

PRODUCTION
— MEMOIR —
ITIABA

Effiong Johnson



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Introduction: Perhaps apart from the overwhelming challenges I had in the premiere production of my work *'NOT WITHOUT BONES'* in 1990, principally because I was not only dealing with a researched historical drama, but I was having to muster every creative weapon in my theatrical arsenal to contend with the over one hundred cast members; the next most challenging directorial experience I have had, came in the premiere of *"Itiaba"* in 2005. With a bent to present it as a ritual celebration, *"Itiaba"* drew out of me the most elastic stretches of my artistic, particularly theatrical prowess.

The Synopsis: *"Itiaba"*, meaning number Seven (7) in Ibibio language, is an excursion to the slavery era in human society. Predicated on the absolutes of imagination, the story of *Itiaba* dramatizes the raw pain and savagery of slavery in a family. While the *Ukaras* (name meaning rulers) are the perpetuated all-time masters, the *Ukuts* (name meaning sufferings) are the resigned victims in a continuum of pains, the pain of bonded enslavement. For generations, the situation had remained unchanged. For generations, the *Ukuts* could only pray to the "fathers residing with the children" in the same abode for a deliverer. For long the answer tarried. But on the Seventh day, of the Seventh month, in the Seventh year of the Seventh generation, *Itiaba* was born, with a mandate to put an end to the protracted cycle of pain and establish from his generation, a people decorated with liberty and peace.



Above:Itiaba takes on his tired father (by the sitting position and support on a walking stick) on the family history. This is to inform and rightly motivate him toward his mission. Note the position of strength of Itiaba which his character depicts.

Below: Itiaba again enjoys a stronger position not only with his focus on Ukut, but from his free access of his hands: Ukut is presented here as a weak old man, not only by his bent posture, but also by the freedom of only his left hand.





Above: A ritual enactment of dance-purification choreographed to sanctify the abode for the manifestation of the fathers. Note the use of space by the dancers and the height ranges which create aesthetic rhythm in the progression of the sequence.

Below: A dance celebration is orchestrated after the mission of Itiaba had been accomplished. Less ritualistic than the above which Itiaba's family remembers could only watch from a distance, the dance of celebration allows participants in the sequences of victory. Again note the equidistance in the distribution of the space between dancers. Note also the facial adornment of the dancers to establish ritual imperatives.





Above: The beauty of directing a crowd is in attaining a certain composition which allows for the faces of the casts to be seen (without masking) by the audience. The semi-circular position of the crowd around Itiaba and parents demonstrate support and protective agreement

Below: Itiaba's right hand is lifted to the heavens as the one, the only one unanimously believed to lead the affront against enslavement: his dedication and commission toward the common good enjoy unallowed agreement. Note the hand lifting by Ukut, Itiaba's father, his staff on the other hand which are well handled such that there is no masking.



The battle lines are drawn in the play between Itiaba and Aniekeme (name meaning who is capable?) while Mfoniso (name meaning Fortune or Good Luck) called “the field of the fathers”, is presented symbolically as the treasure that whosoever succeeds to get would have got fortunes. Aniekeme is therefore drawn into what surfacedly appears to be a romantic craze with Mfoniso, the same woman destined by the fathers for Itiaba as his exclusive “farmland”. In the final and really fierce fight between these “last of the origins”, Aniekeme is killed by the mysterious might of Itiaba, fighting with the combined strength of the innumerable spirits of the fathers.

