

THE YORUBA THEATRE FROM RELIGIOUS AND RITUALISTIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

*Many available studies on Nigerian drama and theatre attribute their development in the country to rituals, religion and festivals. In a more specific submission, Ogunbiyi (ed.) (1981 & 2014) opines that the Nigerian theatre and drama, especially the traditional Yoruba theatre, developed or evolved through vast religious festivals and rituals which are rooted in the culture and tradition of the people in the country. To this end, this study tends to probe into the ritualistic background of traditional Yoruba theatre so as to ascertain the extent to which it has been influenced by rituals over the period of time. In doing this, the study will employ the theory and concept of Vicky-Ann Cremona (2007) in **Festivalising Process** (2007) and **Festivals as Poly-Systems**, proposed by Temple Hauptfleisch (2007).*

Introduction: The Ritual Origins of Yoruba Theatre

Any discourse on Yoruba theatre is not complete without a focus on its ritual source. These ritual performances are intricately attached to Yoruba culture and tradition. Besides, these rituals demonstrate the cultural heritage and customs of the people, revealing the people's strong belief in the gods and goddesses, heroic tales of their forebears, and other communal conventions. With post-colonial transformation of most Yoruba societies, there is a shift in the thematic focus and performance aesthetics of rituals and festivals from pristine traditionalism to the contemporary concerns of socio-political and economic experiences of the people. Considering the vast land mass and the numerous ethnic groups in Nigeria, theatre is closely associated with the traditional ceremonies and religious activities of the various tribes, as well as their ways of life.

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No doubt, Yoruba ritual and festive observances have activated communal essence of the people with a view to promoting continuity and harmony between the living and the dead, as well as between the terrestrial and the celestial. This ritual developed first, as a channel of appeasement by the people, to communicate with their supreme 'creator' *Olodumare*, and other lesser super-powers in the pantheons of gods and goddesses, who they believe are in charge of their survival. To this end, ritual is used to bridge the 'transitional gulf' (Wole Soyinka, 1979:150). In Soyinka's view, transitional gulf maintains the harmony and co-existence among the living, the dead and the unborn. As pointed out by Benedict Ibitokun (1995:23), the gulf between the divine and the terrestrial was, for the first time ever in history, bridged by Ogun (the iron and creativity deity).

In the light of the significance of ritual to the development of Yoruba theatre, Philip Adedotun Ogundeji (2000) classifies Yoruba drama/theatre into ritual drama and de-ritualised drama. Ritual drama is sacred while de-ritualised drama is secular. This is consistent with Victor Turner's (1982) ritual structure of pre-liminal stage, liminal stage and post-liminal stage. All these stages crystallise into holistic theatrical performances during the ritual process. The ritual structure, from the liminal stage to post-liminal stage, as presented by Turner, conforms to the following view by Louise M. Bourgault (2005:106):

A ritual is patterned enactment (a set of acts/procedures) involving the performance during occasions not given over to daily and technical routine, of specified symbolic behaviours and the manipulation of sacred objects, all of which are innately related to the society's beliefs about or its relationship with the cosmos. The performance of rituals is said to strengthen social solidarity by reminding performers of their place in the cosmos, their connection to universal forces, and their ties with one another.

The above understanding of the nature and structure of ritual makes it more convenient for scholars and critics such as Oyin Ogunba, Philip Adedotun Ogundeji, and 'Biodun Jeyifo to offer a discourse on the history, taxonomy and sociology of Yoruba drama and theatre with its origin traced to ritual and festive observances. This position, therefore, further upholds Yemi Ogunbiyi's (2014: 3) view that:

(...) the specific origins of Nigerian theatre and drama are speculative. What is, however, not speculative (...) is the existence, in many Nigerian societies, of robust theatrical tradition. The primitive root of that tradition must be sought in the numerous religious rituals and festivals that exist in many Nigerian communities (...).

Despite the divergent views on the nature and process of rituals among the Yoruba people and by extension, African people, there is a consensus that ritual is integrated in some festivals and festive observances. This is because the appeasement of deities by the Yoruba people does not happen in isolation. It often takes place during seasonal celebrations, which, in most cases, fall within various festivals, where ritual and rites must be performed. The spiritual and social essence of this is to ensure communal harmony and continuity.

