

PERSPECTIVES ON THEATRE IN AFRICA

By

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Abstract

Some experts think that the Ancient Greeks were the first people to put on theatre performances, in the 6th century BC. They performed dance dramas in honour of the god Dionysus, which developed into tragedy plays. The stories were drawn from myth or ancient history and were written in verse. However, the old belief that drama originated from the Greeks is now belated as events show that, the origin of drama could be traced to Africa, specifically in Egypt who celebrated their drama in commemoration of the death and resurrection of the gods – Osiris. Drama and theatre in Africa, from all indication, have the same origin like drama and theatre in other parts of the world. If one therefore, considers that the theatre which finds its subjects mainly from folklore – in aggregate of myths, legends, traditions, stories, then one can say unequivocally that, a specially Black African theatre has existed since the beginning of African civilizations (Boutah 1952:397). The diversity of performance traditions in Africa is a result of the huge spread of peoples and cultural traditions that form the cultural makeup of each country. These traditional performances have been used as a means of self-expression and empowerment by peoples, especially those facing hostile political or social circumstances.

This study, therefore, seeks to appraise the nature of theatre in Africa against the backdrop of its religious, social and political relevance to the people, and to debunk the claim by some Euro-centric scholars that African drama is not true drama.

Introduction

This research work x-rays the nature and functionality of Traditional African Theatre in contra-distinction to the contemporary or western dramatic forms. This arises from the critiques of some western or Euro-centric scholars and apologists who argue that traditional African theatre is not authentic drama.

Theatre, whether western or traditional form has been described as “an experience – a shared indivisible event that includes both those who perform and those who observe” (Edwin Wilson, 2). This means that there is a close affinity between the performers and the audience in any theatrical event. Similar to the above, A. B. C. Duruaku submits that, theatre which evokes wider range of ideas than drama, “is the entire dramatic output including the written and the performed” (2). Theatre is also a place where dramatic performances take place or the art of putting a piece of dramatic work into action for people to watch (Nwabueze, 122).

Like drama and theatre, traditional African theatre according to Anthony Graham-White is, “primarily the drama of the community: prepared by members of the community according to well-established modes and performed or on behalf of the whole community” (13). Traditional theatre is not only community-oriented but has been described by Yomi Onope, “as live performances, typical of festival celebration, music, dance, and other supportive arts that made the traditional African theatre multifunctional (171). Traditional drama

can be regarded as a prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers (Victor Turner, 26) or to what Duruaku refers to as, "indigenous performing art forms that have not been corrupted or polluted by modernization over the years" (11).

The Nature and Functionality of Traditional African Theatre

Traditional African theatre pre-dated the civilization that came with the imperial forces. This is because indigenous African theatre was and still deeply rooted in the day-to-day activities of the people. It is part and parcel of the whole conception of existence and it is a communal activity. It is, therefore, fallacious to assume that African theatre as it exists today in its various forms has its roots in the western dramatic form because a great deal of evidence confirms that a true African theatre evolved with the people themselves. What is not speculative, though, is that the collision of cultures, according to Hayes Mabweazara resulting from the influx of imperial forces did strike a big blow to the face of African theatre (1).

Irrespective of the collision and pollution of our culture by the belligerent western cultures, Africa indisputably has had some forms of art that expressed the collective aspirations of her people. To this end, Steve Biko believes that, "even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day Africans" (43). That traditional African theatre is undoubtedly embedded in songs, dance, music, folktales, proverbs, ritual performances, acrobatics, and other traditional ceremonies is an indication of the fact that Africans have always been theatrical. Traditional theatre with its communal outlook has for centuries been an important social phenomenon by playing some vital roles in religion, ritual and social practices; as an art form and as a vehicle for passing on information and traditions, as well as for expressing ideas (1).

