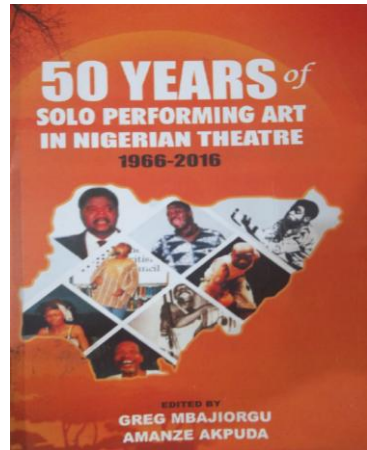


**Perspectives, Reflections
and Theories:
Descriptive Review of ‘50
Years of Solo Performing
Art in Nigerian Theatre
1966–2016’**

Emeka Aniago*



Greg Mbjiorgu and Amanze Akpuda (eds.). *50 Years of Solo Performing Art in Nigerian Theatre 1966 – 2016*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2018. Pp. 614.

This paper is a descriptive/synoptic review of a six hundred and fourteen page pioneering book, entitled *50 Years of Solo Performing Art in Nigerian Theatre 1966 – 2016*, edited by two foremost Nigerian scholars, Greg Mbjiorgu and Amanze Akpuda. Again this book is a collection of forty-two chapters of quality essays, segmented into nine sections (A to I), focusing on the history, evolutionary trends, sociology, reception, performance processes, staging/production techniques, content and textual analysis, contributions of major proponents, and contributions of current practitioners of solo performance and mono-drama in Nigeria as well as texts of interviews with major solo performers and mono-dramatists in Nigeria.

Section ‘A’ with caption ‘Theoretical and Proto-Historical/Pre-Generic Foundations’ features three chapters, starting with Moses Idowu’s chapter, with title ‘Words of Power and the Power of Words:

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the Spoken Word as Medium of Vital Force in African Cosmology’, which discusses the concept of Vital Force in general before concentrating particularly on how Vital Force is engaged as a benevolent power through spoken words. Idowu describes Vital Force as a phenomenon and a universal common, which embodies local specific interpretations and definitions. To elucidate, Idowu’s chapter explains the contexts in which solo performers such as praise-poets, politicians, preachers, dramatists, and public commentators appropriate what linguists refer to as elocutionary force in African oratory in achieving efficacious performance. The next chapter written by Emeka Nwabueze with title ‘The Griot as Solo Artiste and Aesthetics of Performance in African Folk Art’ discusses select dimensions of a griot as a solo performer within given African locale specific contexts and sensibilities. Nwabueze illuminates on a major role of a griot, which is taking the role of a cultural guardian of his people, manifest in his preservation of the genealogies and oral traditions of his tribe. Furthermore, this chapter provides explanations on the formal training of griots, the performance process as well as the distinction between the definitions of a griot and a minstrel. The last chapter in this section ‘The Igbo Mask as Solo Performer’ by Chike Okoye weaves through the major scholarly debates on the context of Igbo mask as a dramatic character before it zeroed in on the description of some Igbo Masks as solo performers. Furthermore, Okoye’s chapter also touches on the performance process, social functions and the theatrical essence of the Igbo mask performer.

Section ‘B’ with title ‘Meta-Theoretical, Comparative, Analytical and Generic studies’ contains eight chapters, (4 to 11). This section’s first chapter, ‘The Solo Performer: Talent and Tradition’ by Kalu Uka touches on the evolutionary trends, and process of solo performance in Nigeria. More so, this chapter elaborates on the centrality of natural latent qualities, which are required for an individual to thrive as a solo performer and the economics of survival strategies of the Nigerian solo performer. Similarly, the next chapter, ‘The One-Man Showmanship: A Reflection on the Solo-Actor and His Environment’, by Ben Tomologu examines the significant information on the evolutionary trends of the mono-drama genre in Nigeria. Particularly, Tomologu examines different aspects of creative innovation, capacity building, aesthetic/entertainment dimensions, and the application of solo performance and mono-drama in advocacy and criticism of Nigerian polity and socio-economic realities. Tomologu highlights also some