With the passage of time and post-modern influence, some ritual performances have transcended their sacredness with some secular innovations. These innovations, however, do not affect the cultural and mythical potential of these rituals. These de-ritualised performances, as a result of post-modern influence, assist in the transformation from ritual to festival. An instance of this situation is found in cultural performances in some Yoruba communities and cities such as Ibadan (with the festive performance of Oke'badan). The innovations observed in some ritual process and festival observances, therefore, validate Margaret Drewal's (1992: 8) view that:

Practitioners of Yoruba religion are aware that when ritual becomes static, when it ceases to adjust and adapt, it becomes obsolete, empty of meaning and eventually dies out. They often express the need to modify rituals to address different social conditions. Sometimes, change is the result of long deliberations; oftentimes, it is more spontaneous. Many revisions are not particularly obvious unless the observer is thoroughly familiar with the ritual process by having followed a number of its performances, much in the same way a critic follows the productions of a dance or theatre piece. Other kinds of modifications are more glaring...

Over time, many rituals and festive observances have been consistently performed and have stood the test of time. These rituals, apart from being

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relevant to socio-cultural existence of the people, are systemic to their growth and survival. For instance, in Ile-Ife (the presumed cradle of Yoruba race), there are numerous ritual and festive performances to ensure continuity and harmony among the living, the ancestors, and the deities.

The performance of these festivals falls in the category of folk theatre which shifted focus from direct appeasement of gods and goddesses to the establishment and sustenance of relationship between the terrestrial and the celestial. The Yoruba theatre, by this time, has been taken to the community square, market place and water front. Like in the performance of dramatised ritual or ritualistic theatre, acting, singing, drumming, dancing and incantations are permitted during the performance of folk theatre or drama; however, offering of sacrifices are not mandatory. The ghost-mummers performance in Old Oyo Empire initiated popular performance of drama and theatre in Yoruba land. What is known today as *Alarinjo* theatre can be traced to the incidental performance of seven ghost catchers in the Old Oyo Empire.

This paper, therefore, notes that festivals are diverse in nature, comprising different cultural and traditional celebrations, with certain varieties of unique display of artistic ingenuities. This section of the paper, thus, explains the concept of festivalisation process in relation to the subject matter of this discourse. Considering the issue from the perspective of performance, Vicki Ann Cremona (2007:5) states as follows:

The foregrounding principle of any festival is the wide range of aesthetic and artistic possibilities it offers. It is this possibility of selection that makes attendance at a festival different from going to a single performative experience, because even if persons decide to attend simply one event, they are aware of the variety of other possibilities that they deliberately choose to ignore.

Hence, the display of many traditional festivals in Africa, especially, among the Yoruba people, reveals diverse performances which are also sometimes related to the people's spiritual and social beliefs in communing with their spiritual benefactors, and, in addition, as a means of entertainment. What the audience witness during many festival performances are the end-products and confluence of all these different unique artistic creations that have been with the people for many years.

Oyin Ogunba (1978:3), commenting on the nature of African festivals, states as follows:

In many communities in Africa today, except those already totally overrun by foreign religions, traditional festivals are staged from time to time. In a town of modest size, say twenty thousand inhabitants, there may be as many as ten to fifteen festivals in a year's cycle of ceremonies. Such ceremonies are woven around diverse beings and physical phenomena, ranging from powerful gods and goddesses to hill and water spirits and the generality of illustrious ancestors. This is particularly true of West Africa where local gods, goddesses and spirits have continued to thrive, in spite of the great challenge of modern civilization and foreign culture.

Cremona's concept of "Festivalising Process" can be appropriately used to explain the formation of these very important Nigerian theatrical movements, not only in terms of styles, modes and techniques of presentation, but also in terms of the philosophical attachment and sentiments some notable Nigerian artists have for some Yoruba deities. The Nigerian author and playwright, Soyinka, for example, conceptualises the attributes of tragedy in many of his tragic plays in terms of Ogun (the Yoruba god of iron and creativity). Again, this, to some extent, is an artistic influence which is evident in many creative works of African, specifically, Nigerian playwrights.

