Kukopa Harusi Kulipa Matanga*. In Hyslop's writing, the significant trend was to undermine the status and place of an African man and exalt the white man. The plays exhibited the notion of the white man as being divine and the black man to be a lower beast. (p.1)

Graham's example was soon imitated by many Kenyan playwrights who began to write plays in Kiswahili. Henry Kuria comes to mind as one of the earliest indigenous playwrights to write in Kiswahili. He wrote *Nakupenda Lakini* (1954). Others are: Crispin Hauli who wrote *Dunia Iliyofarakana*, Felician Nkwera wrote *Johari Ndogo*, Kimani Nyoike wrote *Maisha ni Nini* (1955), Gerishon Ngugi wrote *Nimelogwa Nisiwe na Mpenzi* (1956), B. M. Kurutu wrote *Atakiwa na Polisi* (1957), S.S. Mushi who specialize in adaptation translated several Shakespeare's works: Macbeth as *Makbeth*, *The Tempest* as *Tufani*.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o contributed greatly to drama in Kikuyu. One notable play is *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*) which he co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii. It was originally written in Kikuyu before being translated into English. In this play, "The dramatists lament the exploitation and marginalization of the peasants who fought for Kenya's liberation by a new group of leaders and financiers who have taken over the country's economy" (Ciarunji & Mwangi, 2004, p.22). The play became immensely popular with the people for two reasons: first, it was a play put together by the people. Secondly, it addressed the people's disillusionment with the new political order in the country during the Jomo Kenyatta's regime. There is also another, *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother sing for me*) written at the Kimirithu Community theatre by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the people of Limuru.

Another play in this category is Alamin Mazrui's play *Kilio cha Haki* (*The Cry for Justice*) written in Swahili published in 1981. The play depicts the struggles of the peasants with the white settlers who took over their lands and hired them to work on the same farmlands as cheap labor. There is also a play written in Maasai *Olkirkenyi*, which appeared in 1971.

In Ethiopia, dramatic works written in Ge'ez abound. Gerard (1970) writes that "Ethiopia had an abundant literature, of mainly religious inspiration, which was written in Ghe'ez." (36). He adds: "The many Amharic plays, most notably by Makonnen Endalkatchew, dramatizing the resistance of the Ethiopian patriots to the Italian occupation are just an example of a kind of writing widely spread throughout present-day Africa, which aptly puts new skills to the service of traditional impulses" (pp. 38-39). Several plays were also written in the Amharic language spoken by about twenty-five percent of the Ethiopian population. The first major play is, of course, Tekle Hawariat's famous play; *Fabula: Yawreoch Commedia* (*Fable: The Comedy of Animals*) written in 1912, it impacted greatly on subsequent dramatic works in Ethiopia. The drama makes use of La Fontaine's fables to criticize both the monarchy and the period's corruption and backwardness. The play was thereafter banned by Empress Zauditu (II) who was in attendance when it was staged in 1916 (Beer, 1977). This is because Empress Zauditu keenly perceived the satirical edges of the play in performance not only as an attack on the monarchy but also as an onslaught on her regime.

Other very prominent playwrights who produced great plays in the Amharic language are Yoftahe Negussie and Malaku Baggosaw who wrote *Talaku Dagna* (*The Great Judge*) which became very popular in schools and colleges, Eyoel Yohanes, Mengistu Lemma, Tesfaye Gessesse, Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin, etc. Most of the plays they wrote were preoccupied with moralistic themes and the need to protect their country and religion. The plays showed heavy influences on church education and religious practices. Tsegaye for instance, wrote several plays in the Amharic language: *Yelecha Gebecha* (*Marriage of Unequal*), *Telfso Bekisse* (*Marriage by Abduction*), *Yekermsasow* (*A Man of the Future*), *Tehaddiso* (*Renaissance*), *Iqaw* (*Iqaw*), *Ha Hu Ba Sidist Wore* (*ABC in Six Months*), etc. A host of other playwrights like Abate Mekuria, Debebe Eshetu, Wegayehu Nigatu, Abe Gubegna, Berhanu Zerihun, Taddele Gebre-Hiwot, etc. most of whom encountered drama in secondary schools, higher institutions and universities abroad. (Plastow, 1996). These later playwrights became engrossed with the plights of ordinary people, thus moving away from the themes of earlier playwrights, and promoting revolutionary ideals.