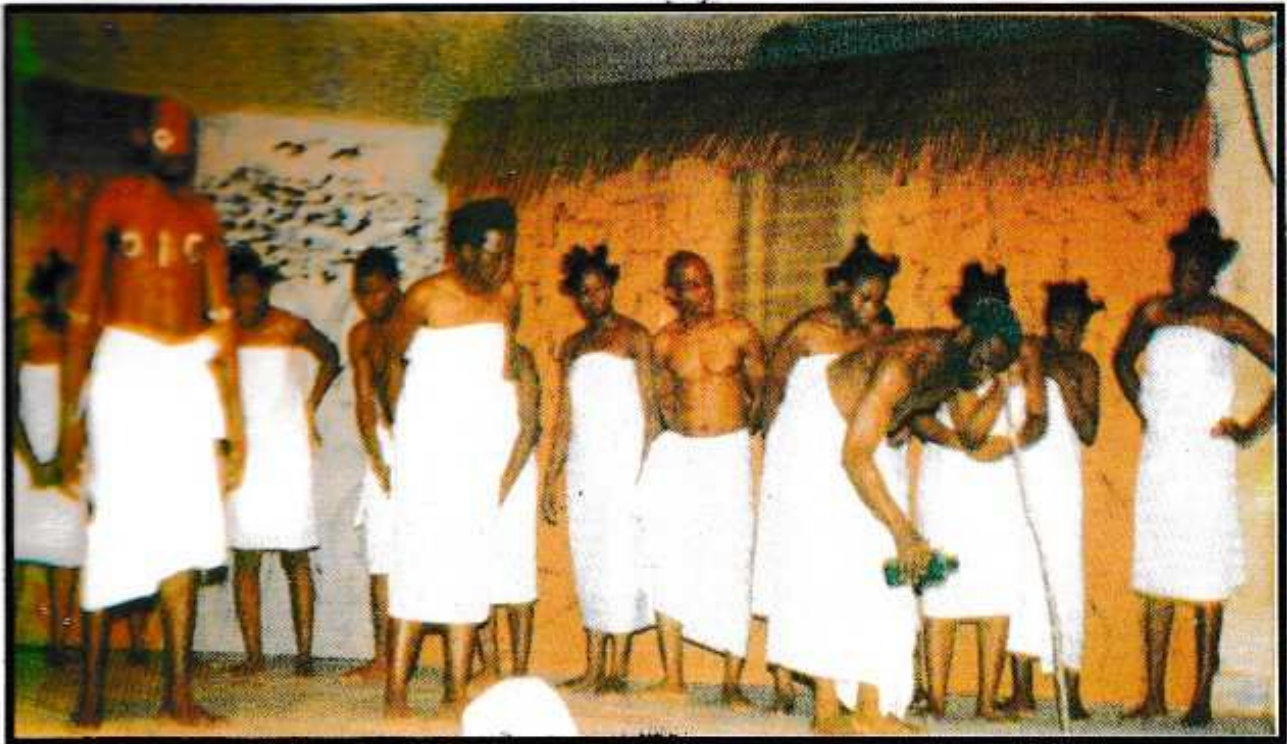
Audition and Casting: The journey in the production of “*Itiaba*” began as a year two (II) class production in the 2005 season of productions. The implication of this was that every cast of the about Sixty (60) cast members needed for the production, had to be drawn from only year two class. Unlike my experiences in both *Frogs At Noon and The Fight Has Just Begun*, which I had an open market to shop for casts, in “*Itiaba*”, the market was sizeably reduced to only a class. The audition was tough in the sense of finding approximations in the physical presences of attendees which suited the characters I carried in my mind-eyes. Approximations indeed they were, with heavy duty behoved on me to shape and sharpen them, as the case maybe, towards the attainment of the ideal statuses of the personalities of the envisaged casts of “*Itiaba*”. The task was arduous. Never had I drilled a people, demanded so much



Above: A teeming mass of ritual dancers in solidarity with Ukut, over the commission Itiaba must undergo for his divine mandate. Note Itiaba's position of yieldedness to the divine will and the sheer curiosity of mass believers.

