AFRICAN THEATRE AND THE POSTMODERN/POSTCOLONIAL AGENDA: THE EXAMPLE OF IGBO MASQUERADE*

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Introduction: The Postmodern/Postcolonial Stranger

The relationship of African studies to the postmodern and postcolonial critical frameworks is ambiguous. This ambiguity reflects the inherent uncertainties and the different receptions of the frameworks – holding in one breadth attraction for some, irritation for some, and indifference for others – as well as the protean nature of African scholarship itself. A look at the global appraisal of these critical 'posts' betrays a demographic alignment. It seems that their reception depends on the national and geographical affiliation of the investigators; that is, on which side of the Atlantic they are, or come from. In the main, African scholars seem to be predominantly sceptical, while those in the global north, especially the United States and Canada, seem to be consumed with these posts.[1] Many factors are attributed to this differential attitudes, most of which concern the nature of the discourse systems and their palpable western origin and inflection which, despite their claims to the contrary, do not seem to echo the concerns of marginalised subjects.

In investigating the differential receptions of the posts I take as a convenient point of departure what I consider to be a telling representation of the postmodern engagement by African scholars. Chinua Achebe (2000), the African literary and cultural icon, presents the encounter in this allegorical scenario:

> Let us imagine a man who stumbles into an alien ritual in its closing stages when the devotees are winding down to a concluding chorus of amens, and who immediately and enthusiastically takes up the singing with such loudness and gusto that the owners of the ritual stop their singing and turn, one and all, to look in wonder at this postmodernist stranger. Their wonder increases tenfold when they ask the visitor later what kind of modernism his people had had, and it transpires that neither he nor his people had ever heard the word modernism (82).

If we interrogate the postcolonial from a similar perspective the 'wonder' would appear to reside in the discovery that the stranger vociferously partaking in the 'alien' ritual is still trapped in effective regimes of colonisation. Thus, this 'postcolonial stranger' is celebrating a condition that neither he nor his people have yet to experience.

Although some African scholars have enthusiastically boarded the postmodern/postcolonial bandwagon in demonstration of "a facility to tag on to whatever the metropolis says is the latest movement, without asking the commonsense question: later than what?" (Achebe, 2000: 81-82), many have indeed interrogated the 'post-' prefix and found it ill-fitting as an analytical sign (Appiah, 1991). Ignoring the pursuit of that intractable moment of transition from the Modern to the Postmodern, the term rationally implies a shift from a certain state of knowledge to another. Thus crediting someone who has not been in the original state with such a 'postness' is somewhat incongruous; and to someone who has long known the 'new' condition the ritual celebration is not likely to be impressive. Paul Zeleza observes, for instance, that postmodernism is 'premised on a project of transcending certain aspects of a self-conscious, self-privileged project of modernism that is largely absent in Africa's construction of itself' (2005: 15).

In this essay I suggest that Igbo[2] masquerade performance tradition engages with postmodernism in the two ways discerned above: firstly, it never participated in the kind of knowledge European modernism canonised and therefore cannot logically claim to now transcend it; secondly, the postmodern celebrates a kind of anti-essentialist knowledge that is always already a part of Igbo masquerade performance tradition, such that it is not likely to be impressed by the discursive newness which postmodernism celebrates. To a certain degree the same applies to postcolonialism: the Igbo masquerade has been discursively 'postcolonial' in its critique of the colonial encounter before the term was invented, and in its eclectic performance style. My objective therefore is to question the significance of these 'posts' in the praxis as well as the discourse of Igbo masquerade performance tradition. In my opinion they do not, in any productive manner, impact on the praxis of the masquerade. However, they may be instructive for the investigator of this genus of traditional African theatre, and would likely invent

new perspectives to enliven the hackneyed discourses which many anthropologically skewed frameworks have begotten. Therefore, it seems to me that a familiarity with the agenda of the 'posts' should be useful towards a richer and better understanding of Igbo masquerade performance.

