

DISCOURSE ON INTERNAL COLONIZATION AND THE DRAMATIC TWIST IN ESIABA IROBI'S HANGMEN ALSO DIE

Okoroafor P. Ayenoya & Otsemobor Gabriel

Department of Dramatic Arts

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author: paokoroafor@oauife.edu.ng

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Abstract

This study examines the paradoxical nature of postcolonial Africa, where the departure of colonial powers gave way to internal colonization that continues to cripple the continent's development. Focusing on Nigeria, the research reveals that despite vast natural resources, the country struggles with underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality since independence in 1960. Government incompetence, corruption, and mismanagement are identified as significant contributors to Nigeria's woes. Through a critical analysis of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* (1989), the study highlights the country's dilemma and the impact of poor leadership. The play employs key dramatic twists, notably the hangman's refusal to execute condemned graduates, the revelation of the murderers as unemployed intellectuals, and the ironic death of a corrupt chief at the hands of his victims, to subvert audience expectations and expose the real perpetrators of violence. These twists reframe "hangmen" as the political elite who execute citizens through poverty, joblessness, and ecological ruin, thereby deepening the play's critique of internal colonization. The study demonstrates Irobi's use of theatre as a medium for social critique and change. Findings underscore the urgent need for Nigerian leaders to prioritize good governance, transparency, and accountability to break the cycle of internal colonization and foster sustainable development.

Keywords: Government incompetence, corruption, mismanagement, sustainable development, postcolonial Africa, leadership accountability, dramatic twist, internal colonization

INTRODUCTION

African drama and theatre are powerful tools for development, serving as a reflection of society and a catalyst for change. It goes beyond entertainment, as Otsemobor (2018) aptly puts it: The business of drama is play, but the dramatist does not play with this business, knowing that it is aimed at not just entertaining but also educating, enlightening, and instructing the audience or reader towards

leading a better and more productive life (225).

Nwabueze (2021) further restated this position when he notes that "theatre is art and art is life." (18). Through its unique blend of storytelling, music, and performance, African theatre can educate, inform, and inspire audiences, shedding light on pressing issues such as colonialism, inequality, and social injustice. This submission suffices as the art

takes on historical events of any nation and the world in general through the enactment of past events and situations. It also serves as a developmental tool as lessons are derived from satirical plays. Africa's independence from colonial powers didn't necessarily bring the freedom and development many had hoped for. Instead, it paved the way for another form of colonization, where the same oppressive systems that existed during colonial rule continued to hinder the continent's development. This has led to various societal issues, including economic struggles, corruption, and social injustices. This phenomenon, referred to as "Internal colonization," perpetuates inequality, suppresses dissent, and undermines development. This, consequently, has led to a situation where the masses are exploited and oppressed by those in power and has resulted in various forms of resistance, agitation, and conflict, as different groups demand greater autonomy, resource control, and representation.

As the giant of Africa, one would expect to see a frantic effort of emerging leaders to ensure speedy development in all sectors of the nation. But the reverse is the case as the train of leadership adopts either a snail-paced movement, a back-and-forth, or a zigzag mode of economic development. This is not oblivious of the rulership style adopted by the ruling class in Nigeria that has weaponized poverty and used it to suppress, subdue, repress, and subjugate its citizenry. Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's vast natural and human resources, the post-independence era has been marked by underdevelopment, poverty, and inequality. The political elite who assumed power after colonial rule have replicated colonial structures of exploitation, thereby subjecting citizens to a new form of domination and internal colonization. This is

evident in government incompetence, corruption, mismanagement of resources, environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, and the systemic neglect of youth development. Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* (1989) dramatizes this dilemma, yet scholarly discourse has not fully interrogated how the play's dramatic twists expose internal colonization as a slow, systemic execution of the masses by their own leaders. There is therefore a need to examine how Irobi uses dramatic structure to critique postcolonial leadership failure.