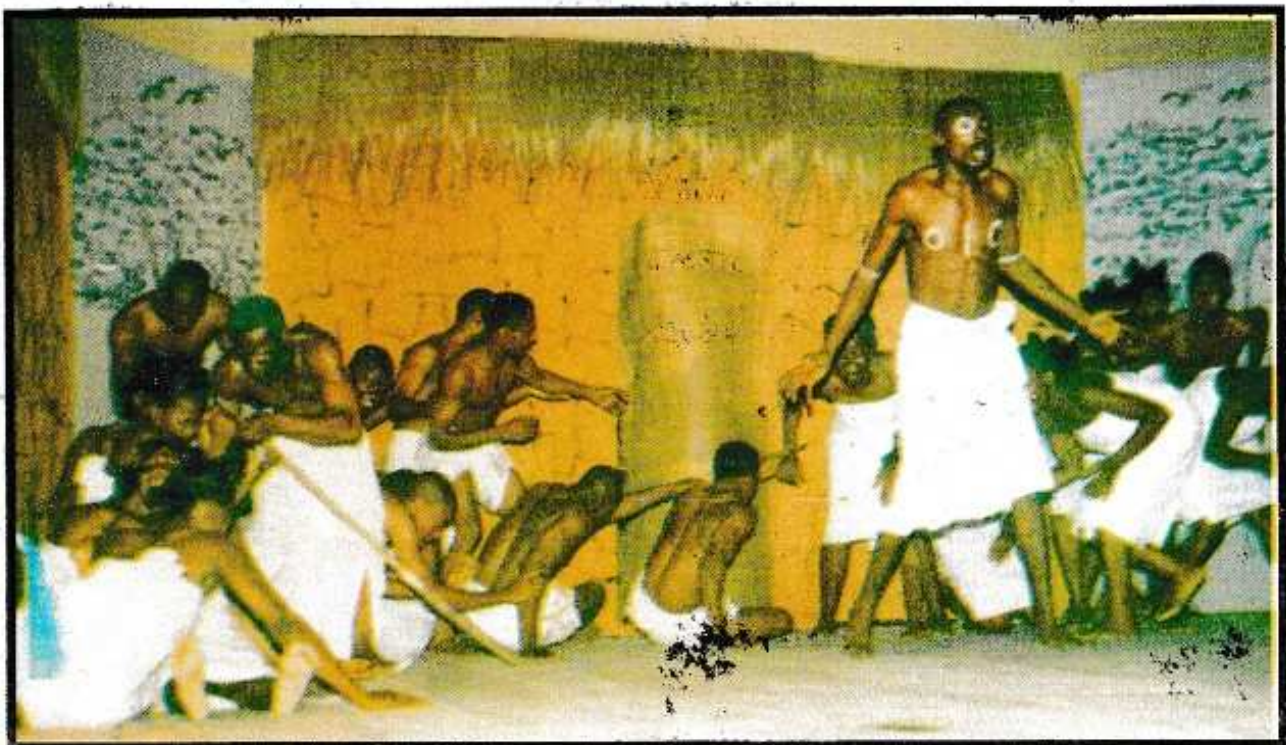
Below: The invocation by Ukut actually arouses believable expectation from the team. Note the eye contact of all in one direction expeting a response from the spirits of the fathers as appeased by Ukut. Note the attempt at exposing the majority of faces to the view of the audience which is a directorial principle on a proscenium.





Above: Itiaba's re-emergence as the long awaited messiah who would wrest freedom from the stronghold of Ukara, is celebrated in a ritual purification and dedication. The solemnity of the occasion is captured in the mood of the ritual celebrants.

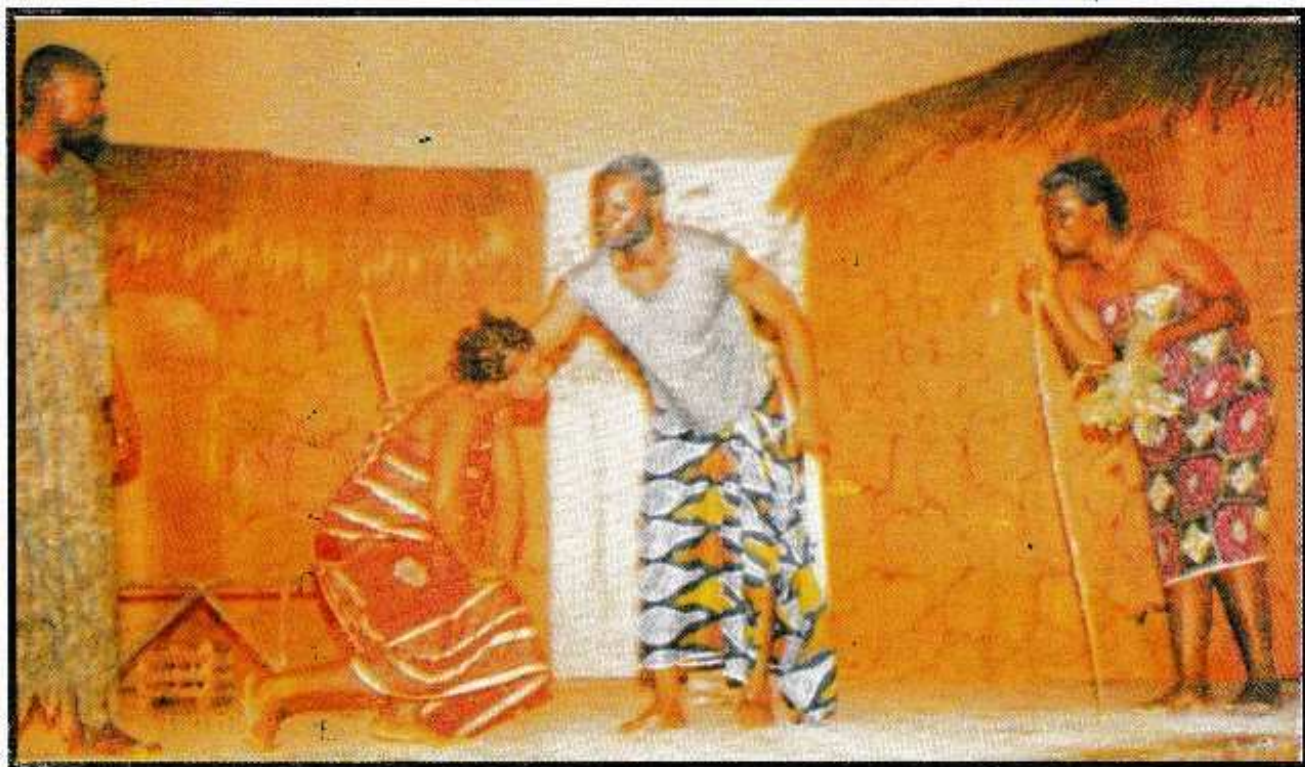
Below: The gods respond favourably to the invocation with sudden outbursts of lightning and thunder. The awe, fright and terror which seize the scene, make the ritual dancers duck for hiding. The shaking throws down many except Itiaba who suddenly becomes possessed in his mounted form as the long expected messiah with a divine mandate to birth freedom.