The 'Posts' and African Scholarship

Dennis Ekpo (1995) argues that

> ... For cultures (such as ours) that neither absolutized, i.e. deified, human reason in the past nor saw the necessity for it in the present, the postmodern project of de-deification, de-absolutization of reason, of man, of history, etc., on the one hand, and of a return to, or a rehabilitation of, obscurity, the unknown, the non-transparent, the paralogical on the other hand, cannot at all be felt like the cultural and epistemological earthquake it appears to be for the European man ... Nothing, therefore, stops the African from viewing the celebrated postmodern condition a little sarcastically as nothing but the hypocritical self-flattering cry of the bored and spoilt children of hyper-capitalism" (127).

Why the celebrated postmodern condition may not be as laudable for African scholars as it is for their Western counterparts is demonstrated in Daniel Reed's (2003) surprise at the discovery of postmodern strategies in the traditional Dan masquerade performance of Mali:

> That these processes are evident in this 'traditional' (as defined by the performers themselves) performance intrigued me, as genre-mixing and the unmooring of signs from their original contexts are features typically associated with postmodernism and 'creolized' popular artistic forms (2).

Thus it is obvious that what appears postmodern to Reed's Western cultural knowledge is traditional in Dan epistemology. Hence, much of what is celebrated as new and exciting in the postmodern condition, especially in respect of forms of cultural expression, is already a traditional mode of thought in many cultures of Africa.

With the term 'postcolonial', the scepticism and/or outright apathy, which elicits from many African scholars has as one of its bases the insinuation that colonialism ended with the elaborate

farcical ceremonies marking flag independence for those nations that once constituted the former British Empire. Among the many inadequacies of the postcolonial for these scholars are its eliding of the painful continuity of effective systems of colonisation by Euro-American institutions, and the fact that it is nothing but a discursive category produced and essentially performed by academics in Western institutions far from the place and condition of 'postcoloniality'. Thus, for Niyi Osundare, the term 'rings truer for those who have "posted" colonialism in posh conference halls and arcane seminar rooms conveniently far from the real battleground of colonial encounter,' and it 'lures us into a false sense of security, a seeming pastness of a past that is still painfully present' (1994: 208).

Apart from the difficulties of nomenclature, the discursive paradigms which postmodernism and postcolonialism deploy are criticised for being defeatist and lacking in historical and material peculiarities, and for effectively excluding the 'margin' or 'other' which they ostensibly represent. Postmodernism, for instance, positions itself as a counter-discourse to the essentialist and hegemonic 'grand narratives' of Enlightenment which dominate(d) western knowledge (Gayatri Spivak, 1990: 19). Yet many scholars accuse this agendum of inflating Western experience, an undoubtedly provincial one, into the 'global,' thereby selectively silencing all other narratives or violently appropriating them into its self-centred elitist whirlpool (Ogot, 2000). Similarly, postcolonialism is criticised for its discursive exclusion of the very identity, the 'subaltern' or marginalised, which it claims to 'speak for.' In the main, it is accused of deploying a semiotic paradigm and a performative self-regarding meretriciousness, which render the subject of its discourse invisible (Gloria Davies, 1998; Terry Eagleton, 1999).

Postmodern/Postcolonial Theatre

The postmodern is not only that which is predated by modern, it is a condition defined by a rejection of the precepts of modern Euro-American knowledge. However, characterising postmodern theatre in this sense poses a number of difficulties. In the first instance, there is no agreement on the constitution of modern theatre and therefore on what it is that the postmodern succeeds and contests. Secondly,

postmodern theatre ranges from mild experimental deviations from modern traditions, such as the early 'avant-gardes' of the 1960s and 1970s, to the most radical and challenging performances of the 1980s and the present. However, because there is no stable and easily distinguishable modern theatre for it to repudiate, postmodern theatre is "postmodern by analogy." That is, it borrows from "an ensemble of strategies that are analogous to ones found in other art forms" that are already coherent in "their rejection of their predecessors by calling themselves 'postmodern' or 'postmodernist'," such as visual arts, dance and literature (Kennedy, 2003: 867). What this condition evinces is a breakdown of the age-old precepts by which the notion of theatre was considerably stabilised, leaving behind a category that is somewhat nebulous. According to Fuchs "The result ... has been a stage turned curiously in upon itself, blurring the old distinctions between self and world, being and thing" (1996: 170).