This paper therefore sets out to:

1. Conceptualize internal colonization in postcolonial Nigeria by interrogating how Irobi dramatizes elite exploitation, ecological degradation, and the systemic "execution" of citizens through poverty, joblessness, and neglect in *Hangmen Also Die*, using the Niger Delta as a paradigm.
2. Deconstruct Irobi's dramatic twists to reveal their structural and thematic function in subverting audience expectations and shifting culpability from the seven condemned graduates to the corrupt political elite as the true "hangmen" who perpetrate violence through policy and theft.
3. Assess the dramaturgical role of theatre as a medium for social critique and advocacy, evaluating how Irobi deploys revolutionary rhetoric, chorus, poetic testimony, and role reversal to position theatre as a tool for civic education and demand for good governance.
4. Establish contemporary resonance by connecting the play's depiction of compensation fraud in the Niger Delta and the plight of unemployed graduates to ongoing struggles against environmental injustice, resource control agitation, and youth unemployment in 21st-century Nigeria.

The focus of this paper, therefore, relates to the internal colonial status of Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*. It analyses the issue of internal colonization of the vast majority of Nigerians by the elite few who took over rulership from where the colonial hegemony left off, and the paper uses the Niger Delta region as a paradigm. Internal colonization, in this context, denotes a form of systemic oppression and marginalization perpetrated by those in positions of power within a nation, often under the guise of leadership. This phenomenon involves the exploitation and domination of citizens by fellow citizens, resulting in the suppression of rights, freedoms, and opportunities. Internal colonization is characterized by a disconnect between the ruling elite and the general population, with leaders prioritizing personal interests over the welfare of the people. This concept is distinct from traditional colonization, where external forces exert control over a colonized people. Instead, internal colonization highlights how power dynamics within a nation can be manipulated and exploited to maintain control and dominance over certain groups or populations by those indigenous to the nation.

The past few decades have seen a growing interest in literature characterized as postcolonial. Works that interrogate the dynamic between imperial settler cultures and the displaced and subordinated native inhabitants. This complicated dynamic can include not only the experience of direct colonization but also the internal colonial hegemony that persists even after official colonial rule has ended. In the aftermath of independence, the new leader takes on the cloak of master and uses this assumed position to marginalize the vast majority of the citizenry. The ruled, on the other hand, resist this marginalization, and consequently, a confrontation ensues. Roth (1988) succinctly captures this confrontation when he notes that

The two struggle for domination, for the recognition of the strength of their respective individualities. The loser of the struggle is the one who decides that life is more important than the recognition originally sought. This person abandons the fight and is made a slave who recognizes the sovereignty of the master. In other words, the loser allows the animal's desire for self-preservation to take precedence over the human desire for recognition (100).

This tussle never ends so long as the desire for one's humanity persists, and this tussle has its root in the colonial era. In *the Empire Writes Back* (1989), Ashcroft et al note that the struggle for domination "emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre" (2). These criteria remain relevant today for most of what is considered postcolonial literature. Increasingly and interestingly, however, dramas produced from within the colonized populace are being viewed through a postcolonial lens, not only as an example of the cultural assumptions of the elite that make subordination of poor populations possible, but also as a form of postcolonial critique offered from within the dominant group, a critique of the centre culture of corruption, of theft, oppression, and suppression of the dominated, from the centre itself. Such is the case in much of the writing of Nigerian writer Esiaba Irobi, a revolutionary playwright who, through his writing and as Mugo (2010) argues, decided to:

take sides with individuals and groups who are denied a voice in naming themselves and the world around them by the violation or suffocation of their imagination, as well as through exclusion from the production process (146).

Furthermore, he takes sides with those whose fervent opposition to internal colonization is most evident in his works. His play, *Hangmen Also Die*, illustrates the sometimes-violent tensions brought on by an invented, unlegislated system of discrimination, oppression, repression, and intimidation by the hegemonic powers of the Nigerian politicians. Historically, tensions between the ruled and the rulers have often been characterized by violent encounters. Fanon (1963), the Martinique-born colonial analyst, argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the relationship between settler and native cultures is inherently one of violence. "Their first encounter was marked by violence," he wrote, "and their existence together, that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settlers, was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons" (36). Indeed, in Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, violence, both perceived and realised, permeates the narrative. However, in this instance, this violence is not between the native and the settler as opined by Fanon (1963), but between the native rulers and the ruled, between the oppressors and the oppressed, the suppressors and the suppressed - both citizens of the same country.

