

Storytelling in African Theatre: Deployment of Ukala's Folkism in Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*

Paula Izere

Department of Theatre and Media Arts,
Southern Delta University, Orerokpe Campus, Nigeria.

Abstract: This paper examines the role of storytelling in African theatre and analyzes the deployment of Sam-Ukala's Folkism in Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*. Storytelling is a vital part of African theatre performance and most times, it goes through different patterns. It constitutes the foundational and communicative mode of African theatre, emerging directly from indigenous oral performances. Folkism on its own is another aspect of African theatre, that focus mainly on African oral and tradition, Ukala propounded a theory termed "Folkism" and since then, most African scripts have adapted this theory in all their works. It is another manner of storytelling on its own, it involves Ukala's strategic use of language, oral traditions, rituals and performance. The method of this research is qualitative which will involve analysis and description. Theatre as we are well aware is to educate, inform and entertain. This paper argues that Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods* reflects these principles through its use of a narrative frame, ritualistic dialogue, communal judgement of character actions, and the addition of Igbo cosmology and oral forms. By applying folkism laws, the play achieves relevance to its folk audience, focusing on its deployment, the relationship and involvement of Ukala's folkism. This paper affirms that African storytelling is theatre is characterized by communal participation, its unique structure, application of music, dance, rituals, masquerade, and the unity between the performer and the audience.

Keywords: Sam- Ukala, African theatre, storytelling, folkism, Audience performance.



Introduction

Story telling is the interactive art of using narrative, emotion, and logical details to convey a message, share experiences, or entertain. It involves a story teller and a listener, utilizing spoken words, text, or visuals to create engaging, memorable, weaving facts, fiction and imagination. It's a universal language that conveys ideas and emotions, it captures attention, focuses on details, preserves history and culture, also connects people and builds empathy. In African Theatre, storytelling is a dynamic, safe and interactive experience, it is used to share cultural values and traditions, analyze societal, moral and political issues. Story telling in African theatre is mythologic and symbolic, it involves oral traditions and folklore, it addresses contemporary issues and realities. African Theatre is a vibrant and diverse form of performance art that encompasses various traditions, styles, themes across the continent. It's deeply rooted in oral traditions, rituals, and communal festivals. It blends storytelling, music, dance, and spiritual themes, often serving as a tool for cultural identity, resistance, and education.

Through storytelling, African theatre connects people, sparks conversations, and inspires change. Performance happens in open spaces with audience participation, call and response, and symbolic dance. Playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o use storytelling and oral narrative to critique colonialism and reclaim pre-colonial identity. Story telling is the heart beat of African theatre. It uses tales to teach morals, preserve history, and reflect social values (Igweonu, 2014).

Folkism is an aesthetic framework drawn directly from African folktale performance. Ukala outlined eight Laws of Aesthetic Response that govern how an audience reacts and participates in a folktale session: Laws of Opening, Joint Performance, Creativity/Free Enactment and Responsibility, Judgment, Protest against Suspense, Expression of the Emotions, Ego Projection, and Closing. These laws insist that African drama should be open-ended, participatory, morally evaluative, and rooted in indigenous performance modes.(Sam-Ukala, 2021).

Chukwuma Anyanwu, a Nigerian dramatist, writes plays that engage Nigerian social realities using language, structure, and techniques drawn from African oral tradition. His play



Wrath of the Gods draws heavily on Igbo cosmology, ritual, and communal ethics. The play is structured as a storytelling competition between the villages of Eziala and Umuanyamele, using the njakiri joking relationship as a framing device. It uses ritualistic dialogue, an oath-taking scene, and situations that invite communal judgment techniques that align closely with Ukala's Folkism. The play concludes without declaring a winner, leaving the judgment to the audience, which reflects the Law of Judgment in Folkism.

This paper introduces the concept of storytelling in African theatre and examines how Ukala's folkism is deployed in Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*. It looks at how the play uses narrative framing, audience engagement, ritual elements, and moral evaluation to recreate the participatory and didactic function of traditional African storytelling within a modern dramatic text. In doing so, it shows how folkism provides a practical model for creating African drama that is both artistically authentic and socially relevant. This study is focused on pointing to an artistic heritage that could provide a pervasive cultural identity, which the Nigerian literary dramaturgy badly needs. African theatre is mainly rooted in oral tradition, where performance functions as ritual, education, entertainment, information and audience / communal participation.