Postmodern theatre is commonly characterised by pervasive anti-illusionist and counter-rationalist strategies. To the modernist presentation of theatre as a narratively progressive and coherent whole, postmodern theatre presents indefinite and contingent performances lacking in any established form. Actions, images and texts, are often grafted fragmentarily, arbitrarily and excessively in ways that leave no coherent threads for an audience to follow. The purity of form that created recognisable theatrical genres, such as tragedy, comedy, farce, drama, opera and the musical in modern theatre, gives way to assemblages of all imaginable disciplinary genera – from dance, visual arts, drama, poetry, music, design, to film, still and video photography. The New York based Wooster Group, one of the most popular postmodern theatre outfits, led by Elizabeth LeCompte is particularly marked by its repudiation of all the precepts which formed modern theatre. Not only are the Group's stagings notoriously disharmonious, they often purposively engage in very radical and subversive re-productions of authoritative works, such as Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (in "Brace Up"), Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (in "Route 1 & 9") and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (in "L. S. D"), in which quotations from the original texts constitute just a small part of a cacophony of words, images, and actions" (Kennedy, 2003: 868).

Gilbert and Tompkins argue that despite the temporal and literary intersections of postcolonialism and postmodernism 'the two cannot be equated' (1996: 3). Expectedly, postcolonial theatre inherits some of the difficulties of postmodern theatre, some of which reside in the zones where the two frameworks intersect. For instance, the textual paradigm of postcolonial theatre, which is obviously inherited from postmodern critical practice, arguably blinds itself to much of what is happening 'theatrically' in the 'postcolonies.'[3] And although its territorial claim is the former colonised regions, the strategies of postcolonial theatre seem to be defined and performed elsewhere – in Europe and the United States, and in the 'settler colonies' of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

The most significant of postcolonial theatre's defining trait is its decolonising project; a preoccupation with the dismantling of the structures of imperialism and its challenging legacies. However, the different systems of colonial administration deployed in the different colonies as well as the differences in the traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples created different relationships between coloniser and colonised, as well as peculiar figurations of the decolonising project. Even within the same territory, differential experiences of colonial presence are discernible. In Nigeria, for instance, Crow and Banfield observe that except for the political elites the direct experience of the coloniser's influence was minimally felt by the peasant population (1996: 2). Thus its psychological effects, especially the notorious crisis of identity, are gleaned by the majority only through a film darkly. This obviously accounts for the manner in which most Nigerian dramatists conceive their decolonising strategies. Femi Osofisan, for instance, disagrees with the habit of 'analyzing the plays we write, and all the strategies we employ, as merely strategies to deconstruct the presence of colonization.' He sees them instead as 'attempts to confront ... the various problems of underdevelopment which our countries are facing' (1999: 3).

Irrespective of the divergent positions on its decolonising project, postcolonial theatre's political and cultural agenda are well-defined. These align the framework with the concerns of the marginalised. Whether the marginalising institutions are directly or indirectly assignable to imperialism, postcolonial theatre contests those grand narratives that enable exploitation, discrimination and

unequal access to social, political and economic capital. To Crow and Banfield the significant criteria are not so much the common experience of a colonial past or a response to neo-colonial presence, as a concern with 'oppressed and relatively impoverished lives,' 'cultural subjection or subordination' (1996: xii). Consequently, postcolonial African theatre is a more coherent category than postmodern theatre. Being largely political, it endeavours, to a large extent, to engage with its audience, comment on material experience and generate greater appreciation of Africa's cultural integrity in the face of its concerted denial in the humanising project of European modernity. Most importantly, it strives to address the inhuman conditions, which now inhabit Africa's 'modernity.' These diverse concerns have, however, produced different categories of postcolonial theatre. Osofisan's three categories of 'African literature and its treatment of the subject of Identity' (1999: 5) can thus be modified as three categories of postcolonial African theatre: The first comprises theatre produced by Africans in diaspora addressing their status as 'exiles' or at least with a peculiarly African perspective; the second is theatre by Africans, wherever they may be, investigating issues of identity and marginalisation under the aegis of Western institutions; the third is performance by Africans resident in the continent narrating the material experiences of Africans within the continent. These categories are, of course, neither exhaustive nor impervious. Apart from the literary or modern theatre, the last category includes traditional performances that address the realities of socio-political or/and aesthetic existence of the citizens.[4]