Unfortunately, however, the political powers that be have dehumanised the ruled by depriving them of the necessities of life. Consequently, their human rights are depicted as unjustly, violently, and corruptly violated and corrupted by the oppressive few who wield the instrument of authority. This play evokes this inherent violence not simply as one group acting on the other, but rather, as a phenomenon fundamental to the social dynamic perpetrated by internal colonization. The play's exploration of themes such as corruption, violence, and social injustice resonates with contemporary debates on decolonization and social justice and makes ironic use of the title, *Hangmen Also Die*, foregrounding the violence at the heart of the

colonial dynamic and illustrating the destructive forces the system visits on the Nigerian populace, most of whom are living below the poverty line. Irobi's work is characterized by its use of revolutionary rhetoric and dramatic structures to convey the message of social change. The play's portrayal of the Nigerian condition is both poignant and thought-provoking, highlighting the need for a more just and equitable society. The author draws on existing evidence that gives further validity to the struggles of the Nigerian people against an oppressive government. It sheds light on the desperation and frustration that can drive individuals to take drastic actions when they feel marginalized and oppressed. According to Buah (1978), in categorizing the classes of people, he places the oppressed as "the other class of people."

Those who formed the bulk of the world's population had nothing which they could call their own. Their lot had always been to work for their masters, to remain poor, earning just enough to keep bone and flesh together. In ancient times, they were the slaves, in the Middle Ages, they were the serfs; and in the modern capitalist countries, they were the wage earners (125).

This class divide is a recurring pattern throughout history. The oppressed, who form the majority of the population, are often left with nothing but their labour, while the ruling elite exploit them for their own parochial benefit. This dynamic is evident in the play, where the ruling class, represented by Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, prioritizes their interests over the needs of the community. He is subsequently murdered by a group of young men who accused him of embezzling compensation funds meant for the entire community. This narrative echoes the real-life struggles of many communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region where the play is set, and where oil exploration has

ravaged the environment and impoverished the people whose salaries failed while government officials grew richer. Although not explicitly stated, the play portrays the fear of the oppressive rich who would not sleep because the oppressed poor (Other) are awake, as hunger prevents them from sleeping. The rich man, as represented by the character of Chief Isokipiri, will live in constant fear of the poor and will always employ the services of the hangmen to guard him against the oppressed poor who themselves have been turned into hangmen of some sort. This then becomes a vicious cycle of dog-eats-dog mentality. Fanon (1963) explained that this fear of a “terrifying future” in the minds of the white settler (*in this instance, the oppressive rich*) grows as the discontent of the native population (*the poor masses*) rises and seeks out what it has long been denied (35–36).

Irobi's play, *Hangmen Also Die*, sheds light on the struggles of marginalized communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region. The play revolves around a community that suffers greatly due to the activities of oil workers who pollute their waters and destroy their farmland while extracting crude oil. After prolonged agitation, the community received compensation of 3 million naira, which Chief Isokipiri had embezzled, sparking outrage among the youth. They eventually murdered him, leading to their arrest and imprisonment. This narrative highlights the theme of internal colonization, where a powerful group exploits and manipulates the marginalized for selfish gain. The play illustrates how a small elite controls power and resources, while the majority are left to struggle. This phenomenon is reminiscent of the historical exploitation of Nigeria's resources by colonial powers. However, in this play, it is no longer the colonial powers but the internal colonial powers that the people are left to grapple with.