The study adopts a qualitative textual and performance analysis design. Textual analysis is used to examine how Anyanwu structures dialogue, narration, and stage directions, while performance analysis interprets implied stage actions such as song, mime, and audience participation as written in the script (Bratton, 2003). This design is appropriate because the research objective is to explain how and why Ukala's folkist techniques and total theatre principles are deployed in *Wrath of the Gods*.

The Concept of Ukala's Folkism

This study is narrowed down to Ukala's Folkism, that is African Folkism, with little or no preferences to other definitions of folkism.

Sam Ukala was a Nigerian playwright, professor, scholar and 2014 NLNG prize winner. He formalized "folkism" as a dramatic theory and practice based on African oral performance and tradition. He developed an approach to theatre that he pioneered in his own dramatic writings. He called this "Folkism", a theory that was propounded by him and explored the



concept further in his academic work. 'Folkism' grew from his belief in the necessity of decolonization in theatre, and the desire to explore African traditional standards of beauty and dramatic balance. In the construction of his plays he draws on African oral tradition.

Sam Ukala's concept of "folkism" emerged in 1992 as a direct response to the perceived alienation of Nigerian audiences from Eurocentric, text-based drama. Ukala (1996) observed that postcolonial Nigerian theatre often privileged Western realism, psychological characterization, and written scripts, which made performance inaccessible to largely nonliterate, oral-culture audiences. He argued that this created a "cultural gap" between playwrights and spectators. To bridge the gap, Ukala (2000) proposed folkism as a dramatic theory that re-centers indigenous African oral performance techniques within modern playwriting. Philosophically, folkism is rooted in two premises: African oral tradition is a complete dramatic system, not raw material needing Western form (Azuonye, 2004), and modern African theatre must be "home-grown" to communicate effectively and provoke social action (Ukala, 1992, p. 3). Ukala (2000) therefore rejected both uncritical imitation of Western drama and mere archiving of folklore. Instead, he advocated "modification" and "adaptation" of folk forms to address contemporary socio-political realities. Ukala's folkism is a prescriptive dramatic theory that adapts African oral performance techniques for contemporary stage practice. Its concept rests on the belief that song, mime, narrator, and audience participation are not cultural decoration but essential structural elements for creating total, accessible, and socially relevant African theatre (Ukala, 2000; Eze, 2020).

Folkism as defined by Sam Ukala (2021), is: "The tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture, and concerns of the folk (the people in general ...) and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktale (285)."

Saint Gbilekaa, commenting on Sam Ukala's theatre said Ukala's theatre leaned heavily on folkist techniques based on the storytelling theatre. He added that the storytelling theatre is an embodiment of devices and techniques of the oral mode of performance. Therefore, he defines folkism as "the technique of dramatizing the folktale on a modern stage". Though folkism relies heavily on the techniques and devices of the storytelling theatre (the folktale), in folkism, folkscripts are re-interpreted with the modern stage in mind and are presented through strict role

playing by actors rather than by interpretation of all roles in the story by the narrator as it is with the traditional folktale performance.

According to Ukala, African stories should base solely on the history, culture and concerns of the folk, it should involve, movement, gesture, impersonation, music-making and dancing, and sometimes costuming, make-up, masking and puppetry. It is meant to bridge traditional African folktale performance. According to Ukala, the laws of aesthetic response were inspired by: “the conventional responses of the narrator and the audience to folktale performance as found by researchers, such as J.P. Clark - Bekederemo, Efua Sutherland, Ruth Finnegan, Ama Ata Idoo, and Dan Ben-Amos in different parts of black Africa. These eight laws of aesthetic response are rules for performing folk plays so they feel real, alive and relevant to African audiences.

The laws are eight in number:

The "8 laws of Ukala folkism," better known as the **Laws of Aesthetic Response**, are a set of dramaturgical principles developed by the acclaimed Nigerian playwright and scholar, **Sam Ukala**. They are designed to bridge the gap between Western-style theatre and traditional African oral performance (such as folktales and festivals).

Ukala's eight laws dictate how a story should be structured, enacted, and received by both actors and the audience.

1. The Law of Opening

A folkist performance typically begins with an arresting opening, usually led by a narrator or storyteller. This sets the mood, introduces the context of the story, and often incorporates a song, chant or a narrators call to pull the audience into the unfolding tale.