Unmistakably, in many cultures across the world today, no culture can exist without the confluence of the sub-elements which form the totality of such culture. Therefore, various festivals that emerge from a specific culture that is formed by the convergence of a chain of cultural activities become poly-systemised in nature. Temple Hauptfleisch (2007:42) elaborates as follows:

The fact is no culture is a single system of processes and events, but really a complexity of sub-systems. More accurately, perhaps, it should be referred to as a poly-system.

Rituals and Rites in the Development of Yoruba Theatre

Ritual and rites are an integral component of the Yoruba festival and performing arts. Ritual was the collective requisite for socio-political and

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economic well-being, social harmony and stability in all Yoruba lands in time past. Adelowo (1990:163) puts this into informed perspective thus:

Rituals and rites are a means of bringing into the limelight the religious experience of a group of people. Rituals and rites thus constitute some kind of religious expression. They are a means of concretising one's belief systems. They are a means of expressing one's experience of the supersensible world and the supernatural beings.

Yoruba people all over the world, including those in diaspora, worship different kinds of deities, whose worships and celebrations can be daily, weekly, monthly, or even yearly. Along this line of thought, Robert Lima (1990:33) asserts that:

The body of Cuban drama contains many accretions from African sources. Among the most important of these is the presence of ancient deities from the Yoruba pantheon, a vast hierarchy of spiritual entities termed Orishas who range from the aloof Maker (variously Olofi, Olorun, Olodumare), through the hermaphroditic creative force (Obatala) and the Mother of the gods (Yemoja), to those associated with specific aspects of Nature (Chango, for one). These are the traditional deities still worshipped in what is present day Nigeria and its environs.

However, there are certain rules and regulations that must be identified and strictly adhered to before, during and after the worship of these gods and goddesses. These conditions (among which is ritual sanctity) must be met before Yoruba rituals and rites can be accepted by the deities. This ritual sanctity "has to do with the various taboos in connection with the administration of the various rituals and rites that constitute Yoruba traditional religion" (Adelowo 1990:164).

Yoruba deities such as Ogun, Sango, Orunmila, Ifa, Obatala, Esu, Yemoja, Osun etc., are held in high esteem by their worshippers and celebrated according to the rules and regulations stipulated by their spokespersons or priests. Some of these deities have varieties of food items required for their rituals and rites celebration. For instance, Ogun, the god of war, only accepts dog meat for appeasement; an attempt to substitute dog meat with another kind of animal such as goat, antelope and sheep will only incur the wrath of Ogun upon the individual or

lineage concerned. Conversely, Sango, the god of thunder and fire, can only be appeased with ram and *bata* drum. Providing other kinds of meat to appease Sango or substituting *bata* with other types of drums is considered a taboo among the Yoruba people. Consequently, theatrical depiction or dramatisation of tales and legendary stories relating to Sango is not appropriate without the totemic consideration of ram and *bata* drum.

The above background information about the Yoruba deities and their nature, in addition to various Yoruba tales and stories (folklore, folksongs and legends), provided the needed artistic materials for the Yoruba theatre and drama such as the theatre of *Alarinjo*, and plays of literary dramatists such as Soyinka, Rotimi, Sofola, and Osofisan. Stage performances, such as *Oba Koso* by Duro Ladipo, *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka and *Kurunmi* by Ola Rotimi, are plays which draw upon the activities of Yoruba deities and their world view.