The traditional African theatre has also been described as a festival theatre housing the total theatre performance aesthetics – a theatre of collective rhythm. For Abdul Rasheed Abiodun Adeoye, "the total theatre idiom, in all its ramifications, is the essence of African theatre, and being telephonic and even within its monologic theatricals, the total theatre idiom welds many performance kernels into one unique, communicative, entertaining and educative performance (2). What Adeoye is saying is that, traditional African theatre being a total theatre embraces and/or uses many elements such as dance, song, acrobatic, mime, folklore, music, symbols, etc. to accomplish its numerous dramatic functions.

These elements too, are obvious properties remarkable in both traditional African drama and western or European dramatic form.

The African theatre, therefore, relies heavily on total theatre aesthetics of dance, music and song, puppetry, poetry, acrobatic display, incantation and invocation, evocation and chanting, mime and pantomimic dramatization, etc. All these elements, as Adeoye submits, have become a recurring decimal of artistry in the poetic justification of African theatrical aesthetics.

The vibrancy of the traditional theatre in Africa, therefore, cannot be over-emphasized. The literary and popular theatre traditions have, no doubt, been influenced markedly by the multiple aesthetics of the traditional African theatre which, according to Ebong, "is the

oldest and most indigenous form of theatre in Africa... as theatre which elements and traditions are deeply rooted in the ontology and cosmology of the African society" (Traditional African Theatre: A Review, 3).

Theatre in Africa

African theatre, whether traditional, historical, and contemporary dramatic forms ranges from sacred or ritual performances to dramatized story-telling, literary drama, or modern fusions of scripted theatre with traditional performance techniques (MNS Encarta, 1). According to Boutah, "drama and theater in Africa, from all indication, have the same origin like drama and theatre in other parts of the world. If one considers that the theatre which finds its subjects mainly from folklore – in an aggregate of myths, legends, traditions, stories, then one can say unequivocally that, a specifically Black African theatre has existed since the beginning of African civilizations. To support this view, Labouret and Travele say that, "there is great deal of evidence to show that, in Africa, there are unique social institutions and artistic achievements worthy of study" (397). These artistic achievements find their expression in an abundant oral literature, consisting of myths, legends, stories, short pieces in prose or verse, rhymed or free, and finally satires. This is no more puppet show or exhibition of conjurers, magicians, and animal charmers, as is found in certain parts of Africa, but of real drama with a perfect sense of plot and writing aiming through its actors, to develop a given theme. Expressing further the artistic nature of traditional theatre, A. O. Onyeneke posits that, "every presentation of traditional drama (masquerade dance) includes creative activity; and the dance and movement pattern of masquerades and the music that goes with them are other forms of art and artistic pleasure." Traditional theatre's major attribute which it shares with contemporary theatre is entertainment. Masquerading, therefore, is a form of entertainment and play. Exemplifying this, Simon Ottenberg notes that, "the okunkpo masked performance of Afikpo area is a full play with a sequence of movements involving a series of songs, short acts, pantomime and dancing, dramatizing events of the season, touching on the lives of the Afikpo community. It is seen as a morality play which stresses traditional values and upholds personal and general standards of behaviour and co-operation (9). Every actual masquerade performance embodies an organized theatrical presentation. Researching on the masquerade performance of Ozubulu/Ihiala areas of Anambra state, Nnabuenyi Ugonna observes that, "Mmonwu Oza Ebuna" is a full theatrical performance, broken up into stages and periods of action presenting some ritual event it not a written plot; and that the masquerade is a play – a make belief presentation in so far as it presents the spirit of the dad in a visible way. Onuora Ossie Enekwe also adds that, the Igbo masking is theatre, not because of the subordination of belief in the supernatural agencies. In fact, the supernatural element is an essential aspect of all adult masking and no matter how entertaining a mask is, the Igbo tend to underrate it, if it lacks supernatural aura" (77).