2. The Law of Joint Performance

In traditional African theatre, the barrier between the stage and the audience is dissolved. The audience is integrated into the performance process. This is often achieved using plant-characters known as **MOA (Members of the Audience)**, who are rehearsed actors planted in the crowd to initiate dialogue, answer questions, and prompt the real audience to participate, it implies that the actors and audience must work together actively.



3. The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment, and Responsibility

This law gives the narrator and the actors the artistic freedom to interpret and adapt a script freely. Performers are allowed to improvise, they can change details on the spot based on how the audience reacts. However, this freedom comes with responsibility; performers are held accountable by the audience for their actions and their interpretation of the narrative.

4. The Law of Judgement

Unlike Western literary theatre, where the audience passively watches and judges the play at the very end, Folkism allows the audience to instantly pass judgment. The audience is free to verbally or non-verbally critique, approve, or disapprove of the performers and characters while the play is ongoing.

5. The Law of Protest against Suspense

In traditional African storytelling, the audience does not tolerate undue, prolonged suspense or anxiety. If a performance becomes too suspenseful or drags out a conflict, the audience will actively protest, interject, or demand to know the outcome so the tale can progress.

6. The Law of Expression of Emotions: Grief, Fear, Sympathy, and Scorn.

The audience is actively encouraged to freely and openly express their feelings such as joy, sorrow, anger, or empathy as the drama unfolds. The performers are trained to react to these spontaneous emotional outbursts from the crowd, making every show a unique communal event.

7. The Law of Ego Projection

This principle dictates that individuals in the audience can identify with specific characters on stage and project their own desires, morals, or experiences onto them. This allows the audience to personalize the moral lessons and cultural messages of the play.

8. The Law of Closing

The performance concludes in a structured way that ties up all narrative loose ends. It is often signaled by a closing statement, a moral lesson given by the narrator, or a concluding communal song that leaves the audience with a sense of closure and reflection.

In other words, plays that adhere to the convention of Folkism, must be grounded in the culture and morals of the people. Beyond this, the foundation of the play must conform to the

traditional African storytelling mode. The African theatre is a festival theatre. It is a theatre where performers and spectators assemble. There is no clear demarcation between performers and spectators, hence the spectators are co-performers. Sam Ukala's theatre leans heavily on folkist techniques based on the aesthetics of the storytelling theatre.

Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods* deployed Ukala's folkism.

Traditionally, folkism in African context taps into pre-colonial cultural practices, itreclaims and celebrates indigenous narratives, using proverbs and wise sayings, folktales and myths, rituals and ceremonies. It blends traditional performance conventions such as music, dance, mime, and audience participation.

Folkism aims to create a uniquely African theatre that moves away from Western theatrical norms and speaks to the cultural experience of the African people (Ukala, S. (2013).

Bio-Data of the Playwright

Chukwuma Anyanwu PhD, Hsonta is a Nigerian dramatist, a storyteller in a world of his own. In this piece, he takes a look at his place of birth, though heavily fictionalized. He is a Professor of Media Arts / Film Studies and currently the Head of Department of Theatre Arts, Delta State University, Abraka Delta State, Nigeria.

Analysis of Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*

Set against the background of the njakiri (joking relationship) between Eziala and Umuanyamele, two villages of Umuohiagu in Ngor Okpala L.G.A., Imo State, Nigeria, the play revives the famous folktale of the Blind man and the Cripple. Through a storytelling competition, it interrogates salient issues on the meaning of life, the existence of God and the consequences of abuse of power. The playwright calls for a return to cultural / traditional values to address corruption in our judiciary and society in general. *Wrath of the Gods* a play by Chukwuma Anyanwu, used igbo oral tradition to examine justice, power, and indigenous values.

The play is designed as a storytelling competition between two neighboring villages in Umuohiagu, Imo state: Eziala (the elder) and Umuanyamele (the younger). The contest takes place on a village ground under the full moon, with the audience as the judges. It re-envision the

folktale of the blind man and the cripple within the njakiri tradition- a joking relationship between the two villages and this serves as the basis for framing structure for the main tale.

Umuanyamele Story: It tells the tale of prince Nwankeze, who is banished by his father for not accepting an arranged marriage. While relaxing under a breadfruit tree, he is struck by a falling fruit, which leads to a chain of events explored through speculative and repeated chants (Kerere Nwankeze). The story ends with the rhetorical question: Who made God?