THE NIGER DELTA CONUNDRUM

The Niger Delta region has been plagued by decades of oil exploration, resulting in environmental degradation, poverty, and social injustice. The once-thriving fishing and farming communities have been decimated, leaving residents struggling to survive. Despite the region's vast oil wealth, the local population sees little benefit, while multinational corporations reap huge profits. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa, a renowned writer and activist, fought tirelessly for the rights of the Ogoni people, highlighting the devastating impact of oil exploration on their land and livelihoods. His activism was met with brutal force, and he was eventually executed by the Nigerian government in 1995. Saro-Wiwa's legacy as a victim of internal colonization serves as a powerful reminder of the dangers of unchecked corporate power and government oppression. Today, the struggle for justice and equality in the Niger Delta region remains ongoing. The Nigerian government continues to face criticism for its handling of the region's resources and its treatment of activists. As Hill (2012) aptly notes, the culmination of colonial rule failed to deliver the anticipated prosperity, freedom, and opportunities that many had envisioned. Instead, the promises made by nationalist leaders and the political class who assumed power after independence remained largely unfulfilled. This sentiment is echoed in his assertion that “the end of colonial rule had not brought with it the prosperity, freedom and opportunities that many had hoped it would, or which had been promised to them by nationalist who had demanded independence on their behalf and the political clans who assumed power once it had been won” (8). Nigeria's struggle to achieve meaningful development despite its vast oil wealth is a paradox that has left many disappointed and frustrated.

The Niger Delta region has been plagued by poverty, environmental degradation, and insecurity, despite being the backbone of Nigeria's economy. The region's inhabitants have been forced to take matters into their own hands, with some resorting to oil bunkering, kidnapping, and other forms of crime. The failure of government to address the region's needs has led to a sense of hopelessness and frustration among its people. The playwright, Esiaba Irobi, sheds light on the complexities of this situation in his play. As earlier noted, the play highlights the corruption and impunity that pervades Nigeria's system, where those in power exploit the country's resources for personal gain. The character of Chief Isokipiri, who embezzles community funds and flaunts his wealth, is a stark reminder of the rot that has set in. The play also shows how the oppressed can be used against each other, as seen in the character of Yekinni, the hangman, who is forced to carry out the bidding of the oppressors. Most importantly, the play also touches on the theme of Internal colonization, where the ruling elite exploit and oppress the masses, leaving them in a state of poverty and despair. This is replicated in real-life situations, such as the recent currency crisis, where citizens were forced to deposit old currencies into their bank accounts but could not access new currency – a situation that led to widespread hardship and suffering, with many Nigerians left feeling helpless and frustrated.

Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die* and the Niger Delta's Struggle

In the course of the play, a character who goes blind as a result of the activities of miners relays his ordeal:

It was one morning. We woke up to see the sea heaving. The sea was roaring, its face black with anger. The sea was boiling. On its blue surface was something thick and pungent, something like mud. But it was oily, oily like petroleum jelly. It surged like the lava from the

armpit of the ocean until it embalmed our little creeks. Covered it. Conquered it. Condoned off the mouth of the freshwater spring from which we daily drink. Our plants began to die. Our roots to rot. Our seeds shriveled. We fled. In canoes. But somewhere before Opukiri, our canoe capsized in an ambush of water hyacinths. Everything we own was lost except our lives ... so we swam ... but little did we know that the water had been poisoned by the film of rancid crude oil where we saw our faces as we swam ... three days later, I could no longer see the sunlight. ... I, who once showed strangers the way through the creeks, am now led by the hands (*pulls his little son up*) by my son, with a walking stick ... to beg for coins daily... (97).

The character of the blind man serves as a poignant example of resilience. His testimony about losing his way in life, despite once being a guide for others, is a powerful metaphor for the struggles faced by the community. The destruction of their farmlands and livelihoods has forced them to adapt and find ways to survive, holding onto hope that one day, their community will experience development and prosperity. The scenario depicted in Irobi's play eerily mirrors the existential crises faced by the Niger Delta inhabitants. The play's themes of corruption, greed, and abuse of power are stark reminders of the region's struggles. Irobi's work serves as a powerful commentary on the Nigerian condition, highlighting the need for accountability and justice.