The diversity of performance traditions in Africa, according to Encarta, "is a result of the huge spread of peoples and cultural traditions that form the cultural makeup of each country (1). National boundaries do not usually reflect traditional territories – in any one nation-state there may be hundreds of different ethnic groupings and tribal languages. Many

of these cultures have rich oral and ritual traditions, aspect of which has survived into contemporary society.

Traditional performances, so to say, have been used as a means of self-expression and empowerment by peoples facing hostile political or social circumstances. For instance, Tiv (Nigeria) used traditional Kwagh Hir puppetry to voice opposition to political victimization during the 1960s.

The Origin of African Drama and Theatre

From time immemorial, drama has been known among many societies. For instance, among the ancient Persians, plays were performed in courtyards; but they were distinctly connected with religious ceremonies of that time. The Old Greeks had a wonderful drama which began with the worship of Dionysus, involving processions, revels, and tableaux were designed to invoke the blessings of the god of wine (Brocket, 67). The Egyptians also celebrated their drama in commemoration of the death and resurrection of the gods – Osiris. Other countries like, Rome, China, India, Japanese, among others, also had good drama most of which originated from religious activities.

Like the drama of most western nations, African drama also stems from religious and traditional festivals. Festivals like religion and art have been used by man of the earliest time. Religious belief was an essential part of life in Black Africa and initiation into their various rites often entails participation in music and dancing. Gustave Cohen in Traore writes that, “every religion produces drama and every cult voluntarily and spontaneously takes on dramatic and theatrical form” (14). Theatrical performances are regulated by the seasonal calendar and the days appointed for festivals. The performance can sometimes translate itself completely into action, which is closely interwoven with ritual.

The Diverse Origin of Drama and Theater

Like its western counterparts, the origin of drama and theatre in Africa emanates from diverse sources vis-à-vis religious ritual origin, mimetic origin, story-telling origin, and festival origin. These are briefly discussed hereunder:

The Religious Ritual Origin:

Although there is no definite written information on the origin of ritual, it is being speculated that the need for man to appease and communicate with the supernatural world, led him to find ways to establish the link between the spirit world and the human world. Duruaku states that, “man conceived the supernatural entity in the image of man himself, a being that has feeling, a mind, and resembles man, yet is mysterious and invisible” (13). He says, religious ritual, therefore, results from series of actions demonstrated by man in order to create a conducive atmosphere for a meeting of the human and spirit worlds, so that gods/spirits would act on human requests, pleas, and activity. It is a sacred, even though it may possess some characteristics of drama like mimesis, synthesis, and temporalness.

The Festival Origin

A festival is a ceremonial event involving an entire community or communities. This happens when a community organizes itself to express its desires and celebrate its

achievements. As this ceremony goes on, many dramatic activities are enacted including singing, dancing and acrobatics, story-telling, merry-making, among others.

The Story-Telling Origin:

In the story-telling form, the single narrator usually acts out the role switching from character to character as he tells the story. The more the story-teller does this role-switch well, the more adroit he become. Storytelling may metamorphosize into satiric drama when it is able to grow in entertainment and interpretative values.

The Mimetic Origin:

Drama also means any kind of mimetic performance which may have evolved from the imitation of the action of humans. Man, for instance, is mimetic being. He loves to be someone else. It is believed that the early man, who was primarily a hunter, tried to deceive animals by disguising himself to look like them. This act as a cover up as well as disguise him well enough to deceive the animals to enable him (the hunter) attack it.

If in the course of time, the stories of this feat are re-enacted to preserve race memory of for didactic purposes, and for entertainment, it may become drama, especially when it has been subjected to re-interpretation and enrichment. Through the disguise theory, the story of the hunt, and/or the legends about heroes, past, folk drama may have evolved (Duruaku, 15).

STAGES OF THEATRE IN AFRICA

The Traditional State:

Traditional drama refers to indigenous performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernization over the years. These performing arts are rooted in the cultural traditions of the various countries of Africa. Many of these cultures have rich oral and ritual traditions, which have over time survived into contemporary society. As a matter of fact, these traditional performances have in recent decades, been used as a means of self-expression and empowerment by peoples facing hostile political or social circumstances.