from a group of artistes or literally demonstrated too often to cast members, as I did in "*Itiaba*". At the end, I could safely say that I had the very best performers in a decade of experiences!

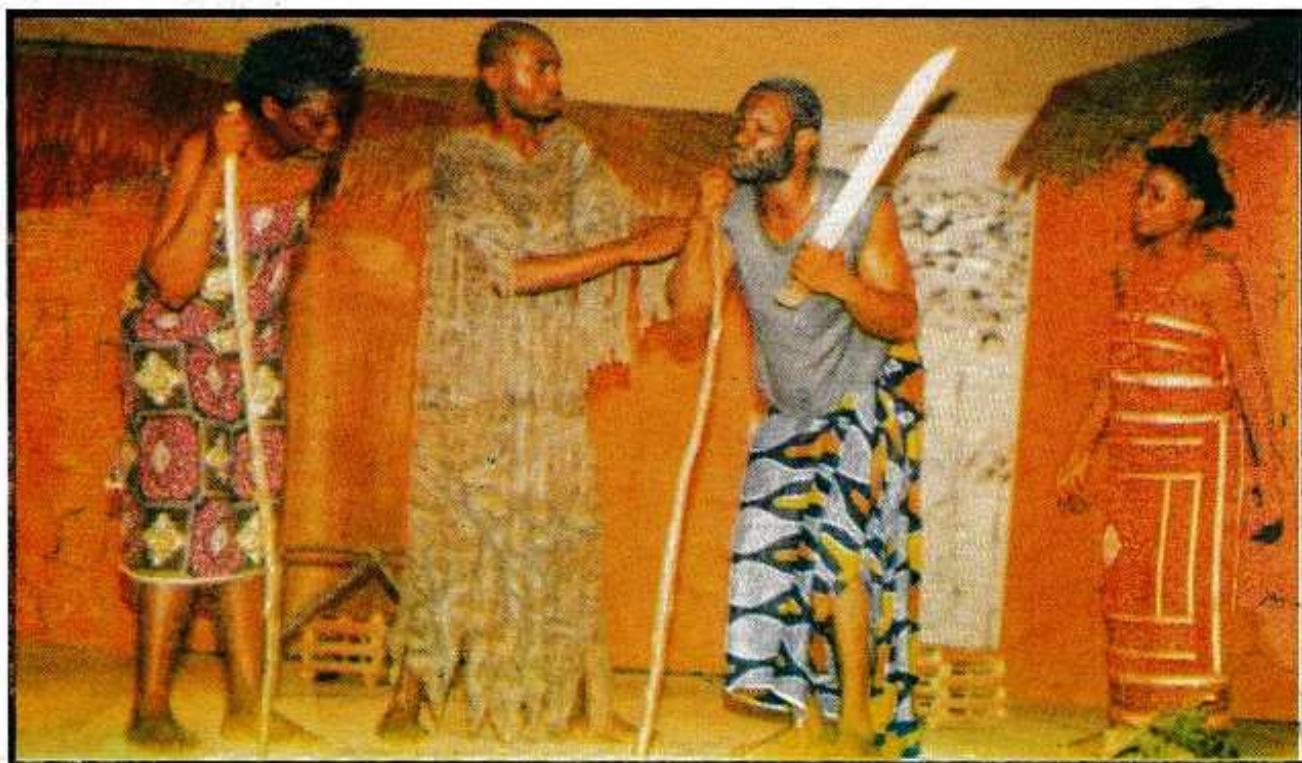
Rehearsal Schedules of "*Itiaba*". Also to be noted is the fact that in my directing experience, never did I have to rehearse one play up to eight weeks before performance as was the case in "*Itiaba*". This was the reason. The first four weeks was used for preparations for presenting the end of workshop assignment within the calendar allowed for the semester. At assessment, the Departmental Board was unanimous that the performance had what it took for it to be presented as a Convocation drama. And that was coming in another four weeks. Wise counsel demanded that the team didn't have to rest on their oasis for the four weeks. They rather had to keep rehearsing to maintain freshening readiness for the performance. So, while we rehearsed daily before the class production, we rehearsed twice weekly for the first two weeks of the rehearsals before the performance. In all occasions, every cast assembled for rehearsals whether they would appear on set for the night or not. In all occasions the prompt book was strictly kept by the stage manager, especially the column on attendance. To ensure that maximum co-operation was received from the students, final scores were reserved for and until the convocation performance.