In Somalia, great dramatic works have been produced in the Somali language by playwrights like Axmed Cartan Xaange, Hassan Sheikh Mumin, Ali Sugule, Axmed Faarax Cali, etc. Axmed Cartan Xange wrote the first play in the Somali language, *Samawada* in 1968. The play explores the contributions of women to the independence struggle after the Second World War. Hassan Sheikh Mumin wrote *Shabeelnaagood* (*Leopard among the Women*) also in 1968. Ali Sugule wrote *Kalahaabiyokalahaad* (*Wide Apart and Flown Asunder*) in 1969.

In Togo, dramatic works in Ewe flourished as far back as 1849. Amegbleame (1990) reveals that most of these performances were done by local pastors; hence, they were religious in content and were performed mostly during Christian programs. However, around 1926, secular drama in Ewe gained prominence. In 1933, there was a competition, Gbanou (Conteh-Morgan, 2004) observes that "The competition drew twenty-eight ends, tries in Ewe alone, not to mention works in Ibo (Nigeria), Bulu (Cameroon) and Zulu (South Africa). The first prize went to a tragedy in Ewe, *Toko Atolia* by Kwasi Fiawoo, who also became that language's most celebrated writer, with two more dramatic works in that language…" (p.65). Kwasi Fiawoo wrote several other great plays which set the standard for drama works in Togo.

In Ghana, plays were also written in indigenous languages like Akan, Ewe, Fanti, Ga, and many other indigenous languages. Of great importance is F. K. Fiawoo's play *Toko Atolia* which had a pioneering influence on other subsequent dramatic works in indigenous languages in Ghana. The play written in Ewe and translated into English under the title *The Fifth Landing Stage* published in 1943 focused on justice and compensation. According to Gibbs (2004, p.163), the title of the play is "a reference to the place of execution for malefactors among the Anglo-Ewe and directs attention to the fact that justice and compassion were known in Africa before the Europeans arrived." The play is always appreciated for capturing the nuances and cadence of the Ewe verbal artistry.

In Sierra Leone, although writing gained expression first in the English language, Krio which is a language of the masses was used as a linguistic medium for dramatic creativity. Thomas Decker pioneered the writing of drama in Krio. He is said to have translated Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* into Krio in 1964, (Sheriff,

2004, p.177). Decker's example encouraged many other writers who came after him to broaden the corpus of plays in Krio. Sheriff (2004) further reveals, "The first to do this was Juliana John (now Mrs. Rowe) … she first wrote and directed *Na Mami Bohn Am* (1968), followed soon after by *I Dey I Nor Du* (1969). These two plays were the first really popular plays, attracting very large audiences from all walks of life" (p.177). This made theatre accessible to the people as plays in Krio became extremely popular and were frequently staged.

In Sudan, drama in indigenous languages flourished as well. Hassan Abdul Majeed is one of the prominent dramatists who wrote in the Sudanese indigenous language and directed his plays. His *Arrafd* (*Rejection*) 1972 looks at the generational gap. The most prominent dramatist in this regard was Abdallah Tayeb. Ahmed Tayeb for his part adapted the works of William Shakespeare into the Sudanese dialect and directed most of them. Although most of his plays were written in Arabic, he wrote very remarkable and successful plays. However, it was Kahlid Abu Rous who wrote the first recognized play. Mberia (2014) notes, "In 1933, Kahlid Abu Rous wrote and produced the first full-length play in the Sudanese dialect (as opposed to classical Arabic) and on a Sudanese theme – the fate of the legendary beauty Tajouj" (p.81). Ibrahim Al Abbadi, though more of a songwriter than a dramatist, made a significant contribution to drama in Sudan. The major theme of his famous dramatic work, *Al Mak Nimiris* dwelled on love and tribal conflict. In this play Abbadi "called for the rejection of narrow parochial loyalties and ethnic animosities in favor of an all-embracing Sudanese identity" (Kahlid, 2004, p.81). Playwrights who came after him took a cue from his experiment.