The essential African Theatre

Ousmane Diakhite submits that 'the African has always lived in close accord with theatre and the theatrical is an integral part of his or her identity' (1997: 17). This claim is vindicated by the evidence that, indeed, the most astounding contributions of Africa to world civilisation reside in the domain of culture. African theatre is most commonly distinguished from the conventional western category by its sensuality; its synthesisation of diverse forms of creative expression – from dance, poetry, song, to mimesis and architecture – into a performance whole that attends simultaneously to practically all the senses. Pitted against mainstream western tradition, African

theatre's vitality stands it out; its focus on the materiality, and exploration of the immense potentialities, of the human body and imagination provide a model much desired by contemporary western theatre. In a critical analysis of mainstream western theatre, Leonard Pronko (1974) decries its pervasive logocentrism and maintains that

> our hypertrophied rational facilities have led us ... to a theatre that is most often small as life itself, a theatre that requires careful listening and intelligent understanding. ... Instead of a feast for all the senses and for the mind as well, we are given the intellectual scraps from the top of the table of theatrical history (1).

In every respect Pronko is prescribing for the west a theatre that is as eclectic and expressive as African theatre. That some of the most renowned theatre scholars in the west have searched in this direction since the turn of the 20th century validates Don Rubin's opinion that to arrive at a proper perspective of (African) theatre 'one must be open to larger definitions of the word than are normally found in western tradition, alternative definitions or perhaps just *more accurate definitions*' (1997: 15; emphasis added). From Alfred Jarry's disaffection with the pretence and the sham theatricality of western theatre; Antonin Artaud's search for a more visceral, affective, and therapeutic 'cruel' theatre; Bertolt Brecht's anti-illusionist, *Verfremdung* technique; Peter Brook's search for a more instrumental and emotive performance language; Jerzy Grotowski's quest for the seminal and transcendental to assail the plasticity of mainstream western audience; Augosto Boal's more physical and pragmatic political strategies; Richard Schechner's own critical quest towards a re-affirmation of theatre's ritualistic, non-verbal resources; to Eugenio Barba's exploration of the performing body's 'presence' or the 'pre-expressive', it seems that what is recognised is the need for a *more accurate* way of knowing, doing and receiving theatre; a desire for that kind of performance technique that is traditional to African theatre. Indeed, Banham and Wake observe that in the desperate attempts to escape the stifling limitations of Anglo-American theatre tradition many theatre practitioners look to African theatre for inspiration (1976: 3-4).

The vast range of performance forms which populate contemporary African theatre renders the idea of a homogeneous African performance category grossly inapposite.[5] However loosely,

similar historical and cultural experiences have spawned performance traditions in Black Africa that share common identifiable features. In West Africa, for instance, the early stage of colonisation witnessed the subordination of traditional forms of oral performance by the emergent African elite in its endeavour to reproduce European-style theatrical entertainment for the 'sophisticated' taste of the minority *petit bourgeois* population in the cosmopolis. This Eurocentric aesthetic was soon supplanted by a more creative and expressive re-interpretation of traditional African theatrical poetics and a critical appraisal of the ruinous material conditions which colonialism begot. The theatre which emerged after independence drew generously on existing traditional oral performance traditions and proceeded to create a new form that is arguably western in outline but unarguably African in perspective. In the main, the emergent theatre is characterised by its fusion of both traditional African and western performance idioms. Today this theatre, which has come to be described as 'literary' (Ogunbiyi 1981: 9) or 'modern' (Clark 1981: 58), exists not simply contemporaneously with the traditional oral forms but often syncretically: both are alive and thriving and often appropriate forms of each other. The modern has been notorious for its integration of traditional oral strategies with its literary style, so much so that this eclecticism has become its definitive characteristic. Similarly, many traditional forms, such as Yoruba Travelling theatre, which Ogunbiyi describes as 'modern traditional' (9), have appropriated performance techniques that are essentially European in form.