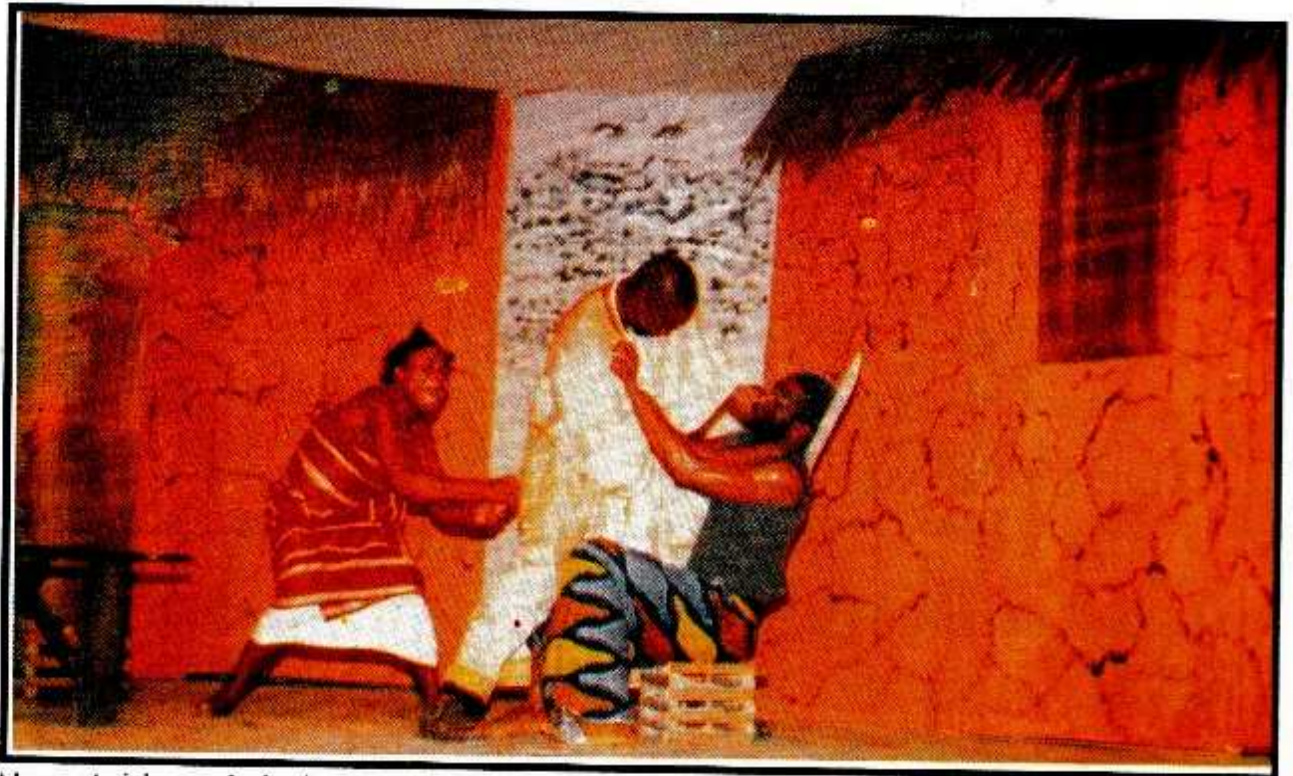
In sum, the schedule apportioned good time for meticulous blocking. Pro-rhythm movements in accordance with the lines, moods and



Above: Aesthetic pictorialism is achieved through this well-blocked composition. No doubt the bending girl Mfoniso enjoys the deserving emphasis here through her posture and touch by Ukut. The duo are perfectly balanced symmetrically by Itiaba and Mama respectively who flank the down-stage and Centre.