vital points on the solo-act, such as performance process, performance experience, the influence of environment and importance of latent abilities. The next essay contained in Chapter Six, with title ‘The Nigerian Response to the Mono-dramatic Tradition and the Culture of Solo Performance’ by Austin Amanze Akpuda discusses given development and evolutionary trajectories and paradigms of solo performance and mono-drama in Nigeria. Clearly, Akpuda’s essay analyzes the variables that distinguish mono-drama from related theatrical performances as well as select relevant issues of performance and narration in mono-drama texts of some playwrights such as Greg Mbajiorgu, Inua Ellams, Benedict Binebai and Akpos Adesi. In Chapter Seven, with title ‘The Colony and Post-colony, Monodrama and Minimalism: Reflections’ the author Chimalum Nwankwo, provides an overview on the inter-link between mono-drama and minimalism in relation to the European/American influence on its practice and scholarship. Nwankwo looks at the realities of cultural assimilation, resistance and originality in subsisting mono-drama practice and culture in some African experiences. Similarly, Chapter Eight, entitled ‘Cloak of Minimalist Consciousness in the Works of Contemporary Nigerian Mono-dramatists, Mbajiorgu, Ellams and Binebai’ by Chidi O. Nwankwo examines given minimalism concept within humanistic and social science purview in an attempt to delineate given minimalism traits in the selected plays of Grey Mbajiorgu, Inua Ellams and Benedict Binebai. In Chapter Nine, ‘Solo Drama as a Potent Tool for Rural Christian Evangelism’ the co-authors Austin C. Okeke and Norbert Oyibo Eze, analyze given ways of application of solo-drama as a medium of rural Christian evangelism. This chapter elaborately discusses different kinds of strategies applicable in spreading the gospel through mono-drama, as well as the shades and nuances of subsumed performance experience. Just as in previous chapter, Chapter Ten, with caption ‘Monodrama in Post-Colonial Nigeria: Regeneration and Reception’ by Ifeanyi Ugwu, focuses on utility and functionality of monodrama. Thus, this chapter discusses the ways mono-drama can be appropriated for artistic, economic, moral and educational purposes for over socio-cultural progression in post-colonial Nigeria. Chapter Eleven, with title ‘The Philosophy of Being: Greg Mbajiorgu’s *The Prime Minister’s Son* and Nuruddin Farah’s *Secrets*’ by James Onyebuchi Ile, presents a vigorous interpretive analysis of Greg Mbajiorgu’s *The Prime Minister’s Son* and Nuruddin Farah’s *Secrets* to illuminate on their

convergences/divergences in projecting Schopenhauer's idea of the absurd. Furthermore, this chapter looks at the shades of depravity and the realities of affliction on people as projected in the given monodrama texts and wonders why so much travail are subsumed and allowed in life, thereby questioning the claim and proclamations of human rights, illusions of humanity and humanism.

Section 'C' with caption 'The Pioneer Nigeria Soloists: Betty Okotie, Tunji Sotimirin and Funsho Alabi' contains five chapters (twelve to sixteen) which focus variously on the contributions of pioneer Nigerian solo performers. In Chapter Twelve, titled 'Betty Okotie and the Birth of Solo Play Production in Postcolonial Nigeria', Greg Mbajiorgu looks at the contributions of Betty Okotie and her place in the annals of history as regards to Monodrama tradition in post-colonial Nigeria. Similarly, in Chapter Thirteen, entitled 'Improvisation as a Strategy for Creating Solo Plays: A Study of Tunji Sotimirin's *Molue*', Greg Mbajiorgu reviews Sotimirin's pioneering contribution in staging and acting of one-actor oriented comic production in Nigeria. Likewise, in Chapter Fourteen, 'The Lone Actor and His Stage: Remembering Funsho Alabi', Ahmed Yerima relates the developmental stages of Funsho Alabi as a pioneer solo actor in Nigeria. Majorly, Yerima's chapter portrays plainly Funsho Alabi's legacy to the Nigerian stage from an insider's perspective, evident in Yerima's inclusion of some relevant personal experiences with Alabi. Chapter Fifteen with title 'The Art of Solo Performances a Study of Funsho Alabi's *Escape from Drugs*' by Grey Mbajiorgu explores Funsho Alabi's acting career as solo-dramatist by looking at his monodrama *Escape from Drugs*, his professional profile, acting and performance techniques as solo actor. Chapter Sixteen with title 'Tunji Sotimirin's Solo Performance and the Domestication of Sartrean Praxis' by Chikwurah Destiny Isiguzo examines the influences of Sartre's existentialist mode in Sotimirin's solo performances.

Section 'D' with caption 'Directing the Monodrama Script' features four chapters (seventeen to twenty). In Chapter Seventeen, 'The Challenge of Directing a Monodrama: Reflections' the author Rudolph Kansese explores the contexts of director's functions in monodrama production. Kansese applies two solo plays by Benedict Binebai *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and *Karina's Cross* in examining the nuances of circumstances and challenges that emanates in directing a monodrama. Similarly, in Chapter Eighteen, 'Beyond Minimalism: Technical Challenges and Prospects of the Solo Play', Kenneth Eni