The Igbo Masquerade

Among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, masquerade performance is unarguably the most popular form of communal cultural expression today. It features in practically every communal festival in both traditional Igbo and Christian calendars, such as the ubiquitous New Yam festival and Christmas and Easter celebrations. Generally, masquerades are figured as ancestral characters who presumably take on physical forms on the invitation of the community to participate in important communal ceremonies or perform specific social or religious roles. As supernatural beings they are received with much awe and reverence, and credited with supernal knowledge and power.

The masquerade is ostensibly a male secret society affair. Certainly the central performers, as well as their troupe or ensemble of performers, are usually initiated adult males even where the characters represented are women.[7] However, secrecy has become more symbolic and ceremonial than real. First of all, every male member of the community gets to 'know' the secret of the masquerade at a certain age. Secondly, it is a tradition supported by the women who are involved in the knowledge and the practice in ways that are not demonstrably evident. They support and encourage their sons and spouses and often contribute thematically and materially to the making of the performances. Many masquerades (such as Nwamkpa of Abagana and Adamma of Ngwo) do not only engage in discourses of femininity, but quite a number of them actually utilise materials, such as musical instruments, costumes, songs and dances, provided by the women (Chukwuma Okoye, 2000: 92). More significantly, the women largely constitute perhaps the most important element of the performance: the audience. They play such influential supportive roles that J. S. Boston observes that Igbo 'women support the custom of masking, and that without their support, masking could not be continued' (1960:56). This seems to suggest that the role of women, like those of men, is culturally and aesthetically assigned. It is rather obvious that most adult members of the female audience know the identities of the performers behind the masks (Okoye, 2000: 91-92). In any case, most of them know that they are members of the community engaged in an aesthetic performance. They, however, willingly play ignorance in order to sustain the most important foundation of the performance codes: the notion that the performers are not simply male members of the community playing in masks and costumes but ancestral beings on a special visitation of the human community.

There are numerous categories of Igbo masquerades, ranging from the most sacred to the most secular. However, the tradition's responsiveness to material reality has resulted in a decline in the production of sacred and aggressive forms and an increase in entertaining masquerades. Consequently, there is a movement towards greater theatricality. This is evidenced by greater attention to spectacle. Big, colourful, technically sophisticated and dancing forms, such as the monumental Ugo, Enyi and Ijele, and the dancing Adamma and Agboghommuo maiden masquerades, have become the

most popular of Igbo masquerades. These more entertaining forms dominate the modern Mmonwu (masquerade) festivals held in many cities of Nigeria as well as the more traditional festivals such as Uzoiyi of Umuoji. In this paper, my attention is on these more theatrical types because they provide a more contemporary picture of Igbo masquerade tradition.

The term 'masquerade' is deployed here in reference to a specific category of traditional African performance in which masks and costumes are actively utilised. It designates the entire performance, featuring masked and costumed characters. Thus it does not refer merely to the performance of masked characters since there are often performers that are not masked or costumed. Rather, the term embraces all the expressive bits and subjects that make up the performance whole: the music and musicians, costume, mask and their designers, dance and dancers, chorus, and so on. The term also incorporates the audience who are also 'performers' rather than mere spectators. Performers are categorisable on the basis of their performance and costume in the following manner: masked and costumed performers, unmasked but costumed performers, and audience. Thus 'mask' is used in its exclusive sense to designate the face covering which totally or partially obscures the facial features of the wearer. In the main, the masked and costumed performers provide what Ugonna describes as 'primary spectacle' while the audience provides 'a secondary spectacle' (1984:196). The primary performers often include an unmasked but often costumed chorus and/or orchestra of musicians and singers. However, in some cases, musicians and other performers accompanying the central performers, perform in masks and/or costumes as well, and often the principal performers also make up the orchestra by playing their own music themselves.[7]

Igbo Masquerade and the Agenda of the 'Posts'

Tejumola Olaniyan argues that in spite of the obvious difficulties of the 'posts' their impact on 'the practice of Africa's humanities have not on the whole been negative' (2005:43). In this regard, the following questions become pertinent: What is/are the significant impact/s of these discursive frameworks on the 'practice' of Igbo masquerade theatre? Or, is there anything significant that traditional

Igbo masquerade performance can learn from postmodern and postcolonial discursive or performance conditions?