The play's portrayal of a community seeking justice for Chief Isokipiri's misdeeds resonates with the Niger Delta's experiences. The region's rich oil wealth has been exploited for decades, leaving its people impoverished and marginalized. The work highlights the desperation and frustration that can drive individuals to take drastic actions. His legacy serves as a call to action for new-generation

playwrights. By using their platform to speak truth to power, they can inspire change and promote social justice. Through their work, they can amplify the voices of the marginalized and hold those in power accountable for their actions. The conversation between the doctor and the hangman reveals the murderers' unwavering conviction and audacity. Despite facing capital punishment, they show no remorse or regret for their actions; instead, they seem resolute and unapologetic:

Yekinni: (*oblivious of his interruption*) But do you know what I saw last night when I looked at the faces of these boys in the moonlight?

Doctor: Guilt?

Yekinni: No.

Doctor: What did you see?

Yekinni: Defiance.

Doctor: Defiance?

Yekinni: Defiance! (*the convicts begin to hum a song*) Do you know what attracted me to their cell in the first place?

Doctor: No

Yekinni: A song. They were singing. As they sang, their voices swept across the face of the mind like a sea breeze on a cold night when the moon decides to peep into the soul of the ocean, and becomes a lantern for the lonely fisherman; it was as if cold dew was descending on my head. (20)

The murderers' demeanour as reported above suggests they believe their actions were justified, and they're willing to accept the consequences. They are prepared to put their life on the line for a just and upright society. This conviction is rooted in their perception of injustice and exploitation, which fuels their desire for retribution. Their audacity is evident in their unapologetic stance, even when faced with death. This boldness stems from their conviction that their actions were necessary to address the injustices they suffered. This portrayal highlights the complexities of

morality and justice, raising questions about the nature of right and wrong in situations where individuals feel compelled to take drastic action in response to systemic injustices. As a voice for the voiceless, Irobi's play underscores the importance of art in shaping societal narratives. His unique writing style, which is striking and poetic, brings to life the struggles and resilience of the Niger Delta people. Through his characters, Irobi masterfully exposes the complexities of human nature, revealing the motivations behind their actions.

The Community's Resolve

The community's determination to persevere in the face of adversity is a testament to its strength and resilience. Despite the challenges they face, they remain resolute, refusing to give up in the face of oppression and marginalization. Their story serves as a powerful reminder of the human spirit's capacity to endure and overcome even the most daunting challenges. Irobi's portrayal of the community's struggles and resilience is a masterclass in storytelling. Through his characters, he sheds light on the complexities of human experience, revealing the depths of human emotion and the power of the human spirit. His work serves as a powerful commentary on the Nigerian condition, highlighting the need for justice, accountability, and development.

Irobi's thought-provoking play (*Hangmen Also Die*) explores the themes of corruption, greed, abuse of power, and terrorism in postcolonial Nigeria. The play is a scathing critique of the Nigerian condition, highlighting the country's struggles with governance, security, and economic development. Through the lens of revolutionary violence, Irobi examines the complexities of social change and the role of the artist as a prophet, critic, and advocate for change. He explores the use of violence as a

tool for revolution, highlighting the desperation and frustration of the masses.