discusses the technical challenges and prospects of the solo play staging, applying Niger-Delta University's experimental techniques of staging the solo play as a reference point. Chapter Nineteen, with title 'A One-actor Show is not a One-man Production' by Richard Umezina and Ikechukwu Erojikwe explains how production of mono-drama inevitably involves the contributions of a production crew. Thus they buttress the place of technical director and technical crew input in mono-drama production. Similarly, Chapter Twenty, 'The Solo Actor in Training with the Method Technique: The Example of Kaka Benson in *My Life in the Burning Creeks*' by Rudolph Kensese, echoes the necessity of production crew in mono-drama production. Thus, Kensese elucidates on some approaches in preparing a solo actor for a play. He discusses the experience with a solo-actor, Kaka Benson in preparing him for solo act in the mono-drama *My Life in the Burning Creeks* and the application of Lee Strasberg 'Method' as an appropriate technique in preparing kaka Benson for the role. Kensese's chapter also looks at the production process, challenges and outcome in directing solo-drama with emphasis on Benedict Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks*.

Sector 'E' with title 'Encountering Dramatists/Actors Dramatists' contains eight chapters (twenty-one to twenty-eight). Chapter Twenty-one, 'Tunji Sotimirin: A Conversation with a Pioneer Nigerian Solo Performer' by Amanze Akpuda and Chikwurah Isiguzo is a text of an interview by the authors and Tunji Sotimirin centring on philosophical and sociological inclinations in his works as well as his creative experience in relation to solo performance, and the prospects and challenges of solo performance as a genre of theatre in Nigeria. Similarly, Chapter Twenty-two, entitled 'Greg Mbajiorgu on the Theory and Practice of Solo Performance' by Amanze Akpuda is a text of the interview between the author and Greg Mbajiorgu, which focuses on Mbajiorgu's perception of monodrama, the backgrounds and motivations that propelled his mono-drama, *The Prime Minister's Son*. The chapter also touches on solo performance experiences such as improvisation, adaptation, transformation, and voice modulation techniques. Chapter Twenty-three, 'Tunde Awosanmi on Solo Performing Art in Nigeria' by Ademola Dasylva is another text of an interview between the author and Tunde Awosanmi which touches on topics such as Awosanmi's experience as a director and co-producer of solo performances, his perspectives on concepts of solo performances and stand-up comedy. Chapter Twenty-four, 'The Entirety of the world

that I Inhabit: Interview with Inua Ellams' by Greg Mbajiorgu is also a text of interview between the author and Inua Ellams. The text includes the philosophy, practice and performances of Ellams, who is a Nigerian based in England. The interview text also touches on theatre narrative mode which he adopts, the absence of conventional dialogue in his mono-drama and his profile as a poet and a dramatist. Chapter Twenty-five, 'My Monodrama: The Vision and Philosophy' by Benedict Binebai is the author's attempt at sharing his perspectives, vision and philosophy in relation to his published mono plays. Chapter Twenty-six, 'Interview with Benedict Binebai' by Paul Uzoigwe is a text of interview between the author and Benedict Binebai, which focuses on aspects of Binebai's philosophy on monodrama and his career as a mono-dramatist. In this text, Binebai reflects on his style and techniques, dialogue concept in monodrama, and the relationship between dialogue and monologue in solo performances. Chapter Twenty-seven, 'My Heritage as a Dramatist, My Monodrama Creations: Reflections' by Akpos Adesi is the author's reflections on his early stages, growth and challenges as a dramatist and as an author of published mono-drama. He also touches on his styles and techniques, philosophy, point-of-views and ideological inclinations in his plays. Chapter Twenty-eight, '*Mbem Ijele*: An Emerging Solo Dramatist' by Ndubuisi Nwokedi, traces the ongoing journey of *Mbem Ijele*, as a form of solo drama in southeast Nigeria, and applies the findings as the basis of discussing the factors hampering its growth in Nigeria. The chapter makes suggestions on how to grow the genre of mono-drama in Nigeria.

Section 'F' with title 'Greg Mbajiorgu' contains seven chapters (twenty-nine to thirty-five). Chapter Twenty-nine, entitled 'The Trials of Street Children: A Thematic Study of Greg Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*' by Norbert Oyibo Eze, takes a look at the thematic purview of Mbajiorgu's play *The Prime Minister's Son* touching on the realities of homeless and street dwelling children in Nigeria. Chapter Thirty, with title '*The Prime Minister's Son* and Greg Mbajiorgu's Art of Solo Performance' by Uche Nwaozuzu, focuses on Mbajiorgu's style, philosophy, technique and artistic inclinations in *The Prime Minister's Son*. Chapter Thirty-One, 'Solo Performance and the Film Medium: Adaptability of Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*' by Obi Okoli interrogates the possibility of adapting solo-drama to film. He examines the possible difficulty and the viability of such endeavour in commercial terms. Chapter Thirty-two, 'Social Out-casts in Greg

Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*' by T. M. E. Chukwumezie focuses on the social realities explored by Mbajiorgu in *The Prime Minister's Son* as a means of projecting the inequalities and travails that propels certain actions. Chapter Thirty-three, 'The Symbolism of Blindness in Greg Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*' by Hyginus Eze explores the application of symbolism by Mbajiorgu in *The Prime Minister's Son* in relation to the metaphor of blindness. Chapter Thirty-four, 'Poetics of *The Prime Minister's Son*: An Inter-textual Reading' by Chibuzo Onunkwo, applies the concept of fate as the basis of inter-textual relationship between *The Prime Minister's Son* and other dramatic texts in line with Carl G. Jung's perspective on psychology of the unconscious. The chapter attempts an inter-textual interpretation between *Oedipus Rex*, *Blood Wedding* and *The Three Sister* with *The Prime Minister's Son*. Chapter Thirty-five, 'The Operatic Nature of Music in Mbajiorgu's *The Prime Minister's Son*' by Chijioke Ngobili examines the conscious and unconscious convergence of operatic features in *The Prime Minister's Son*. Thus the chapter looks at the strength of songs in provoking emotive state.

Section 'G' with title 'Inua Ellams' features two chapters (thirty-six and thirty-seven). Chapter Thirty-six, with title 'Inua Ellams' *The 14th Tale* and the Concept of the Outsider' by Uche Nwaozuzu and Cindy Ezeugwu examines the phenomenon of deviancy which finds adequate parallels in the focus text. Particularly in adopting the concept of the outsider, the chapter, views Ellams' play, as a commentary on the human condition within the globalized context. Chapter Thirty-seven, 'Magical Realism and Destiny in Inua Ellams' *Untitled*' by Emeka Aniago is textual analysis of the play '*Untitled*' which evaluates the nuances of magical realism and the philosophical conceptualization of destiny in Ellams' technique of intertwining of destiny with a person's name, and how he represents situations and circumstance describable as magical realism within African sensibilities.

Section 'H', with title 'Benedict Binebai', features three chapters (thirty-eight, thirty-nine and forty). Chapter Thirty-eight, 'Idiomatycity of Feminist Aesthetics in Binebai's *Karina's Cross*' by Chidi Nwankwo portrays the feminist inclinations in Binebai *Karina's Cross* which projects the validity, authenticity of women's social value, as a means of re-orientation on the social justice and fairness for all people. Chapter Thirty-nine, with title 'But Some Are More Equal than Others: A Marxist Reading of Benedict Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Greeks*' by Kingsley O. Ugwuanyi, applies the principles of Marxism

in analyzing Binebai's portrayals in the play. The chapter concludes that unfair and perceived mistreatment of the people will continue to fuel feeling of disenchantment which could boil down to acts of social disorder and sabotage by the disgruntled and the afflicted. Chapter Forty, 'The Subaltern Tells His Story: Reflections from Benedict Binebai's *My Life in the Burning Creeks* by Abiodun Olayiwola analyzes the playwright's techniques in his portrayal of nuances of plight, responses to the plights and the trajectories of demands of the Niger Delta people of Nigeria to the perceived injustices propelled by the oil exploration/exploitation superintended by Nigeria.

Section 'I' focuses on the mono-plays of Akpos Adesi and contains chapters Forty-one and Forty-two. In Chapter Forty-one, 'Narrating Self: Interrogating Gender Characterization in Akpos Adesi's *Whose Daughter Am I?*' the contributor Kenneth Eni examines the identity crisis the play's character Tari had lived through. Thus, Eni examines the variables that propel Tari's circumstances in poverty, prostitution, and pre-marriage, as life phases. Similarly, in Chapter Forty-two, 'Labyrinths of Victimhood: Akpos Adesi's Subliminal Rhetoric in *Whose Daughter Am I?*' the contributor Emeka Aniago examines the basis and understanding that informs the conceptualization of individuals as victims of socio-political and cultural realities. Furthermore, this chapter interrogates the social construction of contexts and concepts which defines 'victimhood' and when one is a 'victim' within given culture specific realities and contexts. Thus, the chapter by Aniago and that of Eni project variously the essence of didacticism, attribution and metaphor of poor social justice and welfare in Nigeria.

In conclusion, the publication of this book *50 Years of Solo Performing Art in Nigerian Theater 1966 – 2016* is a commendable response to lack of acclaimed books on Nigerian solo performance and mono-drama experience. Thus, this book provides dependable research and class-room reference source. Clearly, the richness of this book is in the diversity of topics, paradigms, perspectives, and study approaches, yet revolves around a common purview – solo-performances and mono-drama in Nigeria. Again, the spread of chapter contributors – thirty-six major theatre and literary drama scholars, foregrounds the authority and relevance of this book. Finally, the apt placement of related chapters into the same sections provides unambiguous understanding of convergences in thematic inclinations of the chapters.