The return to a democratic system of government in 1964 resulted in prolific growth of drama as the open-air theatre built-in 1959 was turned into a National Theatre. This brought about astronomical growth of drama and the emergence of great dramatists like AlFaki Abdur Rahman, Hamadnallah Abdul Qadir, Makki Sinada, Hashim Siddiq, etc. The plays of Hamadnallah Abdul Qadir show remarkable talent and craft. His *Napata Habi bati* (*My Beloved Napata*) which is preoccupied with historical themes caused a great stir resulting in a demonstration in 1972 among the masses when it was staged. Other contributions of Hamadnallah Abdul Qadir were his radio plays written in the Sudanese dialect because he took most of his plays down to the people. Kahlid Abu Rous reveals that Qadir "took theatre to nomads and villagers in the remote countryside… in their daily dialect" (p.82). His practice can be described as a collective theatre.

In Lesotho, a drama written in an indigenous language flourished unhindered. Like South Africa, Lesotho produced great playwrights who showed marvelous talents in dramatic works written in the Sesotho language. The earliest indigenous plays are those by M. L. Maile and T. M. Mofokeng. M. L. Maile wrote *Ramasoabi le Potso* (*Ramasoabi and Portin o*) in 1937. The focal point of this play is the conflict between Christianity and anti-Christianity. Leetsile Raditladi is another great playwright who chose the indigenous language of Lesotho. His *Motsatsele II* (1937) was written in Setswana. Other playwrights like B. M. Khaketla who wrote *Moshoeshoeke Baruti* (*Moshoeshoe and the Missionaries*, 1947) in Sesotho, and Twentyman Mofokeng wrote *Sek'onasa Jaalu* (*The Calabash of Beer*) in 1939, Mrs N. M. Khaketla wrote *MosaliEo U Neileng Eena* (*The Woman You Gave Me*) in 1957 which is the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

In Zimbabwe, dramatic texts were written in Shona. The Shona language belongs to the Bantu language group and it is commonly spoken in the Southern African countries of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. One of the prominent playwrights who wrote in Shona is Pual Chidyausiku. He wrote plays, novels, and poetry in Shone and was an influential journalist who practiced his journalism purely in the Shona language. He wrote the first Shona play; *Ndakambokuyambira* (*I Warned You*) in 1968. Other Zimbabwean playwrights who wrote in Shona include Mordikai Hamutyinei who wrote *Sungai Mbabvu* (1973), and Simbarashe T. Dzoro wrote *Mukuwasha Aba Nyama:* mitambomitatuyavadiki (1978), Chigidi, R.H wrote *Kwaingova Kuedza Mhanza*in (1989), Moyo, A.C. wrote *KerekeInofa* (2014).

In Botswana, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje translated several of William Shakespeare's works into Tswana. Mukoma wa Ngugi (2020) reveals that "Sol Plaatje… translated some of his plays, including *The Comedy of Errors* into Setswana as *Diphosho-phosho* while translating proverbs into English" (p.6). One other prominent play written in Setswana is *Ngwanaka intshwarele* by S. J. Malao published in South Africa by Lillian Pub. Co. in 1987.

In South Africa, dramatic creativity gained expression in Zulu and Xhosa as well. For instance, there are several historical plays written in the Zulu language. Playwrights such as Esau Mthethwa wrote social satires about local life in the Zulu and Xhosa languages. Other prominent dramatic works are those of Hubert Sishi, Elliot Zondi who wrote *Ukufakuka Shaka* (*The Death of Shaka*) in 1966, and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi who wrote *Dingiswayoka Jobe* (*Dingiswayo, Son of Jobe*) in 1939, Bethuel Blose Ndelu who wrote *Magebalazihlonza* (*I Swear by Mageba*) in 1962. Most of these plays were epical in scope.

We have expended considerable time reviewing the corpus of plays written in African indigenous languages. We will now proceed to examine the linguistic competence of African languages as mediums of literary creativity. Contrary to the claim made by some scholars that African languages lack the linguistic resources and form to give expressing to literary creativity, many African writers who wrote/writing in foreign languages lack the understanding and technical skills needed to write in indigenous languages in addition to the need to reach a wider audience.