As already implied, postmodern theatre's concern with the breaking down of the definitive boundaries erected by modern Euro-American knowledge is not a strategy subscribed to by African theatre, which never erected such boundaries in the first instance. Instead, traditional African theatre already exhibits a formal flexibility which witnesses a lively blend of non-linear narrative with other expressive forms such as dance, music, song and visual arts. This aesthetic is paradigmatic of traditional African masquerade performance. In the Igbo case, narrative content, where discernible, is non-linear and is usually overwhelmed by other expressive resources such as literal and non-literal vocal, instrumental, non-rhythmic and rhythmic sounds; visual lyricism evidenced principally in the use of costumes, makeup, and masks; and forms of rhythmic, non-rhythmic, mimetic, and non-representational bodily movements.

Igbo masquerade seems to paradoxically affirm the (re)presentational potentiality of the body even as it has this body virtually entirely masked. In the first instance, the mask and costume *represent* a reasonably identifiable human or animal character, an idea or emotion. However, this representation is not as illusionistic as the characters that obtain in conventional literary drama. In a more presentational framework, these characters, ideas or emotions inhabit the real everyday world of the community. Even in the rare instances where discernible linear narratives are presented, they adopt the anti-illusionist style through their interaction with an active audience, and the involvement of the narrating subjects (the masquerades) in the act of narration itself rather than the actions of the narrative. That is, they are narrators rather than characters in their narratives. Thus, even when they mimetically execute the actions of the characters they do not encourage the audience to see a world of illusion beyond their material presence. For instance, although the *Agboghommuo* family ensemble often has the characters interacting with each other, such as the girl child playing with her mother's breasts, this kind of interaction is usually limited and extemporaneous, and is overridden by the material interactions which the characters maintain with the participative audience, the music, the singing and the dancing. Thus while modern theatre does not generally use masks, the performer's material identity, the

physical body, is masked by that of the character. On the other hand, while the body of the Igbo masquerade performer is masked, it is 'unmasked' through diverse non-representational strategies – such as interaction with the audience, music, dancing and singing – which affirm the materiality of the performer's body.

Raymond Saner observes that 'postmodern performances change from one performance to the next' and 'there is no intention to repeat a play ... consistently and methodologically' (2001, par. 16). Likewise every performance of the Igbo masquerade is not an attempt to replicate a pre-ordained or pre-formed mould. Although many anthropologists have habitually typified these performances as 'rituals' (Simon Ottenberg, 1975), implying an overarching consistency and inflexibility, many scholars who focus on the performances themselves attest to a governing aesthetic framework which strives to make every performance a refreshing experience for the audience. Regarding the popular *oje ogwu* masquerade of Afikpo, Wole Soyinka (1996) notes that

> what the audience looks for and judges are the finer points of leaps, turns, control and general spatial domination. The poorer performers are soon banished to the group sessions – which demonstrates the importance given to individual technical mastery (344).

This illustrates the nonreproducibility and contingency of every performance. An audience looks out for novel and challenging experiences in the performance and also often intervenes positively or negatively. Thus in a typical performance, a performer strives for a balance between repetition and innovation: while maintaining aspects of those systems the audience recognises and finds aesthetically endearing, he also strives to exceed them through creative interpretation. As evidenced by Soyinka's observation, this is a risk which might result in honour or disgrace for the performer. Repetition thus privileges creative re-interpretation rather than duplication. The processional nature of most performances demands that performers make every repeated performance refreshingly different. Because of this the audience follows expectantly from station to station, knowing that it is yet to see all. If performances become clearly predictable an audience would certainly abandon it or do something to either refresh or stop the boring performance altogether. Thus it certainly does not look forward to seeing exactly

the same performance over and over again. As the present writer observes, 'At the end of a particularly impressive performance the typical Igbo response is: *Nke arọ-a dị mma mana nke arọ ọzọ ga aka* ("This year's performance is good, but next year's would be better"). So everyone aspires to an even better performance' (Okoye, 2000:267).