Ezuala's Story: The elder village presents the main drama about King Agu I, draconian ruler of Umuohiagu. He exploits his people through force labor, seizing property and wives. When his farms are inexplicably emptied, he forces the villagers to swear an oath to Agbara-Ubi, the god of the farms. Meanwhile the real thieves are Azuka, who is blind, and Agumma, who is crippled. But they cleverly avoid breaking the oath's wording. The gods, seeing the king's injustice, strike him down. The goddess of the earth appears, and emerges with a divine feminine force and claims the king's soul. It concludes without declaring a winner, leaving the judgement to the audience.

The 2025 production at Delta State University, Abraka, was directed by the playwright himself and performed by 300 level Theatre Arts students.

The Deployment of Ukala's Folkism in Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*

Wrath of the gods

Fokism, as Ukala (2021) defines it, is "the tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture and concerns of the folk, and to compose and perform them in accordance with African conventions for composing and performing the folktales". Anyanwu applied this in *Wrath of the gods*.

Ukala's folkism requires the call and response structure of Igbo folktale sessions. Anyanwu opens with a lead song:

"Onye gburunwanneya ma na-ebeakwa.."

He who kills his brother and weeps.



“Lekwala”

Imagine

“Onye gburunwannaya ma n’etinkpu”

He who kills his kinsman and weeps.

Lekwala

Imagine

Egbulanwanmegi o

Do not kill your brother

Egbulanwannagio o.

Do not kill your kinsman

Egbulanwannegiugwu ka mma

Owuadighimma.

Do not kill your brother, do not kill your kinsman, enmity is preferable to loneliness

Lekwala

Imagine

Mgbe chi abolaanyammiriejulagianya

Before dawn tears would flood your eyes

Lekwala

Imagine

Mgbe chi ejilaanyammiriejulagianyaineyee!



Before dawn your eyes will flood with tears

Egbulanwannegi o

Do no kill your brother

Egbulanwannagi o

Do no kill your kinsman

Egbulanwannegi

Do no kill your brother

Ugwu ka mmaowuadighimaineyee!

Enmity is preferable to loneliness

Wrath of the Gods (P. 17 & 18)

This sets the communal and rhythmic tone right away, replicating how a folktale narrator opens a call and response for the audience. The play is built on the folktale of the blind and cripple, a well-known Igbo folktale linked with oral tradition. Ukala's folkism rejects European dramatic models and insists on basing plays in African oral tradition and narratives. Anyanwu employed this by framing the entire play as a storytelling contest between Eziala and Umuanyamele. That contest portrays the folktale performance context Ukala identifies as the base of African theatre.

Folkism requires plays to follow African conventions for composing and performing folktales: use of songs, dance, improvisation, mimicry, masking, and direct audience involvement.

In *Wrath of the Gods*, The Umuanyamele group uses a repetitive Kerere Nwankeze chant to drive their narrative.



What happened to Nwankeze?

Gini mere Nwankeze?

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

A breadfruit fell on Nwankeze,

UkwakugburuNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

What happened to the breadfruit?

Gini mere ukwa ahu e?

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

A digger smashed on the breadfruit,

Obi mawaraukwa ahu o.

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

What happened to the digger?

Gini mere obi ahu e?

KerereNwankeze



KerereNwankeze

Termites were gnawing at the digger.

Apu rakwara obi ahu o

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

What happened to the termites?

Gini mere apu ahu e?

KerereNwankeze

KerereNwankeze

A fowl was pecking at the Termites.

Okukoturuapu ahu o

Wrath of the gods (pp 30 & 31)

The chant follows the tale of Prince Nwankeze killed by a falling breadfruit while he was resting under the breadfruit tree, which leads to the question ‘Who made God?’. Music marks scene changes and emotions. That’s a direct application of Ukala’s point that folkism uses music-making, dancing, and ritual chant as core performance conventions.

The setting is a village playground under a full moon, replicating the communal performance tale of folktale. That’s the communal performance space Ukala identifies as typical of African oral narrative. Unlike the western theatre, performance can be staged anywhere. Any available venue can be used as a performance space.

The most potent theme in *Wrath of the Gods* is a critical examination of power, its acquisition, and its inevitable corruption when divorced from service and justice. King Agu I



does not begin as a tyrant; the play suggests he was “one of us,” elevated by the community. However, his reign becomes a masterclass in oppressive rule: he confiscates farmland, demands forced labor, and sexually appropriates the wives and daughters of his subjects as punishment. This tyranny illustrates the idea that power, once absolute, often rewrites morality to serve itself. Agu I’s justification; that working for the king “improves your sense of patriotism”, is a stark critique of how authoritarian regimes reframe exploitation as duty.