Elements of form and African indigenous drama

Drama in the African indigenous languages is perhaps the genre that has explored the resources of oral tradition most proficiently. The cardinal influences of cultural products such as rituals, marriage, sacrifices, festivals, funerals, christenings, etc. on African drama written in indigenous languages give these plays the gracility that is absent in many African dramas written in foreign languages. They form the essential features of the drama just as they function as the organic structure which gives life to the drama. This validates Ngugi's view, "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves about to their natural and social environment, indeed about the entire universe (1986, p.4)

The language of African indigenous drama is always carefully crafted to give solid form to imaginative thoughts and ideas. Playwrights of drama in African indigenous languages have a sensitive attachment to the appropriate language

because they know that language is the pillar of artistic creativity and beauty. Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile*, for instance, manifests the dexterous handling of language as an essential medium through which the revolutionary context is realized. Mbughuni (1981) comments on Hussein's remarkable use of language:

> Hussein's use of Swahili colloquial prose to distinguish between different characters and different states of being, i.e. when Kinjeketile is in a trance he speaks differently, is highly commendable and thought-provoking. His sometimes-jarring juxtaposition of philosophical ideas with metaphysical language leads one into new mysteries of thought and the complexity of human nature, the gods, and man. (p.89)

In every African society, there are speech patterns for different categories of people; elderly men and women, young men and women, youths, married people, unmarried and children. So, playwrights creating their literary works in indigenous languages are not blind to the nuances of words and speech which differentiate one class of people from another. Most times, they use language dynamically to advance their plots and delineate characters. Ngugi's experiences while working on *Ngaahika Ndeenda* with the people of kamiriithu validate this view:

> They were also particular about language which, of course, is another element of form. They were concerned that the various characters, depending on age and occupation, be given the appropriate language. 'An old man cannot speak like that' they would say. 'If you want him to have dignity, he has to use this or that kind of proverb.' Levels of language and language use and the nuances of words and phrases were discussed heatedly. (p.54)

The worldviews of every society are enshrined in the linguistic philosophy of the society and when applied to drama, such a dramatic piece is bound to captivate the attention and interest of the audience because they can relate very well with the incidence therein.

Music and songs as elements of form serve several functions in dramatic works. In African drama, music, and songs rendered in indigenous languages enhance dramatic situations and reveal the emotional makeup of characters better than when rendered in a second language. This is particularly right given that even African Playwrights who write in foreign languages always render the songs in indigenous languages. The plots of indigenous drama are always beefed up with music and songs which serve as a driving force for the advancement of the plot. A classic case in point is the opening of Duro Lapido's *Oba Koso* (1978). The people are happy at the opening because, in their opinion, Sango's time is prosperous and distinguished by success:

> Igba oba wa dara funwa – Our king's time suits us
> Igba oba wa sunwon fun wa – Our king's time is good for us
> Ija kosi o te kosi - There are no rows, there are no intrigues
> Igboro ma dun gbongbon fien wa - There is jollity, there is merriment.

(Ladipo, 1970, p.4)

The function served by the song above justifies the observation of Albert Oikelome (2019) that in the African context, music performs "a form of emotional expression, social interaction, or exercise, in a spiritual or performance setting, and is sometimes used to express ideas or tell a story" (p. 185). Ngugi wa Thiong'o equally underscores the values of songs and dance; "What's important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation…part of the structure and movement of the actors…" (1986, p.45). Ngugi further explains the artistic value of songs and dance in his play *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother sing for me*,1981), "a drama in music, had more than eighty songs from more than eight nationalities in Kenya all depicting the joy, the sorrow, the gains, the losses, the unity, the divisions, and the march forward as well as the setbacks in Kenyan's people's struggles" (pp. 58-59).

One distinctive feature of Hubert Ogunde's drama is his prolific and proficient use of music and songs. He wrote over fifty plays. His *Strike and Hunger* (1945) opens with music and dance which is a symbolic call for solidarity:

> Araige ewa kewa parapo kajo jija ebi
> Come, people of the world, rally round to fight hunger
> Angeli ebo Angeli ebo wa waiye
> (Descend oh Angels, grant us audience) Angeli ebo wa wora enie
> (Angels behold the people of the world)
> Tinse alaimi ehun ewa wole aiye
> (Deprived of good things of the world)
> (translated by Obafemi 2001, p. 41).