Perhaps the most influential and recalcitrant boundary which postmodern theatre challenges is that which ensconces the audience and confines it to a physically and psychologically pre-formed space, separated from that of the performer, performance and everyday experience. This is one boundary already inexistent in the Igbo masquerade performance tradition. There are usually no exclusive spaces structurally designed for performances, wherein such designated spaces as auditorium and stage are pre-set for the accommodation of audience and performers respectively.[8] Thus even in the contemporary stagings of the masquerade, conventional theatre structures are not favoured. Instead, open spaces such as stadia are most commonly used. There is usually a spatially undetermined interaction between audience and performers across a performance environment that is absolutely dynamic. The physical space is usually a common environment of everyday experiences, such as market squares, roads or courtyards of reputable members of the community. No significant attempt is made to structurally transform these spaces for the sake of a performance. Most performances are mobile, originating at a particular point and moving through the community, stopping at certain stations, with the key performances held at the most communally important space, which is usually the major town or market square. After this, the performance makes its journey back to its point of origin. In this peregrination, the audience follows all the way. The space inhabited by both audience and performers is notoriously unstable. Its dimension is continuously defined by a standing audience free to surge forward towards performers and outwards from them, thereby intermittently contracting and expanding the available space for the performance.

Psychologically, the typical Igbo masquerade audience does not see its role as one that is disengaged from that of the performers. Because of the communal nature of every performance, members of the audience feel that they have invested somewhat in the

performance, if not directly, then tangentially as a member of the producing community. In this manner they often comment freely on the performance. They applaud or boo performers and in this manner discourage bad performers from continuing. Also, at certain points in a performance, it is not uncommon for talented members of the audience to take the 'stage' and exhibit their performance skills. Postmodern theatre's aspiration towards this borderless condition of audience and performer relationship is usually manipulative. An architectural space might be reconfigured in such a way as to bring the audience physically close to performers. Performers also sometimes address audiences directly or invite them to participate in the performance. However, even when the physical space is broken, the conceptual one continues to set performers and audiences apart. The Igbo masquerade audience would naturally not need any encouragement or spatial manipulation to participate.

In its set objective to create a theatre free from the preconditions and preconceptions that hedge modern theatre, postmodern theatre is marked by an often challenging formlessness. Elinor Fuchs (1997) observes that

> instead of leading the audience toward a single dominating significance or interpretation, postmodern theatre, whatever its style, will be characterized by multiple tracks or channels, a demand that the audience respond to many 'texts' at once" (186).

Some postmodern performances take this decentredness to the point of incoherence and annoyance. Both critics and audiences find performances of this kind boring, incomprehensible, 'extremely shocking and disturbing if not traumatizing' (Saner 2001, par. 19). In such contexts 'many people fall asleep during the performance or go into some fantasy world (par. 33). On the other hand, the Igbo masquerade audience rarely finds any performance negatively challenging or provocative. Although it encourages individual creativity, there is a certain fount of shared aesthetics which guarantees that an audience is never estranged. Similarly, because every performance is owned at least by a section of the community, and that it involves a good number of creative artists of diverse skills who are not essentially under the total control of an auteur director, author or impresario, and rehearsals are often attended by select members of the community, every potentially outrageous or

aesthetically bland element is usually excised before public performances are held. This guarantees that no performance gets so individually skewed or narcissistic as to aesthetically or morally challenge or offend the sensibility of the audience.