The play’s central conflict arises not from the theft of crops but from the king’s perversion of a sacred tradition: the oath to Agbara-Ubi. He weaponizes this spiritual mechanism not to discover truth, but to terrorize and reaffirm his dominance. His subsequent death by divine retribution delivers the play’s core thesis: leadership is a sacred trust from both the people and the cosmos. When a ruler violates this trust, becoming a predator rather than a protector, he severs his mandate. The gods, in their ultimate judgment, side not with the institutional power of the throne, but with the foundational principles of justice. Thus, the play argues that true authority is conditional and moral, and its abuse invites a wrath that is both natural and supernatural.

In *Wrath of the Gods*, the divine is not a distant or capricious force but an active, moral arbitrator deeply woven into the fabric of the human world. The gods; embodied by Agbara-Ubi and, majestically, by the character of Earth, operate on a logic that transcends human legalism. This is most brilliantly illustrated in the outcome of the oath-swearing. The literal guilt of Azuka and Agumma is undeniable to the audience, yet the gods strike down the king instead. The divine judgment focuses on a greater crime: the king’s abuse of his people and his arrogant defilement of a ritual meant for justice.

The entrance of Earth as the “womb of time” and “avenger of the helpless” crystallizes this theme. She is not a vengeful deity but a foundational, nurturing force that must also correct imbalance. Her speech frames her actions as a tragic necessity: “the ground must receive a cut” whether the snake (the guilty) is caught or not. In punishing Agu I, the gods prioritize the health of the community over the punishment of a petty crime born of desperation. The play thereby presents a sophisticated theology: divine justice is not about petty score-keeping but about



maintaining the fundamental moral and natural order. The true “wrath” is reserved for those who poison the well of collective life.

The most potent theme in *Wrath of the Gods* is a critical examination of power, its acquisition, and its inevitable corruption when divorced from service and justice. King Agu I does not begin as a tyrant; the play suggests he was “one of us,” elevated by the community. However, his reign becomes a masterclass in oppressive rule: he confiscates farmland, demands forced labor, and sexually appropriates the wives and daughters of his subjects as punishment. This tyranny illustrates the idea that power, once absolute, often rewrites morality to serve itself. Agu I’s justification; that working for the king “improves your sense of patriotism”, is a stark critique of how authoritarian regimes reframe exploitation as duty.

The play’s central conflict arises not from the theft of crops but from the king’s perversion of a sacred tradition: the oath to Agbara-Ubi. He weaponizes this spiritual mechanism not to discover truth, but to terrorize and reaffirm his dominance. His subsequent death by divine retribution delivers the play’s core thesis: leadership is a sacred trust from both the people and the cosmos. When a ruler violates this trust, becoming a predator rather than a protector, he severs his mandate. The gods, in their ultimate judgment, side not with the institutional power of the throne, but with the foundational principles of justice. Thus, the play argues that true authority is conditional and moral, and its abuse invites a wrath that is both natural and supernatural.

In *Wrath of the Gods*, the divine is not a distant or capricious force but an active, moral arbitrator deeply woven into the fabric of the human world. The gods; embodied by Agbara-Ubi and, majestically, by the character of Earth, operate on a logic that transcends human legalism. This is most brilliantly illustrated in the outcome of the oath-swearing. The literal guilt of Azuka and Agumma is undeniable to the audience, yet the gods strike down the king instead. The divine judgment focuses on a greater crime: the king’s abuse of his people and his arrogant defilement of a ritual meant for justice.

The entrance of Earth as the “womb of time” and “avenger of the helpless” crystallizes this theme. She is not a vengeful deity but a foundational, nurturing force that must also correct

imbalance. Her speech frames her actions as a tragic necessity: “the ground must receive a cut” whether the snake (the guilty) is caught or not. In punishing Agu I, the gods prioritize the health of the community over the punishment of a petty crime born of desperation. The play thereby presents a sophisticated theology: divine justice is not about petty score-keeping but about maintaining the fundamental moral and natural order. The true “wrath” is reserved for those who poison the well of collective life.