Another Yoruba theatre artist worthy of note is Hubert Ogunde, whose knowledge about the tradition and culture of the Yoruba people reflected in his theatrical exploits throughout his career. On Ogunde's artistry and professionalism, Olu Obafemi (1996:36) comments as follows:

In examining the social statement in relation to the art-form in Ogunde's plays, it is essential to observe the syncretic aesthetics that shape his work. These qualities are traceable to his unusual origins as both the son of a clergyman, whilst being also the maternal grandson of a Babalawo (Ifa diviner). Ogunde once talked of the inevitability of 'pagan' and 'church' influences on him. These influences blend first as conflict: 'Here I was, a youth versed, as I could claim to be, in juju music and used to the altar of the Ifa priest. I had eaten fowls and sheep slaughtered in pagan festivals and enjoyed them full. Then I was in a church, singing songs of praise to God and denouncing the *jujuman* and his ways.' Then as syncretic imagination: 'I began to see that I could blend the charms and splendor of the church house and the colourful solemnity of the altar and use them to good advantage.

Jeyifo and Obafemi affirm that Ogunde was a typical Yoruba man, with a strong belief in the Yoruba tradition and culture. In other words, Ogunde was in close contact with the Yoruba customs, which were noticeable in almost all his works, even to the point when he started

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producing and acting for cinema. Biodun Jeyifo's (1984:33) point of view below explains the connection between the theatre and Yoruba deities:

Within traditional Yoruba culture itself, there is extensive evidence of the importance of theatre and related performance forms in the cultural life of the people. One significant illustration of this is the fact that three of the most important deities in traditional Yoruba religion - Obatala, Ogun and Sango - deities whose cults still flourish today - are thought to be "theatrogenic" gods whose cults and worship are vitally connected with drama and theatre and their symbolic and psychological uses. Equally illustrative of this point is the fact that in traditional Yoruba folklore, art and artists, especially the performing arts, are extensively celebrated.

The foregoing excerpts explain why Ogunde, in his performances, always invokes and appeals to the gods and goddesses in the pantheons of the Yoruba spiritual world. It is the same case with many of the feature films Ogunde produced and acted in, in later years after his successful and long venture in the practice of Contemporary Yoruba Travelling Theatre. One could find some strong evidence of his beliefs in the Yoruba spiritual evaluation of the universe. Although the thematic preoccupations of his films were overtly political, he displayed a high level of his Yoruba belief in the various deities located in the spiritual devotion of his Yoruba origin, in many of his works. Furthermore, apart from numerous stage operas and dramas, Ogunde also made laudable contributions to Yoruba film industry. Most of his popular and most often talked-about cinematic productions of the 1980s were *Aiye* (1980), *Jaiyesinmi* (1981), *Aropin N'Tenia* (1982) and *Ayanmo* (1985). These films are concerned with thematic pre-occupation and subject matters which Obafemi (1996:269) describes as "animist and metaphysical concerns" with "a frightening overdose of magical and voodooistic effusions."

Yoruba Theatre as Poly-Systems

Many African theatrical traditions which originate from festivals, rituals, other cultural practices and social orientations of life are mirror of the people that own them and capable of speaking the truth to the society to

which they belong. In the same vein, Adedeji (1969) believes that theatre and drama have a “religio-genic root”, that is, theatre and drama have a common umbilical cord which ties them to religion and festival celebrations in Africa, specifically, in Nigeria. Consequently, most of the Yoruba religions, rituals, festivals, traditions and cultural practices have always advocated the need for peaceful co-existence among the people. Different lessons, moral values and teachings for provision of a good social well-being, respect and protection for human dignity in general, are passed across to the spectators during performances. In this regard, Dopamu and Alana (2004:155) state as follows:

Idowu has contended that with the Yoruba, “morality is certainly the fruit of religion,” and that “they do not make any attempt to separate the two.” Although some scholars may question the validity of this assertion, the fact is that among the Yoruba, “what have been named taboo took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity.” In other words, morality derives from the fact that people believe that there are certain actions or behaviors or things which are ethically approved or disapproved by *Olodumare*, the supreme God among the Yoruba. Thus, the demands laid upon humankind by *Olodumare* are purely ethical. Morality, therefore, is of vital importance in the life of the Yoruba.

