



## Folkism in Sam Ukala's the Placenta of Death

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### Abstract

*This qualitative study uses cultural studies theory to examine the use of folkism in Sam Ukala's play, "The Placenta of Death." The study analyzes the author's use of language, imagery, and symbolism to obtain a deeper understanding of the issues of political struggle, power, and resistance that are addressed in the play. The research questions explore how Ukala uses folk elements and traditions, the cultural and historical contexts that inform their use, and the potential implications for contemporary discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature. The study involves a cursory examination of the play and its literary techniques, as well as a critical analysis of its broader implications for African culture and literature. The study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature and to deepen our understanding of the significance of folkism in Igbo culture.*

**Key Words:** Folkism, Cultural Studies

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### I. Introduction

*Folkism*, as used in Sam Ukala's play *The Placenta of Death*, is the preservation and celebration of traditional cultural beliefs and practices, especially among the Edo people of Nigeria during the post-colonial era (Ukala, 1998). Ukala uses the idea of folkism to emphasize the importance of upholding cultural traditions and beliefs, emphasizing the importance of customs like honoring ancestors, worshiping deities, using traditional medicine, and the placenta's symbolic significance. The placenta is revered by the Edo people as a spiritually significant artefact, representing life and vigor, and being connected to the idea of reincarnation, according to Uwagboe (2017). In the Edo culture, the placenta is regarded as the baby's spiritual twin and a source of great power. It is frequently interred in a specific location, such a family complex or a holy forest, to guard and mentor the child throughout their lifetime. Also, some Edo people think that a child delivered with the placenta remaining in situ will achieve greatness. The word "folk," which describes the cultural practices, beliefs, and habits of a particular group of people, is where the idea of *folkism* originates. *Folkism* places a strong emphasis on the necessity to maintain and honor these traditions despite how much society is changing and evolving. This idea is frequently connected to cultural nationalism and the notion of cultural heritage. The concept of *folkism* is emphasized in *The Placenta of Death*, highlighting how crucial it is to preserve cultural identity and continuity, especially in the face of modernization and globalization. It emphasizes how important it is to strike a balance between tradition and modernity in order to build a healthy and prosperous community. The idea of folkism is a major element throughout *The Placenta of Death*, echoing the play's overall point on the value of cultural preservation. In spite of the difficulties associated with industrialization and globalization, Ukala's usage of *folkism* emphasizes the necessity for societies to value and retain their unique cultural traditions, viewpoints, and practices.

## II. Literature Review

African *folkism* is a term for the social, political, and cultural philosophy that aims to uphold and advance the traditional cultural practices and values of Africa. This section gives an overview of the significance of African folklore and emphasizes the value of these studies for maintaining cultural traditions. *Folkism*, according to Ogedegbe and Odiase (2015), can be utilized as a strategy to sustain cultural practices that are in danger of vanishing because of the pervasive influence of Western cultural imperialism. This phenomenon is the erasure and loss of traditional cultural practices and ideals as a result of the domination of Western cultural values, beliefs, and practices that have been introduced and imposed on other cultures around the world. *Folkism* is best understood in this context as a movement that aims to preserve and rejuvenate indigenous cultures by highlighting the importance of their distinctive customs, beliefs, and rituals. *Folkism* can counteract the growth of Western cultural norms, which frequently place a high value on individualism, materialism, and consumerism, by accomplishing this. By embracing *folkism*, people and communities can fend off the homogenizing impacts of Western cultural imperialism and preserve a strong sense of their unique cultural identity. According to Asante (2019), folklore is an important aspect of African culture and portrays African *folkism*. He contends that folklore has made a substantial contribution to the growth of African communities and is a means of conserving cultural traditions and values. African *folkism*, which places a strong emphasis on cultural preservation, is exemplified by Asante's work. Asante emphasizes the significance of folklore in African culture in his perceptive writing. He claims that folklore is more than just a collection of tales and that it serves as a means of maintaining the rich cultural traditions and ideals of African nations. The myths, tales, and stories that have been passed down through the ages serve as a reminder of the values and customs that have come to characterize African culture over time. Furthermore, Asante contends that folklore has played a significant role in the growth of African communities. African communities have gained a feeling of identity and belonging and been able to learn from the experiences of their predecessors thanks to the stories that have been passed down. A cohesive and resilient civilization has been facilitated by folklore, which has also significantly shaped African social norms and rituals. The value of conserving African traditional practices and beliefs is emphasized by Asante's work. Recognizing the importance of these traditions and making sure they are passed on to future generations are both crucial. By doing this, we may foster social cohesiveness and resilience while also aiding in the preservation of the distinctive identity and heritage of African societies. In the effort to protect and honor the continent's rich cultural history, African folkism continues to be a key principle. This idea is at the heart of Sam Ukala's play *Placenta of Death*. The work of Ukala has been the focus of academic examination and critical debate, and a number of academics have shared their perspectives on the play's usage of folkism. Okoh, (2013) claims that in *Placenta of Death*, Ukala uses traditional cultural forms. Using traditional dance, music, and storytelling to highlight the significance and relevance of the culture to contemporary Nigeria and its future, Okoh says that the play takes the audience on a journey through Benin history and culture. Predicated on the above, it can be deduced that, Ukala transports the audience through the history and culture of the Benin people using traditional dance, music, and narrative. Thus, the play gives the audience a chance to empathize with the history and culture of the Benin people and to learn more about the import of traditional cultural activities. The utilization of traditional forms also highlights how crucial it is to keep these traditions alive and pass them on to future generations. In keeping with Okoh's argument, Ukala's use of traditional cultural forms in *Placenta of Death* is a purposeful and efficient means to express a message about the significance of African culture in modern Nigeria. That is to say, Ukala's play serves as a potent reminder of the diversity and depth of African culture and its potential to influence Nigeria's future by underlining the relevance of traditional traditions. In conclusion, Ukala uses these components to both highlight Nigeria's rich cultural legacy and show how relevant it is to modern life. Jeyifo, (1998) contends that *Placenta of Death* is an illustration of how African playwrights use conventional cultural conventions to convey modern social and political themes. According to Jeyifo's argument on the *placenta of death*, it can deduce that the play's core symbol; *placenta*, is taken from Nigerian mythology, in which the placenta is viewed as a strong spiritual force that may be employed for good or evil. The *placenta* in the play stands in for Nigeria's corrupt and exploitative political system, which thrives on the misery and blood of its citizens. Ukala is able to develop a potent metaphor for the divisiveness of Nigerian politics by utilizing this ancient emblem in a modern setting. Sequel to the aboveground, *The Placenta of Death* is a shining example of how African playwrights can utilize conventional cultural forms and conventions to address current social and political issues, as well as to make their criticisms more understandable and pertinent to the general public. African playwrights have adapted ancient forms of artistic expression, as well as their cultures' mythology and stories, to the challenge of dramatizing current issues (Jeyifo 1998).