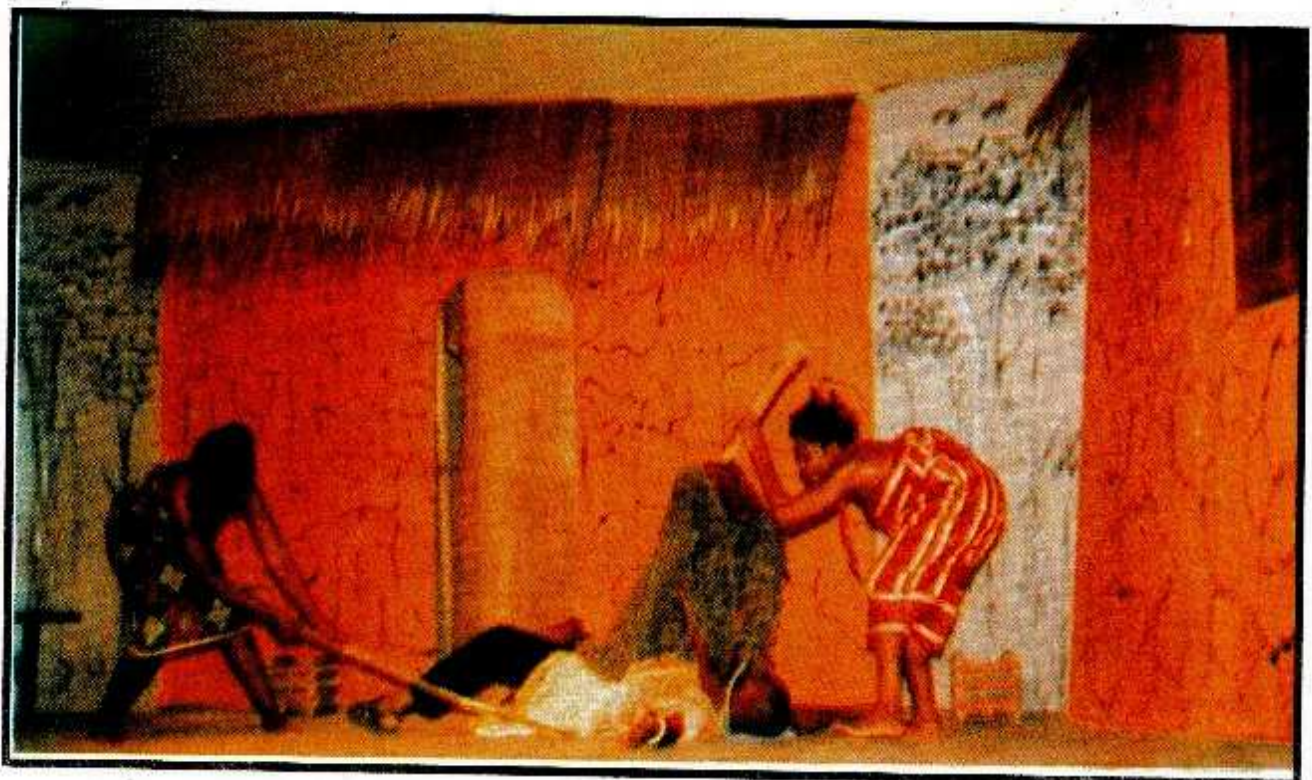
Below: The same method of achieving emphasis is given this time to Ukut in the same scene. Note the re-positioning of the casts above and below which accounts for variety for delectable playing. Note the bamboo seats which are appropriate props in a mud-walled, mat-roofed hut. These account for Aesthetic correlation in directing.





Above: Aniekeme, the lord and master, is unwittingly dragged to the abode of the fathers by the careful hands of fate and spirits so that Itiaba could use him to pay the supreme price for freedom for his family. While engaging in an attempt at strangulating Itiaba's old father, Itiaba's fiancée (incidentally wooed also by Aniekeme), takes side in defense of the slaves. Her deadly blow on Aniekeme's back saved the old man long enough for Itiaba to return to fulfil the wish of the fathers.