Analysis of Esiaba Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*

The word “Hangmen” in the title, *Hangmen Also Die*, immediately calls to mind the imagery of persons whose business is to kill or murder fellow humans by hanging, with the feet left dangling till death comes calling. The play’s first lines evoke this gruesome imagery of men who are to be hanged. The opening lines begin with a death sentence letter from the military administrator of the Izon State, authorizing the death by hanging of 7 citizens of the state. According to the play, their crime was the murder of “one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima of Kalahari in Izon State” and consequently are expected “to be hanged by the neck until dead” (10). However, in a twist of irony, the hangman, whose duty is to hang condemned criminals, refuses to perform his duty. His shocking response when asked why he did not perform his duty was: “Warden! (curses violently) If you think say I go take this my hand hang those boys (points) you dey waste your time (sic)” (13). Irobi evokes in the reader the feeling of anxiety of wanting to know why the hangmen would refuse to carry out their assigned duty and picks up the story at the tale, forcing the reader to question the direction of the narrative. The seven convicts who later, in the progression of the play described themselves as “been marginalized out of existence” (47) and identified themselves, using various epithets such as head-hunters, suicide squared, Kamikaze, leftovers, renegades, murderers, cadavers (48) etc. are, from their utterances, graduates who after years of study in the university and bagging degrees in their different fields of study are unable to put food on their table and lead a decent life. Norbert Oyibo Eze et al succinctly assert that Irobi, in the play *Hangmen Also Die*, articulated the flaming and thunderous path Nigerians seem to be walking

today due to oppressive economic laws and oil politics of self-aggrandizement, which have left millions of educated and uneducated youths floundering in diverse unventilated rooms of unemployment and poverty

Waritimi Tamuno alias Mortuary, for instance, holds a first-class degree in Statistics and has been unemployed for the past six years (49). The same applies to Atiemie Waribo alias Moshe Dayan, who holds “a master’s degree in Political Science” with a “life ambition” of becoming “an ambassador or this nation’s representative at the United Nations,” but alas, ending up “picking locks and removing window panes” and “an expert in climbing through windows no matter how tiny” (49). Labomie Allagoa alias AYATOLLA KHOMEINI, graduated with “an LL.B. and passed out from the Law School five years ago” and “hoped to become a high court judge wielding a mallet” and sadly ends up with “an axe and overfed necks to battle with” (50); Tekena Ikutubosin alias HYDROCHLORIC ACID has an “M.Sc. in Microbiology”, Konji Amakarama alias TETANUS TETANUS is “a fully qualified mechanical engineer” and “have been unemployed for seven years”, Accidental Discharge whose real name is Fubara Igonikon has a “B.A. in Social Welfare and an M.A. in Guidance and Counselling. He was sacked from the police force for being overqualified”; R.I.P. has a B.A. in Sociology, an M.A. in Anthropology. And a Ph.D. in Criminology” (51). The seven members hold degrees with which to change society for good if only they were meaningfully and gainfully employed. Unfortunately, they are dehumanised and made to resort to criminality. They are dehumanised to the extent that they become violently inhuman in their own actions. Their political leaders, the new colonial masters, in their parochial interest, destroyed the promising future of these ambitious youths – youths that resorted to crime because of a brazen denial of their future by corrupt politicians. With their

hopes and aspirations drowned in pessimism, they labelled themselves with sundry epithets like “murderous vampires, hangmen, outlaws,” with Mortuary’s sad and pathetic closure of their bleak future when he opines that “Every dream we have you have stolen from us” (52). This statement evokes bleakness and a horrifying future for the world of the play, where graduates had their hopes and dreams dashed by their leaders. Irobi succinctly tells us of the two groups that exist in the world of the play: the few politicians culturally associated with safety, plenty, affluence, and well-fed, and the poor masses, hardly thought about. Indeed, the title of Irobi’s play becomes one of violence created by the corrupt politicians in the world of the play, where threat and danger loom. Nothing is worse than the future of the youths’ metamorphoses into that of crime and criminality. A society where the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, with a near absence of the middle class, is aptly described in this play by Irobi. He describes a society where the poor get frustrated to the extent of getting “tired of living a lifeless life” (69). He also describes a sorry state where few individuals in positions of leadership corruptly share money meant for an environmentally degraded community without thinking of the negative financial and health implications to the inhabitants. Yekinni’s account of the cause of the crisis is worth quoting in detail:

Some time ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which, as you know, is a riverine state, the sum of three million naira as compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms, their homes, and their lives. But the man they killed, one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, connived with his councilors and local Government Chairmen to confiscate the 3 million naira. The Councilors took one million

and shared it among themselves. The Local Government Chairmen shared one million. The Commissioner himself, one million. No single citizen, no matter how wretched, got a single kobo ... And that Commissioner they killed is Superintendent Daminagbo’s godfather. He smuggled Daminagbo into the Prison Service after Daminagbo failed the West African School Certificate in 1962. He also gave him ₦200,000 out of his own one million (22-23).

