

# EZEULU: A NOH PLAY

*Waki:* A Government Official

*Waki Tsure:* His Son

*Shite:* 1.A Village Elder

2.Ezeulu

*Scene:* Umuaro, Eastern Nigeria

*(A stylised climbing-frame and pumpkin vine stand centre-stage and mUSICIans are seated on folding stools at the right. The Waki and Tsure enter, wearing richly coloured damask agbadas and caps.)*

*Waki.* The silent forests of the east *(Shidai)*  
unnerve me.  
They lead inexorably  
towards an unfamiliar past.

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towards an unfamiliar past.

I am a government official on leave with my son, *(Nanori)*  
visiting the scenes of my mother's youth.

The land is rich and fruitful, as *(Michi-yuki)*  
wide and wild  
as the images of her memory.

*Tsure.* The land is rich and fruitful, as  
wide and wild  
as the images of her memory.

*Together.* Giant trees and lush undergrowth  
give way to farmland -  
moist, fresh earth,  
red walled compounds  
with tall carved doors,  
and deep-rooted pumpkin vines.

*(They circle the stage.)*

At the village centre,  
the exposed roots  
of the timeless ogbu tree,  
seat of council  
for generations of elders.  
But, the sky is darkening  
The stark and steady  
lightning flickers.

The rushing wind shakes  
its flame.

The rushing wind shakes  
its flame.

*(Waki advances downstage.)*

*Waki.* How can this be; broken walls, fallen roofs,  
the scattered ashes of long dead fires. *(Tsuki-zerifu)*

*(The Shite enters, wearing a yellow loincloth under a white homespun ,toga' and a mask. On his head is a red ozo cap girdled with a leather band from which an eagle feather points slightly down. He picks a bunch of fresh pumpkin leaves from the vine on passing.)*

*Shite.* I am a son of the soil, *(Issei)*  
a man of Umuaro,  
whose greatness guttered  
in the days of Ezeulu -  
we were divided and confused.  
We were like the puppy  
who attempts to answer  
two calls at once  
and breaks its jaw.

Ezeulu was a proud man. *(Sashi)*  
The most stubborn of men  
was merely his messenger.  
Had he inherited  
his mother's madness?  
He expected everyone -  
wives, kinsmen, and friends -  
to think and act like himself.  
Anyone who denied his will  
was an enemy.  
But he feared  
the wrath of his god.

Ezeulu, Chief Priest of Ulu; *(Uta)*  
tall as an iroko tree  
white, like the sun.  
One half of him, man;  
the other, spirit.

Like his fathers before him,  
    he carried the chief god,  
Ulu, more powerful than  
    Idemili or Ogwugwu.  
At first he feared,  
    but the people sang support;  
the flute man  
    turned his head;  
the god possessed him.  
    Transformed into spirit,  
he stepped forward,  
    compelling even the four  
days in the sky  
    to give way to him.

Compelling the four days  
    to give way to him.

*Waki.* My father, what are you saying? *(Mondo)*  
    Why speak with such passion?  
When roof and walls fall in,  
    the ceiling is not left standing.

*Shite.* Who was Ezeulu to tell the god  
    how to fight against Idemili?  
He was no more than an arrow in  
    the bow of his god.

*Waki.* I have heard of Ezeulu,  
    who refused the white man's warrant,  
who spat out the morsel  
    fortune placed in his mouth.

*Shite.* Because of that proud rejection  
    Ezeulu was imprisoned.  
Two new moons came and went,  
    The sacred yams were not consumed.

*Waki.* The six villages  
    were locked in the old year.  
Under the earth the yams ripened  
    to be devoured by sun and wind.

*(A chorus of six or eight men enters, wearing deep-coloured ,togas‘ and carrying goatskins on which they seat themselves, stage-left.)*

*Shite.* Ezeulu was confirmed  
in his own conceit;  
some of the others  
turned to a newer faith.

*(The Waki and Tsure seat themselves on the ground, down-stage right.)*

*Chorus.* ,Go, my son, *(Sashi)*  
be my eyes and ears  
among the white men.  
Master their knowledge  
until you can write it  
with your left hand.  
If there is something in it,  
bring back my share.‘  
The world is a masquerade;  
to see it well  
you must move  
from place to place.

*Shite.* The white man is the masked *(Uta)*  
spirit of today.  
People from other places  
control the great markets.  
We have no share  
in his offices.  
We have no share  
anywhere.  
We must leave off dancing  
and join in the race  
for the white man’s money.  
Why should Ezeulu  
refuse the warrant?  
Why betray us?

With all their power and magic *(Kuri)*  
white men could not overrun us

*Chorus.* if we did not help them.  
The sacred yams went uneaten,  
Ezeulu refused to alter the ritual.  
Instead of harvest, famine stalked the land.

*Shite.* Customs can be changed  
when they work hardship on the people.

*Chorus.* Our fathers freed  
the children of widows from slavery.  
We no longer carve  
our faces like *ozo* doors.

*Shite.* Ezeulu would not relent. *(Sahi)*  
The harvest was still- born.  
His wrath was turned  
on the enemies of Ulu.  
Umuaro waited  
in shocked silence,  
expecting retribution;  
a hand stretched out against them.

*Chorus.* A puff-adder suffers *(Kuse)*  
every provocation  
before unlocking  
its seven fangs  
one by one.

*(Shite dances.)*

Obika, Ezeulu's son  
was suddenly struck dead.  
The flute and song of Umuaro  
which had supported the priest,  
shaking the earth  
with a multitude of voices  
and the stamping of countless feet,  
died away altogether.  
Shaken and reeling  
Ezeulu retreated  
into the haughty splendour  
of a demented high priest.  
Old rituals and prayers  
often forced themselves out  
in eccentric spurts  
through the cracks in his mind.

*Shite.* I will not be anybody's  
Chief but Ulu's.

*Chorus.* O God, who protects and punishes,  
                  cleanse our household  
of all defilement  
                  spoken with my mouth,  
seen with my eyes,  
                  heard with my ears,  
stepped on with my foot,  
                  and the defilement of my children,  
my friends and kinsmen.  
                  Let it follow these leaves.

*(Weakly tosses the leaves to the ground.)*

*Shite.* The man who brings home *(Rongi)*  
                  ant infested faggots

*Chorus.* cannot complain  
                  when he is visited by lizards.

*Shite.* He who uproots  
                  the pumpkin vine,

*Chorus.* destroys the homestead  
                  and leaves it deserted.

*Shite.* No man, however great,  
                  is greater than his people.

*Chorus.* No man ever wins judgement  
                  against his clan.

*(The Shite exits and the climbing frame is removed from the stage. The Waki, alone, faces the audience for his speech.)*

*Waki.* Liquid thunder rumbles, stark, *(Machi-utai)*  
                  sudden flashes of  
                  lightning follow.  
A man moves  
                  in the obscure darkness.  
By the flickering light  
                  near the exposed roots  
of the *ogbu* tree,  
                  he recreates a ritual.  
It is an apparition,  
                  perhaps a vision,  
A figure  
                  out of former times.



Completing his circle,  
He disappears into the shrine,  
triumphant  
over the sins of Umuaro,  
burying them  
deep in the earth.

The villagers too,  
have run their circle.

The leaves, so green,  
so lucent with life,  
are smashed  
and trodden into the dust.

Smashed and trodden  
into the dust.