The play replicates the participatory nature of folktale performance by positioning the audience as judges. The narrator urges the audience, as judges, to analyze both tales and later turns the questions back to the audience, this mirrors the narrator-audience interaction in traditional folktale sessions that Ukala cites. This involves planting (MOA’s) as part of the audience. Ukala believes that folkism must address the history, culture, and concerns of the people.

Anyanwu uses the play to confront all that, he talks about corruption and abuse of power (King Agu draconian leadership, forced labor, and seizure of properties. Divine justice (The gods punish the king, and the goddess of the earth claims his soul). Return to Indigenous values. The playwright advocates a return to traditional and moral foundations to confront corruption in the society.

This is in line with Ukala’s goal of using folkism to explore African standards of beauty and dramatic balance, and to decolonize theatre. Theatre is an art for all.

The play is set in Umuohiagu, Ngor Okpala LGA, Imo State, and uses Igbo with deities like Agbara-Ubi and the Earth Goddess. Ukala insists on cultural authenticity drawn from the people’s view, and Anyanwu replicated this by keeping the cultural logic intact rather than translating it into a western moral framework. It blurs the strict boundaries between performers and audience, thus allowing audience to engage, give feedbacks, pass judgements on actors, and participate actively in the moral evaluation of the plot.

In conclusion, the characters in *Wrath of the Gods* are meticulously crafted not as psychologically complex individuals but as archetypes and symbolic agents that serve the play’s philosophical and political arguments. They exist along a spectrum from literal to allegorical;



from the vividly rendered Azuka and Agumma to the metaphysical presence of Earth. This approach allows the play to operate simultaneously as engaging drama and moral parable. Each character, whether tyrant, trickster, priest, or peasant, illustrates a facet of the central conflict between human injustice and divine order, between the abuse of power and the resilient, cunning will to survive and seek justice. Through them, Anyanwu demonstrates that in the theatre of social conflict, every role; from the king on his throne to the blind man in the shadows, is essential to the unfolding of truth.

Conclusion

Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods* is far more than a dramatized folktale or a nostalgic celebration of Igbo oral tradition. It is a sophisticated, multilayered work of political theatre, philosophical inquiry, and cultural critique, framed within the vibrant and participatory form of a storytelling competition. Through its intricate narrative structure, rich characterization, and potent use of dramatic devices, the play delivers a powerful meditation on power, justice, survival, and the enduring role of art in society.

At its core, the play presents a searing indictment of tyrannical leadership. King Agu I's descent from a traditional ruler into a predatory autocrat illustrates how power, when divorced from accountability and compassion, corrupts absolutely. His eventual downfall, orchestrated not by human revolution but by divine retribution, reinforces the play's central moral thesis: true authority is a sacred trust, and its abuse invites a cosmic rebalancing. The gods, as represented by Agbara-Ubi and the majestic force of Earth, are not arbitrary but just; their wrath is reserved for those who pervert the natural and social order.

Simultaneously, the play celebrates the resilience and ingenuity of the marginalized. Azuka and Agumma, the blind man and the cripple, emerge as the unexpected heroes of the narrative. Their triumph is not one of strength or position but of intellectual subversion and collaborative cunning. They embody the idea that those overlooked and oppressed by a system can become its most effective critics and destabilizers, using wit and literal-mindedness to expose hypocrisy. Their survival is a testament to human adaptability and a quiet, powerful form of resistance.



Structurally and stylistically, the play is a masterclass in meta-theatrical engagement. By framing the central drama within a storytelling contest and breaking the fourth wall through the Narrator and the MoA (Members of the Audience), Anyanwu transforms spectators into active participants and judges. This technique does more than entertain; it implicates the audience in the very act of moral judgment that the play explores. It asks us not only to watch a story about justice but to practice judgment ourselves, blurring the line between performance and reality, past and present.

Furthermore, *Wrath of the Gods* serves as a robust defense and examination of storytelling itself. It posits narrative as the primary vessel for cultural memory, ethical instruction, and social critique. The competition between Eziala and Umuanyamele showcases different narrative modes; the philosophical and the political, both of which are vital for a community's intellectual and moral health. The play argues that stories are not escapes from reality but essential tools for understanding, questioning, and shaping it.

In its final moments, the play refuses to provide a neat resolution or declare a winner of the competition. This open-endedness is its final, powerful statement. The Narrator turns the questions back to the audience: Who made God? What is justice? How do we build a clean society? There is no easy answer provided, because the play understands that the quest for meaning and justice is ongoing, a collective project that requires vigilance, wisdom, and participation from all.