Below: Itiaba successfully kills Aniekeme after a fierce fight though. Down and helpless, Mama and Mfoniso gain access to pummeling Aniekeme's already finished body for all the years of their torture in the master's hand. Observe the killing scene played in upstage zone of the stage to allow for creative cheating for believability.



situations were uncompromisingly orchestrated. Lines were carried as they should be spoken strictly from the English Language perspective. Dances were choreographed by the expert with professional depth and essence. Songs were sung with the particular verve requisite for the occasion in the drama. The schedule addressed every need on the production script and made provision for all of them to receive due attention.

The Directorial Approach in “Itiaba”: It was in “Itiaba” that my Ph.D. work on “Performance Experiments...” had its most constructivist exemplification. First, though I was the writer of the script, I tended to 'exorcise' myself as writer from the passion of the work and rather approached it with creative independence. “Itiaba” was written in 1985, and here the production was in 2005, twenty years after. I chose the stance of an auteur director, and used the script as a raw material the beginning point of my investigative and interpretative conjecturings.

Second, I decided to work on a vision of the play as a ritual celebration. On the script, 'Itiaba' merely has an eight-person character, presupposing that only eight casts are necessary for its performance. But on the performance floor, it used about Sixty (60) casts to enact its celebrative essence.

Third, it was presented as an African Moonlight Story Theatre. The

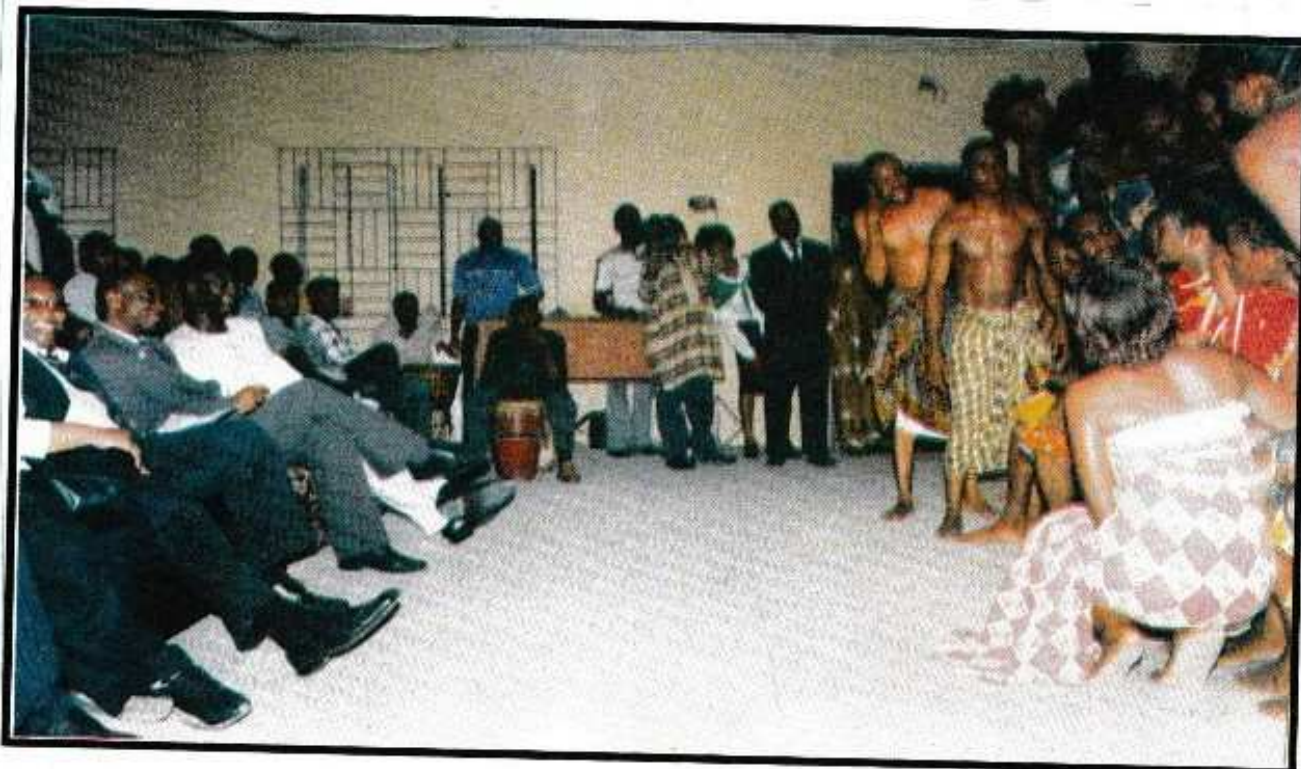
role of a narrator was created with lines written for that role. Moonlight games were built into the dramatic sequence, while the casts except Grandma, all began as African children, participatorily excited in a story situation. And the story here was that of "Itiaba".