The poor have also been pitched against the poor in this nepotistic world of the play. Yekinni, a poor man, is employed to carry out the dirty work of corrupt politicians. His job, as earlier explained, is to hang criminals. His employers, who in this instance are the real criminals, employed him to hang graduates that they, in their vicious acts, have dehumanised and transformed into a life of criminality. The institutional failure is rightly traced to their doorstep. This is because, by their acts of commission and omission, these youths, after years of joblessness, are toughened, hardened, and humiliated into human beasts and “can no longer be lured back into society by the softer indulgences of those living on the other side of life.”

(70). Consequently, Irobi introduces violence in the play’s society and shows a society that has apparently gone berserk as a result of the corrupt and oppressive acts of the political leaders. Deeper into Irobi’s play, it is made clear that the safety of the family is contingent upon a political organization that attempts to maintain separate spheres for the affluent politicians and the poor masses. He further pictures a society where the poor, as reflected in the character of Dimeari, resort to crime because, as he puts it, “I am a reject of the society. A piece of human furniture standing unobserved in the living room of a blind world. I feel empty. I feel impotent, I feel useless” (72). It is this apparent loss of their

beingness and their die-hard spirit to assert their “human desire for recognition” that consequently turned the society into a jungle of survival of the fittest with crime as a common factor between the rich and the poor. The insatiable and corrupt politicians become the hangmen in the true sense of the word, having stolen the future of the poor, thereby turning them into victims of corruption, exploitation and dehumanization. They have, by their corrupt acts, maim, destroyed, dehumanised, traumatized, oppressed, suppressed and killed by instalments the poor masses in the world of the play. And this much Tekena Ikutubosin alias HYDROCHLORIC ACID tells Erekosima: “And what have you been doing all this while? What has your generation been doing all this while if not hanging us” (120)? Consequently, Erekosima’s final statement that “Hangmen ... Also... Die” is an apparent irony.

His instalment hanging of the poor turns full cycle and he is also hanged. This seeming moment of ironic statement is important in establishing the title and is a fundamental underpinning to the entire internal colonial enterprise. Hence the overwhelming response by the **Chorus**: “Hang him, he has been hanging us all this (sic) years” (121). Little wonder, Eze and Ezeugwu (2018) argue that the play “projects the current state of anomie faced by many Nigerians in the twenty-first century” (15).

DRAMATIC TWISTS AND THEMATIC IMPACT

Irobi employs several dramatic twists that subvert expectations and deepen thematic concerns:

First is the issue of the Hangman’s Refusal. This twist, which is central to the play, occurs when Yekinni, the state executioner, refuses to hang the seven youths. This inverts the power

structure. The hangman, instrument of state violence, recognizes the condemned as victims of a larger crime. The twist reframes “hangmen” — the true executioners are the corrupt elite who “hang” citizens through poverty, joblessness, and environmental destruction. This forces the audience to interrogate who the real criminals are, reinforcing the theme of internal colonization. Another twist in the play is that of Graduates as Murderers; the revelation that the condemned are highly educated but unemployed creates tragic irony. Their degrees symbolize wasted potential and betrayal by the state. The twist shifts blame from individual criminality to systemic failure. It dramatizes how internal colonization dehumanizes youth, turning promise into pathology. Thematically, it argues that corruption kills futures, not just bodies. The chief who embezzled ₦3 million in compensation was killed by those he had impoverished. The twist exposes cyclical violence: the oppressed become oppressors when pushed beyond endurance. Yet Irobi avoids glorifying murder; the boys’ execution shows the state’s monopoly on violence remains intact. The twist thus critiques both elite impunity and revolutionary violence, emphasizing that without justice, “*Hangmen Also Die*” - no one is safe in a broken system. Furthermore, the interlude of the blinded villager is a twist in narrative mode - from political drama to ecological lament. It shifts focus from elite crime to environmental violence against the poor. This expands the play’s theme: internal colonization is not only economic but ecological, as leaders collude with multinationals to destroy livelihoods. The twist makes the abstract “oil spillage” visceral, linking governance to survival.