Lastly, *Wrath of the Gods* stands as a significant work of modern African drama that successfully bridges the traditional and the contemporary. It uses the forms of the past; proverbs, songs, ritual, and oral narrative, to address timeless and urgent issues of power, corruption, and resistance. It reminds us that the stories we tell, and how we tell them, are never neutral; they are the means by which we envision the world as it is and as it ought to be. In the end, the true “wrath” to be feared may not be that of distant gods, but the consequences of our own human failures, and the greatest hope may lie in the enduring, transformative power of the story to warn, to heal, and to inspire change.



Finally, Anyanwu uses *Wrath of the Gods* as a practical application of folkism. He takes an Igbo folktale, frames it as a live storytelling contest, involves narrator and audience, employs oral performance devices like chant and audience participation.

Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods* as a storytelling Theatre

Storytelling theatre, also called narrative drama or theatre of narration, is a dramatic mode in which the act of telling is prioritized over Western mimetic realism (Osofisan, 1999). Unlike realist drama that creates an illusion of "life on stage," storytelling theatre openly presents itself as a story being narrated to a live audience (Schechner, 1988). In African performance, storytelling is not a minor device but a complete aesthetic system rooted in oral tradition (Finnegan, 2012). The storyteller/griot mediates between past and present, living and ancestors, individual and community (Okpewho, 1981). Meaning is co-produced by teller and listeners in a communal circle, not dictated by a script alone (Irobi, 2007). Thus, storytelling theatre can be defined as: drama that uses narration, episodic structure, oral devices, and audience participation to convey meaning, with minimal reliance on realistic sets or psychological acting (Ukala, 2000; Finnegan, 2012).

Storytelling theatre is a dynamic, highly collaborative performance style that dramatizes narratives without elaborate sets or lighting. It seamlessly blends narration (often in the past tense) with live enactment (in the present), encouraging a small acting troupe to stimulate the audience's imagination through words, movement, and minimal props. It focuses on the performer's body and voice rather than heavy stage design. Actors frequently step in and out of character to narrate the story directly to the audience. Incorporates live music, choreography, and sometimes puppetry to enrich the narrative, often blurs the line between performer and spectator, inviting active imagination or direct participation.

Chukwuma Anyanwu's *Wrath of the Gods*, deployed all the features of a storytelling theatre.

Total theatre refers to performance in which all theatrical elements, text, voice, movement, music, light, costume, space, and audience function as equal and integrates it into a unified, and immersive experience. Total theatre is the defining of African indigenous



performance traditions, it operates on holistic communal participation rather than the huge separation between performers and audience. Artaud, (1938).

Wrath of the Gods deployed all the features of a total theatre in these various forms

- Communal / audience participation
- Unity between performers and audience
- Incorporation of African indigenous performance traditions
- Ritual foundation
- Orality / Storytelling
- Community life exhibited
- Mystical enactment

References

- Anyanwu, C. (2025). *Wrath of the Gods*. BWright Integrated Publishers.
- Artaud, A. (1958). *The Theatre and its Double* (M.C. Richards, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1938).
- Azuonye, C. (2004). *A Tale of Two Traditions: The Aesthetics of Continuity in African Oral and Written Literatures*. In A. Irele & S. Gikandi (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (pp. 17 – 32). Cambridge University Press.
- Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral Literature in Africa* (2nd ed.). Open Book Publishers.
- Igweonu, K. (2014) *African Drama and the Construction of an Indigenous Cultural Identity: An Examination of Four Major Nigerian Plays*.
- Irobi, E. (2007). *What Makes a Performance African?* In K. Anyokwu (Ed.), *Perspectives on Nigerian Drama and Theatre* (pp. 23-42).
- Okpewho, I. (1981). *The Epic in Africa: Toward a poetics of the Oral Performance*. Columbia University Press.
- Osofisan, F. (1999). *Theatre and the Politics of Culture*. Opon Ifa Publishers
- Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance Theory* (Rev. ed.). Routledge
- Ukala, Sam. *Akpakaland*,



- Ukala, S. (2000). Folkism: Towards an aesthetic of Modern Nigerian Theatre. Kraft Books.
- Ukala, S. (2002). Folkism and the Search for a Relevant Nigerian Literary Theatre.
- Ukala, S. (1996). "Folkism: Towards a National Aesthetic Principle for Nigerian Dramaturgy