In reference to Ogundeji (2000:2), it is relevant to note that some of the media through which traditional or “religious or secular events employ theatrical arts to articulate the beliefs” of the Yoruba people are mythologies, tales, legends, folklore, proverbs, songs and riddles. These are passed down generational lines through the oral literature practice of story-telling, or through songs (although, these vital elements, which used to be a well-known part of the Yoruba cultural practice, are gradually fading away) to propagate moral values, unity and, in some cases, to teach moral lessons. In this regard, Obafemi (1996:14) states as follows:

But in this theatre, more than in the Nigerian drama in English, the dominant influence is the traditional festival, and other verbal and performed arts of the Yoruba. It is important here to identify and briefly describe the elements of oral traditional performance

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which supply the main ingredients for the contemporary theatre in Nigeria, and are directly the 'folk opera' which maintains a close relationship with traditional drama. The three main constituents of oral performance are oral literature (poetry and folktales), music and dance. The important point to note is that these elements are interrelated and they are all realised, basically, in performance. For instance, poetry is actualised in performance via songs, chants, music and recitative forms.

As a result of this background, more often than not, all of these vital cultural elements, which are well-known ingredients of the Yoruba traditional performance, are inevitably bound to manifest during the performances of the works of many contemporary writers and practitioners in Nigeria. The Yoruba artistes in Nigeria have over the time borrowed from traditional folklore and folktale to propagate and achieve their artistic vision of social harmony and revolutionary aesthetics in their various works. It is all about taking a 'cultural material' from the society and giving it back to the same society for socio-economic and political advancement via the arts.

Furthermore, the media of communication in traditional Yoruba performance enumerated above (mythologies, tales, legends, folklore, proverbs, songs and riddles) and many others, characterise both traditional Yoruba travelling theatre and its contemporary counterpart. Noticeably, some of the works of the Nigerian modern playwrights and theatre practitioners, also known as the "Nigerian Literary Dramatists", emerged in the late 1950s just before Nigeria's independence, in 1960, from British colonialism. Such works include those of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan (who joined their league much later in the 1970s). The works, interestingly, possess some resemblance with the traditional Yoruba travelling theatre as well as the contemporary Yoruba travelling theatre. To this end, Adedeji (1980:16) states as follows:

The theatre in English has since independence produced a number of Nigerian playwrights and dramatists, of whom the most distinguished is also the most politically conscious. He is Wole Soyinka, African's leading creative artist. Since the production of his play, *A Dance of the Forests*, written especially for, and premiered to mark, Nigeria's political independence in 1960, he has become a Colossus that bestrides the African theatre world. *A Dance of the Forests* will go down in the history

of Nigerian dramatic literature as a play that embodies not only the paradigm of African theatre, but also one that uses folklore to communicate a political statement in which the visionary artist shows his consciousness and nationalistic sensitivity.

Obviously, playwrights research and study their own cultures and traditions, as well as the socio-political and economic realities of their time, as they affect the lives of the people around them, but most especially, the less privileged in the society. Consequently, the craftsmanship, and by extension, the performance of their plays embrace poly-systemic style and features of festival theatre. Thus, what makes Yoruba theatre, drama and festival poly-systemic in nature is the chain of various events which make up the totality of celebration and performance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has attempted to look at the Yoruba theatre from ritualistic perspective, concentrating on the importance of festivals, rituals and rites. The study also focuses on traditional *Alarinjo* (masquerade) travelling theatre, the contemporary travelling theatre, and the drama of the Nigerian literary dramatists.

The study concludes that since the ritual, which is an organ of festival, is a cultural and traditional practice of the Yoruba people, Yoruba theatre and drama cannot but retain a significant level of ritualistic features in works of traditional, contemporary and literary dramatists, such as Hubert Ogunde, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan.

However, it should be noted that the traditional ritual practice of the Yoruba people has, over the years, dwindled considerably, especially among the Yoruba people living in the cities. Nevertheless, those living in the rural communities still reverence and devote time and attention to ritual and rite commitment.

For instance, the town of Ile-Ife, considered by Yoruba race as their cradle, still religiously observes those ancient rites and rituals. According to Yoruba oral rendition of *Oriki* and *Ewi*, out of the three sixty five days in a year, the Ile-Ife people keep only one day ritual-free. Hence, rites and rituals live on in the consciousness of the Yoruba people, and these find eloquent expression in their theatrical performances.

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