Collectively, these twists create a dialectic of guilt and innocence. By withholding information and reversing roles, Irobi prevents easy moral judgment. The audience must confront complicity: the state hangs bodies;

the elite hangs souls. The twists, therefore, intensify the play's central theme - that internal colonization is a form of slow, systemic execution, and unless accountability is restored, the nation remains on the gallows where everyone, including the hangmen, will eventually die.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

Irobi's play serves as a powerful commentary on the Nigerian condition, highlighting the need for accountability, transparency, and social justice. By shedding light on the struggles of marginalized communities, the play encourages audiences to think critically about the systemic issues that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Irobi's play, therefore, sheds light on the desperation and frustration that can drive individuals to take drastic actions when they feel marginalized and oppressed. For instance, the plight of jobless graduates as depicted in the play is a pressing concern, with far-reaching implications for the nation's economic and social stability. Again, as portrayed in the play, some graduates resort to menial jobs or crime to survive, underscoring the desperation and frustration that often accompany unemployment. The situation calls for urgent attention from policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders to address the root causes of graduate unemployment and develop effective solutions to bridge the skills gap and create meaningful job opportunities. In conclusion, Nigeria's development challenges are complex and multifaceted. The Niger Delta region, in particular, has been ravaged by environmental degradation, health challenges, poverty, and insecurity. To break this cycle, Nigeria needs leaders who prioritise the needs of its citizens, promote transparency and accountability, and adopt a more inclusive and equitable approach to governance, ensuring that all regions and groups have a stake in the

country's development and decision-making processes. This requires a fundamental shift in the way power is exercised and distributed, prioritizing transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Dismantle Structures of Internal Colonization through Good Governance.** In line with Objective 1, Nigerian leaders must move from elite-centred extraction to people-centred governance. Transparency, accountability, and the rule of law should be institutionalized to end the systemic "execution" of citizens via poverty, neglect, and ecological damage dramatized in Irobi's play.
2. **Deconstruct and Expose Elite Culpability via Civic Education.** In line with Objective 2, government agencies, media, and civil society must publicly deconstruct how corruption shifts violence from individuals to systems. Public enlightenment campaigns should reframe "hangmen" as leaders who execute citizens through failed policies, embezzlement, and joblessness, thereby reducing scapegoating of the marginalized.
3. **Reposition Theatre and Arts as Tools for Social Critique.** In line with Objective 3, Departments of Dramatic Arts, NUC, and cultural agencies should integrate plays like *Hangmen Also Die* into civic education and public enlightenment. Theatre's use of chorus, poetic testimony, and role reversal should be deployed to reawaken civic consciousness and demand accountability from leaders at all levels.
4. **Achieve Environmental Justice and Resource Control in the Niger Delta.** In line with Objective 4, compensation for

oil spillage and ecological damage must be equitable, transparent, and community-driven. Multinational oil companies and government agencies must be held liable to restore livelihoods, while constitutional reforms on resource control should reduce the Niger Delta's experience of internal colonization.

5. **Systematically Address Graduate Unemployment and Wasted Intellectual Capital.** In line with Objective 4, government and the private sector must invest in targeted job creation, skills development, and entrepreneurship funding. The plight of Irobi's seven graduates with First Class degrees and PhDs must serve as a policy warning: wasted intellectual capital is a national security threat that fuels crime and resistance.

If these recommendations are implemented, Nigeria can break the cycle of internal colonization and move toward sustainable development where no citizen is executed by poverty, neglect, or corruption.

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