Some of Ogunde's plays started as songs which were later turned into plays. His *Yoruba Ronu* (1964) for instance, was a song composed following the split between Obafemi Awolowo and Chief Akintola, two great Yoruba political leaders. Ogunde wrote the song and then transformed it into a drama in response to the terrible dispute between the two leaders to encourage and promote a reunion among the Yoruba ethnic community to prevent any kind of hostility that would shatter unity.

In Pen Muhando's *Tambueni Haki Zetu* (*Recognise Our Rights*) 1973 for instance, music and songs are judiciously used to achieve several effects. Some of the songs and music are instructive; some are used to heighten the mood of the play while some serve as a device for separating one scene from another: Peninah utilises songs and music to increase tension and emphasize the importance of speech and movement. The call of ZETU, trumpets, is used to announce the beginning or end of a drama (Mbughuni, 1981, p.92). The argument that traditional African drama is almost often music-oriented, with dance and song as ancillary elements (Chukwuma, 1994, p.44) is valid because, in the drama written in African indigenous languages, songs are also used to make profound statements on the state of things in the land.

Another element that gives African drama in indigenous languages rooted in oratorical elegance and substance is the use of panegyric poetry called *oriki* in Yoruba. In drama written in African languages, panegyrics are not merely deployed for linguistic ornamentation, they are verbal arts used to impact the actions of

drama. In the hands of a gifted playwright, panegyric poetry is often deployed to achieve a dual purpose; to elicit emotional responses from the audience and to infuse characters with courage and boldness to take up vicious tasks. An excellent example is found in Lapido's *Oba Koso*:

> O ba baale jiyan gangan tan, o tun wa p omo re s iloro!
> Obenle-ja-wuukan!
> Jagunlabi—ja-nibi to gbe-jeko-ana! (Ladipo, 1970, p. 5)
> You had a meal with the head of the family and killed his son on the porch!
> In the process of fighting with the house owner, you uprooted the pillars of his house!
> The born-fighter fights where he had a meal of corn meal yesterday! (Author's translation)

Sometimes, the imageries and symbols drawn to achieve the desirable traits and attributes of the personality of a character in African drama in indigenous languages can be dreadful and awesome. Another excellent example can still be found in the play quoted earlier. For its aptness, the passage is worth quoting in great detail:

> Iwarefa: Iku oooooo!
> Iku baba-yeye, alase, ekeji orisa!
> Iwarefa: O death, the mighty one Death,
> the mighty one, father and mother and second in command to the gods
> Olori: Kabiyesi
> Olori (wives): Long live your majesty.
> Iwarefa: Alagbara lori awon omo olori kunkun!
> Ijangbon lori omo alaigboran
> Akokoluko ebo ti i pa gun leru!
> Inaju ekun tii derub ode! (1970: pp.1-2)
> Iwarefa: The mighty one who subdues stubborn children.
> He whose stubbornness is far greater than any child's.
> You are a sacrificial ritual that frightens the vulture.
> You are the tiger who frightens the hunter with a gaze.
> Iwarefa: Afeni ti kogila kolu,
> Afeni Esu nse
> Lo le kolu Esu Lo le kolu Sango, A
> feni ti Sango o pa! (p.2)
> Iwarefa: Only a person who is possessed by evil
> Only a person who is being deceived by Esu
> Could dare to confront Esu
> Could dare to confront Sango
> Only a person who Sango may kill!
> Olori: Oloju orogbo, Eleeke obi o!
> Eegun ti i yona lenu Oosa ti i bologbo leru!
> Aji-saiye-gbege, oko iya olorogbo!
> Eni foju di o, Sango a gbe e!
> Sango, olukoro ooooooo! (p.2)

Olori: Eyes like bitter-kola,
And cheeks potruding like kola-nuts!
The masquerade that emits fire through his mouth!
The deity who frightens the cats!
One who wakes up and leisurely enjoys life, the kola-seller's husband!
Anyone who undermines you (Sango) will face your wrath!
Sango, the mighty fierce lord!

The reactions of the audience to these compelling and fearful imageries during a performance of this play can be imagined.