Fourth, it heavily utilized the aesthetics of total theatre traditions. Ritual enactments, songs, dances, instrumentations, crowds, proverbs, ululations, magic, invocations, spirits- all had expressions in "Itiaba".

Fifth, the central metaphor approach was outstanding in the set. Beyond capturing the essence via a motif or two, the entire set with its attendant props, at once, convinced the onlooker as representing poverty. With cracked and patched mud-walls, thatched roof, local mats as door and window blinds, bamboo seats, the paraphernalia of poverty was in exhibition as a metaphor for slavery.

Sixth, Theodore Hoffman and Kenneth Cameron's "The Superobjective Approach", was superimposed on the interpretations of "Itiaba". The Superobjective in this case being Itiaba's mandate, namely, to bring to an end the dynasty of slavery and establish the freedom of Ukut. Other objectives of the drama were carefully identified and found convenient-links to the Super, for appropriate aesthetic flow.

Seventh, and finally, the proscenium distance with the audience was bridged by situating actions on the apron. Since everyone had one



Above: A cross-section of the audience here attests to the status of this command performance. On the front roll are Prof. Akaneren Essien, then Acting Vice Chancellor, University of Calabar, the NUC Executive Secretary, the Vice-Chancellor, University of Uyo, Prof. Akpan Ekpo and his wife Njeri Ekpo. The camera caught them at the moment of excitement.

Below: The casts sit in a form which frames up the number seven (7). The title of the play "Itiaba" meaning 'seven' (7) was directorially, through a master metaphor and symbolism, projected to the audience at the very beginning of the play. The effect here was to conjecture their minds in a decisive preoccupation for the theme and essence of the play to unfold.



struggle or the other in life-not necessarily enslavement-an identity via the dramatic vehicle of physical and psychological immediacy, was established. Itiaba, the character this time, played close to the people, to smear them with his profile, inspiration, guts and mandate, such that at the end, all could go back determined to face up to the challenges of life.

The Technical Aspects of "Itiaba": Itiaba had it going well in this aspect. The set design by Aniefiok Udombang, was a splendid piece of attraction (See the photographs and the film) the cracked mud wall, the thatched roof, provided an incredibly befitting stage environment for the performance. Udombang translated my vision for the set perfectly. The light designer, namely, Lilian Mba showed her proficiency and dexterity in this aspect. The magic scenes had the strobe giving desiring eerie atmosphere. The flash back was beautifully seen through the orange-eye of the super spot.

The pair of Charles Nwadiuwe and Thomas Etuk was even more forthcoming in the management of the sound elements. The effect of lightning and thunder, rainfall, the barking dog, the hooting owl, might vis-a-vis the chirping chorus of crickets-booming via heavy loudspeakers, added the spicy flavour quintessential to the aesthetic of "Itiaba". The cues were accurately handled, the duration were within aesthetic time. Even ritual chants and songs on stage from about sixty voices, came thundering in encapsulation each moment.

The costumes were simple, communicative and symbolic. Ekaete Ibuot truly deserved her grades in the design. The ritual costumes and their accompanying make-up were the most visually captivating (See the pictures). The make-up applications were incredibly believable. Ukut and Mma Ukut were completely transformed to their character-miense. Akan Johnson and Victor Ekieno playing boys in the flashback, had their ages beaten in by the makeup. They looked every inch boyish in the face.

The Audience of "Itiaba": Two sets of audience membership were recorded for the two different performances of "Itiaba". The first set comprised the staff and students of the Theatre Arts Department, other students of the University of Uyo and some members of the public. Because of the typical African Flavour "Itiaba" carried, there was a full hall with some standees in the two days of the run. This was the most knowledgeable audience and in that wise the most critical. The X-ray or post-mortem evaluation of the performance by members of the Departmental Board scored the show a unanimous excellent; and recommended it for the Convocation play for 2005.

The next set of audience was the group that attended the Convocation drama, particularly, those on the Convocation night proper. They were the V.I.P. Guests of the University on Convocation. People from the National Universities Commission (NUC), the Chancellor of the University and his royal retinue, the Pro-Chancellor and Council members, the Vice-Chancellor and Management Staff, University dons from other Universities and those from Uyo, Government of Akwa Ibom State Representatives, Press Members, University Of Uyo Staff And Students, Ladies And Gentlemen.

This elite group sat enraptured by the performance of "Itiaba", with many of them asking for its video tape at the end.