The Alarinjo players, for instance, are the first documented professional African Theatre troupe which developed from the Egungun (ancestral spirit) masquerades and were performed from the 16th and 17th centuries in the Yoruba city of Oyo in Nigeria. The traditional Kwagh-Hir puppetry of Tiv in Benue area of Nigeria was also used to voice opposition to political victimization during the 1960s.

The Colonial Stage:

Drama and theatre during the colonial period were basically political – protesting the colonization and inhuman treatments of the colonial masters. Theatres in Africa were revolutionary in nature and were concerned with fighting the bourgeoisie, group of persons, institutions and government policies which have denied individuals their right as human beings and subject them to inhuman treatment and psychological torture. Africa, as a result of colonialism suffered dehumanization, oppression, poverty, disease, slavery, social and political dependence. The continent was also partitioned into fragments and the colonialists instituted the culture of racial superiority, brain drain, and social/economic degradation.

Colonization led to the suppression and outlawing of many indigenous art-forms, such as drumming and dancing. The colonial attempt to stifle indigenous African belief

systems led to many protests or revolutionary plays by many Africans. For instance, Hubert Ogunde's plays such as *Strike and Hunger* (1945) and *Bread and Bullets* (1951) took issue with colonial exploitation. Esau Mthethwa wrote social satires about local life in the Zulu and Xhosa languages. In the 1920s research and production of plays based on traditions of the people were encouraged in Senegal, South Africa and other African countries that have been polluted with plays of western extractions.

The Independence and Post Independence Period:

At the end of the World War II, many African countries began a fierce struggle for the achievement of independence through nationalist movements in every nation-state. These nationalist movements produced a number of African playwrights who merged African theatrical traditions with European forms. Some of these plays are still widely performed and read in many parts of Africa. For instance in Nigeria Wole Soyinka wrote his first plays in the late 1950s. *A Dance of the Forest* was written to the Independence Day Celebrations in Africa in 1960. Hubert Ogunde wrote *Strike and Hunger* (1945) in protest of a clash between Nigerian workers and their colonial bosses. The University of Ibadan at a stage, produced a generation of playwrights, including John Pepper Clark, who was the first to make explicit connections between Greek tragedy and African ritual in *Song of a Goat* (1963), and Ola Rotimi, who dramatized Oedipus myth called *The Gods are Not to Blame* (1968) in Yoruba language.

According to MNS Encarta, "independence spawned efforts in some countries towards radical social reform into which playwrights were sometimes co-opted" (3). In some others, the new regimes soon inspired playwrights to use theatre as a vehicle for political opposition and in some cases for mobilization. Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland was known for her association with the social reformist government of Nkwame Nkrumah. Her political leanings were followed by two other important Ghanaian playwrights, Joe de Graaft and Ama Ata Aidoo.

In Sierra Leone, Raymond Sarif Easmon in his play, *The New Patriots* (1966) to attack ethnic prejudice and power mongering in his country. Ugandan playwrights Robert Serumaga and Byron Kawadwa sought symbolic, mythical, and abstract forms in which to express their opposition to the regimes of Milton Obote and Idi Amin. Other playwrights of repute abound in other parts of African continent, concerned with political struggles in their various countries against the colonial masters.

Conclusion:

The content and style of African theatre have over the years been influenced by both African dramatic traditions and western theatre. The influence of Western styles is the result of colonial presence, education in European languages, and the training of artists abroad. The degree and manner of foreign influence, no doubt, contributed immensely to the under-development of drama and theatre in Africa, especially in those countries where the Europeans had both stronghold and stranglehold.

However, thanks to the independence of African nations, which has made many African countries to re-establish their theatrical art-forms that were hitherto, polluted for many decades.

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