Drumming and dance are other sustaining elements of the form of drama in indigenous languages. During the performance of plays written in indigenous languages, drumming is an elemental component of theatrical production without which the esthetic values and atmosphere of a play cannot be meaningfully expressed. In many cases, drumming and dance function as an interlude or relief, other times, drumming and dance accompany symbolic actions. For instance, the drumming in Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* is its great sustaining element, without which the performance is incomplete. The rendition of Sango's *oriki* (eulogiums) quoted earlier is both preceded and followed by serious *bata* drumming. The effect is that while the *oriki* gives Sango a swelled head, the fitful drumming spurs him into fretful action and the spitting of flames. The thunder that accompanies Sango's divine voice is heralded by a stampede of *bata* drums to a crescendo. In addition to propping up the rhythmic pattern of the esoteric dialogue, the *bata* drumming serves as an inspirational element that propels Sango into symbolic actions. The constant dialectical interchange between Sango and the *bata* drum accounts for an esoteric level of non-linguistic communication.

Plays written in indigenous languages are often richly garnished with proverbs, riddles, chants, incantations, ideophones, aphorisms, etc. When playwrights of drama in indigenous create conflicts between characters which come in form of a battle of ideas or wits, it is always rendered in proverbs or riddles which enhance the aesthetic value of the dialogue. The aesthetic function of proverbs is always explored to enhance dialogue. Proverbs expand the dialogue into the cognitive mental process. In Oladejo Okediji's *Ṛ́ṛ́ Rún*, a play in Yoruba, we find excellent examples. A character in this play, Lawuwo, indulges in proverbial musings in his moments of emotional upheaval. He renders many of these in quick succession such that the dialogue becomes convoluted and turgid:

Ìwò táà ń wàparò, bíi ká fi dá 'lá, orí ẹyẹ ni kò pẹyẹ
(As we cast a furtive glance at the partridge with the intent of cooking it in okra soup, it is the bird's providence that spares its life).
Àgùntàn kò paṣọ èṣí dà.
(The sheep has not changed its cloth of last year).
pírí lolongo ó jí, a kìí bá òkùnrùn ẹyẹ lórí ìtẹ́.
(the robin wakes up bubbling with energy; no one finds a sick bird in the nest).
Òjò ló kẹ́yẹlé pọ̀ mádìẹ.
(It is the rain that crowds pigeons together with chickens) (Adeoti, 2019, p.87)

Drama written in indigenous languages is always riddled with proverbs such that one proverb claims on the shoulder of another until the language becomes so condensed beyond the grasp of casual understanding. Thus, the audience is given food for thought which leaves the performance evergreen in their memory.

Mime is an essential element of form which energizes dramatic performances. Indigenous language drama deploys mime to sustain its narrative power. Ngugi wa Thiong'o views mime as the most essential component of form in the theatre:

> Mime is the most important element of form. The best example is kiguuda's intended church wedding ceremony. That sequence starts with Kiguuda and Wangeci who are now admiring their wedding suits and robes… They try them on and with mime, music, and dance go through the entire exercise climaxing in their cutting and imagery five-story cake. (p.53).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii made extensive use of mime during their production of *I Will Marry When I Want*. Many of the materials came directly from the people of Kamiriithu in Kenya who worked together with the playwrights to put the script together. In *I Will Marry When I Want (Ngaahika Ndenda*), mime is explored in the drama to enhance the plot of the play. The play made intensive use of mime and gestures as great instruments of social reformation. They concretize abstract ideas and thoughts, thereby giving shape and form to ideas that only words cannot readily convey to the audience.

Conclusion

Literary works written in African indigenous languages tend to enhance and revitalize indigenous languages which in turn ensures the rejuvenation of the various cultures where those languages originated. Besides, writing in these languages ensures robust reawakening of any language threatened with extinction as a result of a lack of consistent usage or abandonment by the native speakers of the language. Moreover, by proving that they can be mediums of dramatic creativity, playwrights who write in indigenous African languages enhance their viability to stand on equal footing with foreign languages. Writing in African indigenous languages serves the dual purposes of using drama as a form of entertainment and historical documents which can be of vital importance in the distant future. The richly layered nature of the indigenous languages deployed by these playwrights relives the interest of the native speakers of such languages. As a result, the native speakers of these indigenous languages gain not only an aesthetic renewal of their indigenous languages but a renewal of their sense of selfhood since it is a fact that language shapes our distinctive ways of being in the world.

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