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Remembering Zulu Sofola: Great woman of theatre

By Yemi Olakitan

IN the 50 years of Nigerian independence, many theatre practitioners, dramatists and playwrights came on the scene to develop Nigeria's theatre. The late Professor Zulu Sofola, first female Professor of Theatre Arts in Africa was one of them. In looking at 50 years of theatre in Nigeria, we will be looking at the lives of those who have contributed immensely to the development of the stage performance.

Zulu Sofola was perhaps, the most important female playwright in Africa during her time. In a male dominated world where the voice of women seemed unheard and under-appreciated, Zulu Sofola stepped forward and distinguished herself as a literary icon and an excellent dramatist.

It was a dream that started from her parents. In those days, it was not fashionable to send female children to school. There was the fear that educating a girl-child might prevent her from getting a good husband. Zulu's parents made a different choice from the norm and sent their beautiful daughter to school not only in Nigeria but also in the United States of America.

Born in Isele Uku to the Okumabua family of Ogboutu quarters, Zulu attended secondary school at the Mary Mount College, Agbor, in Delta State before she traveled to the United States for her university education. She studied at Virginia Union Baptist Seminary and The Catholic University of America. It was while she was in the US that she met her husband, the late Professor Adeyemi Sofola. They both came back home to Nigeria and began their careers in teaching at the University of Ibadan where she later obtained a PhD in Theatre Arts.

Zulu Sofola was a woman with a strong passion for African Drama and Literature and she used her privileged education to tell the story of her people through her numerous works. She also projected the culture in such a way that those that belong to other culture were able to appreciate her people. The theatre scholar used her plays to address issues of justice and individual freedom. She also used her talents as a playwright to explain the relevance of culture and traditional practices and their boundaries and limitations in human relationships and happiness.

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In a chat with one of the directors of Zulu's plays, Abiodun Abe, the Technical Director of the National Theatre of Nigeria, he said Sofola's plays are both culturally entertaining and educative. "They are largely traditional and instructive and they tell tales of love and royalty through tragedies and the various experiences of human life in such a way that readers and audience alike are both entertained and informed in one scenario or the other."

Abe began directing her plays in 1988. He directed *Wedlock of the gods* in 1988 and *Wizard of Law* in 1996, as well as *King Emene* in 1999. Other directors who have worked on Zulu Sofola's plays include Yomi Adebamigbe and Kunle Adewole who is the head of the Department of the Performing Arts in Jalingo, Taraba State University. Till date Zulu Sofola's plays are being performed in theatres in Europe and America.

Zulu used some of her plays to criticize the mistreatment of females, although some of her critics have portrayed her as a liberal feminist. They however acknowledged her status as a brilliant playwright.

In the play, *Wedlock of the gods*, the playwright questions the tradition that reduces women to a piece of property that could be passed from one man to another. This is aside addressing the issue of political savagery often exhibited by dictators. In *King Emene*, for instance, she exploits the themes of anger, jealousy and selfish ambition to mirror the evils of society.

She was the founding coordinator of the three arms of the Performing Arts department at the University of Ilorin, Kwara State. Each of the departments was headed by various professionals in their fields such a Dr. Bode Omojola who headed the School of Music, Chris Ugholo who was the head of the Dance School, while Professor Akanji Nasiru and Dr. Ayo Akinwale were both senior lecturers alongside Zulu Sofola at the Drama School. She ran a professionally bubbling theatre department that kept the university busy and she was an inspiration to all.

Zulu's writing style was simple and her deep knowledge of the people's culture reflected in her plays. In fact, her treatment of romantic love in her play is a reflection of true-life experience, as her storyline seems to mirror society. In *Wedlock of the gods*, Ogwoma falls in love with Uloko. The young stars strongly held on to a belief that the gods have ordained their relationship from the heaven and that they cannot part.

This story line seems to have a replay in Zulu's life when she met her husband who was from another tribe. Adeyemi Sofola was a Yoruba man while she was from Isele Uku in Delta State. There was opposition to the relationships by both families but Zulu and Adeyemi stood their grounds and they got married. Their strong love ended when Adeyemi died in 1996 after many years of marriage. At the funeral service, Prof. Zulu Sofola repeatedly asked what she was waiting for and in few months later she joined her husband. According to Abiodun Abe, "it seems that her storyline and plot in *Wedlock of the gods*, played out in her own life.

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