According to Ogedegbe and Odiase (2015), folkism can be employed as a strategy of maintaining a culture that is rapidly disappearing as a result of Western cultural imperialism and Africans' haphazard adoption of Western cultural ideals.

### III. Theoretical Framework

The broad field of study known as cultural studies first appeared in the UK in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The field is distinguished by an interdisciplinary approach that examines how culture influences society and politics by drawing on cultural anthropology, literary theory, sociology, political economy, and other disciplines. Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Stuart Hall, and Richard Hoggart are the creators of cultural studies theory. Particularly, Stuart Hall is regarded as one of the pioneers of the discipline, and the growth of cultural studies theory has been influenced by his work. As a significant source in the area, Hall's groundbreaking essay "Encoding/Decoding" from 1973 is frequently mentioned.

Whilst its roots can be seen in the early 20th century work of theorists like Antonio Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, cultural studies theory was first presented in the 1960s and 1970s. Cultural studies theory is criticized for being overly focused on how culture affects politics and society while ignoring other crucial elements like economics and power dynamics.

Additionally, some detractors claim that cultural studies theory is overly politically skewed and is more interested in advancing leftist ideology than in providing an unbiased critique.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the area of cultural studies theory is still important and extensively researched, and there are still disagreements and disputes concerning its applicability and value in comprehending modern society and culture.

### IV. Statement of the Problem

The literary works of Sam Ukala are known for their portrayal of African culture and traditions, particularly in his play *The Placenta of Death*, which explores the concept of *folkism*. However, there is a lack of research on how the play portrays the struggle for power after the post-colonial independence amidst the traditional beliefs and how Ukala's portrayal of folks reflects broader societal issues such as the legacy of colonialism and the influence of Western culture. Therefore, the problem statement for this research is to analyze how Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* explores the concept of folks, its conflicts with modern values, and how this portrayal reflects broader societal issues.

#### 4.1. Methodology

For the article *Folkism in Sam Ukala's The Placenta of Death*, qualitative research is ideal; as a result, this methodology provides the researchers with an in-depth insight through the examination of themes and motifs in the play based on cultural studies theory. This is made possible by doing a cursory examination of the play and analyzing the author's use of language, imagery, and symbolism to obtain understanding of the issues of political struggle, power, and resistance that are addressed in the play.

#### 4.2. Research Questions

1. How does Sam Ukala use folk elements and traditions in *The Placenta of Death*? What is the significance of these elements for the story's themes and messages? This question will explore the literary techniques used by Sam Ukala and how he incorporates folk elements into the story. It will also delve into the meaning behind these elements, how they contribute to the themes and messages of the story, and the implications of their use.
2. What are the cultural and historical contexts that inform the use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death*? How do these contexts shape the meaning and interpretation of the text? This question will examine the cultural and historical factors that influenced Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in the story. It will explore how these factors shape the interpretation and meaning of the text, as well as the broader implications for African literature and culture.
3. What are the potential implications of Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* for contemporary discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature? This question will focus on the relevance of Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in today's discussions on cultural identity and representation in African literature. It will explore how the use of these elements can challenge or reinforce stereotypes, as well as the impact on contemporary African literature and culture.

### V. Analysis and Discussion

1. How does Sam Ukala use folk elements and traditions in *The Placenta of Death*? How does Sam Ukala use folk elements and traditions in *The Placenta of Death*? What is the significance of these elements for the story's themes and messages?

Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* is a play that explores the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Edo tribe of the Benin state of Nigeria and the impact of modernity on these traditions. One of the key literary techniques that Ukala uses to convey the cultural context of the play is the incorporation of folk elements and traditions. These elements include songs, dances, rituals, and mythologies, all of which serve to deepen the cultural context of the play and add to its overall meaning. For example, the play's opening scene features an evening storytelling

session at the village square where a Narrator was introduced calling for the attention of the villagers who were gathered playing their normal evening games after a hard day at work. The narrator proposed they sing a song to begin the storytelling session. Again, traditional music and dances were portrayed in the play during the marriage ceremony of Omon as well as the naming ceremony of Ibo's son at Emeni's quarter. The use of traditional music and dance throughout the play serves to create a connection between the characters, the audience, and the cultural heritage of the setting. The play also incorporates various mythological and spiritual elements, such as the belief in ancestral spirits and the power of the gods. These elements serve to highlight the spiritual and cultural significance of the community's beliefs, and the importance of these beliefs to the characters' lives and identities. The use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* also serves to explore the political struggle between the rich and the poor in the play. Throughout the play, the characters especially Emeni who was rich but a slave to the Owodo kingdom grapple with the tradition of the people which he described as bow down to the king's fart. The use of folk elements serves to emphasize the importance of cultural heritage and traditions in one's roots and identity. Furthermore, the use of folk elements and traditions in *The Placenta of Death* also highlights broader societal issues such as the legacy of tribal conflict on culture. The play's exploration of the tensions between tribes thus the Owodo kingdom and the Dein tribe can be seen as a reflection of the struggle that many African societies face in reconciling their cultural heritage with the influence of power struggle. The use of folk elements serves to ground the play in a specific cultural context and to highlight the importance of preserving and celebrating cultural traditions of the people of Edo state and Nigeria at large.

2. What are the cultural and historical contexts that inform the use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death*?

The cultural and historical contexts that inform the use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* are rooted in the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people of Nigeria, from whom Sam Ukala hails. The play draws heavily from Igbo mythology and folklore, reflecting the community's belief in the power of ancestral spirits, the significance of the earth gods, and the use of divination to seek guidance from the gods. In the second scene of the play where Owodo III was holding court with his elders, thus Iyasere, Ihama and Olotu, a lot of references were made to the traditional stories of the former Oba and there throwing more light on how Ibo and her tribe are not descendants of the Owodo kingdom but rather are slaves because of captivity. In that same setting, a lot of references were again made to the ancestors and the gods whom the peoples revere so much thereby bringing out the significant of these ancestors who are believed to be the protectors and guidance of the tribe. Additionally, the play takes place in the post-colonial era, a time of great change and transition for many African countries. The play explores the struggle for power and identity amidst the clash between traditional the poor and the rich which reflects broader societal issues facing African nations at the time. These contexts shape the meaning and interpretation of the text by providing a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical forces at play. The use of folk elements highlights the cultural identity of the community and underscores the importance of preserving traditional beliefs and values amidst rapid social and political change. The play also underscores the impact of colonialism and how wealth can influence the respect for one's cultural heritage. Overall, the use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* serves to create a sense of cultural continuity and identity in the face of rapid change, while also shedding light on broader issues affecting African literature and culture.

3. What are the potential implications of Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* for contemporary discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature?

Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in his play, *The Placenta of Death*, has important implications for contemporary discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature. Ukala's use of folk elements challenges the dominant narratives and stereotypes that have long been associated with African literature and culture.

Firstly, Ukala's use of folk elements provides a way for African writers to reconnect with their cultural heritage and to represent their experiences in a more authentic and nuanced way. By incorporating elements of African folklore and traditional beliefs, writers can challenge the notion that African literature is limited to stories about poverty and conflict.

Furthermore, the use of folk elements can also help to challenge negative stereotypes that have been associated with African culture, such as the belief in witchcraft and other supernatural forces. By representing these elements in a more complex and nuanced way, writers like Ukala can challenge simplistic and harmful stereotypes that have long been associated with African culture.

In addition, the use of folk elements in African literature can also contribute to the overall diversity of contemporary African culture and literature. By incorporating a wide range of cultural influences and traditions, writers can create works that are more representative of the richness and diversity of African culture. Overall, Sam Ukala's use of folk elements in *The Placenta of Death* has important implications for contemporary discussions of cultural identity and representation in African literature. The use of folk elements can challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes, and contribute to a more authentic and diverse representation of African culture in literature.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Placenta of Death* by Sam Ukala is a play that explores the concept of *folkism* and its significance in the Benin culture. Ukala emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional customs and beliefs, even as modernization threatens to erode them. The play highlights the tension and struggle for power between the rich and the poor leading to the fall of Owodo Kingdom as well as the use of folktales, dances and singing in portraying the rich culture of the Edo tribe. Overall, *The Placenta of Death* is a thought-provoking work that invites readers to reflect on the role of tradition in a rapidly changing world and to consider how we can navigate the tensions between the rich and poor.

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