Although postcolonial African theatre is described essentially as syncretic, celebrating a medley of old concepts rather than the purity of form, its closeness to folk and traditional modes makes it a much more focused and controlled mixture than postmodern theatre. It enriches its essentially representational western framework with strategies from traditional African performance tradition. However, most 'postcolonial' theatre scholars tend to focus more on the literary theatre (Gilbert Helen and Joanne Tompkins, 1996; Brian Crow with Chris Banfield, 1996), and also conceive 'syncretism' as a salutary quality which African theatre attained after its acquaintance with western culture. Balme (1999), for instance, argues that postcolonial theatre's 'most striking' trait is syncretism, a fusion of 'the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements' (1-2). Such a perspective blinds us to the evidence that African theatre was already syncretising non-indigenous forms available from its various inter-cultural interactions before its contact with Europe. This is most evident in communities located on the borders of two or more cultural identities. In Igboland, for instance, there are shared masquerade performance styles between communities and their non-Igbo neighbours, such as the Igala to the North and the Niger Delta peoples to the South (Neyt 1985, Bentor 2002). Indeed Neyt observes that the Igbo and their Igala neighbours have had such an intense cultural syncretism 'that it is often difficult to identify what belongs to the one or the other' (73). Themes, characters, styles and practically every expressive bit of visual resources appropriated from non-Igbo cultures abound in the performance of the Igbo masquerade. These processes are not only limited to the frontiers of cultural contact but often evidently imported from distant cultures, such as the Hausa community in northern Nigeria.[9] Thus when contemporary African theatre syncretises western culture, it is merely echoing the polymorphous currencies of traditional African cultures, their inclination towards a harmonious hosting of diverse and even oppositional formations and their favourable disposition to social, cultural and political critique.

Similarly, traditional African theatre critiqued Africa's colonial encounter long before the literary tradition evolved in Africa. But, as Crow and Banfield observe, scholars of postcolonial theatre have tended to disregard 'the remarkable range of literature and performance in indigenous languages that articulated criticism of, and resistance to, colonial rule and its characteristics' (1976:7). Traditional Igbo masquerade deploys such postcolonial discursive strategies as mimicry, allegory, parody, ridicule and translation in its engagement with colonialism. The strange ways of *Nwa DC* (the character of the colonial District Commissioner) have always been a subject of much ridicule, awe, and even admiration for the Igbo masquerade audience. In addition to this, the masquerade has always been socially and politically contestatory, healthily showing concerns over social and political inequities. This is expected since it is a communal art, actually produced and sanctioned by all the social strata in the community. This consists basically of all the age grades that usually have unimpeded access to social and political representation. Since actual performances are undertaken by the younger members of the community within an essentially gerontocratic order, the concerns of the populace are often privileged. Consequently, every section of the population is represented. Thus, the masquerade already effectively challenges marginalisation. Furthermore, practically every cultural, sexual, social, professional and political orientation is physically and discursively represented in the forms of the masquerade. Hunters, musicians, children, titled elders, foreigners, and even animals and non-living things are visibly represented.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the fundamental performative and discursive strategies which postmodern and postcolonial theatres deploy are already traditional to Igbo masquerade theatre. Consequently, it appears that in these respects there is nothing significant that the masquerade can learn from these critical frameworks. Instead, it is evident that these frameworks variously aspire to the conditions, and appropriate certain techniques, of traditional African theatre. Being basically communal and oral, the Igbo masquerade operates in an entirely different terrain from the postmodern and postcolonial self-reflexive and literary frameworks. The subjects, as well as the spaces

and sources of inspiration are different. There seems to be little, for instance, that modern Nigerian theatre can do to influence traditional masquerade performance. On the contrary, the literary excursions of postcolonial dramatists display profound influence of this traditional performance category. However, since modern African theatre is described as postcolonial, based predominantly on the thesis that it is heavily inflected by the experience of western colonialism in both contestatory and affirmative gestures, and that postmodern theatre actually aspires to conditions already traditional to African theatre, this fact makes a working knowledge of the two analytic categories rewarding for studies of traditional African theatre. So although these frameworks are essentially ineffectual in the praxis, they could be profoundly significant in the discourse of traditional contemporary African theatre. To the criticism of Igbo masquerade they could provide new frameworks and analytical strategies to the jaded anthropological perspectives which tend to ignore the different material, social and cultural specificities that continue to frame and determine performances. The posts' deflation of the meta-narratives of western knowledge and interrogation of all totalising truth claims, undoubtedly offer new themes and methodologies to the dated and exhausted theatre/ritual or tradition/modernity dialectics and the various strategies they have misbegotten. One of such is the tendency to even now investigate the 'theatrical elements' of traditional African performances, a perspective which seems to validate the outdated evolutionist view that these performances possess only the 'germs' of theatre but are certainly not *yet* good enough as theatre themselves. It was this view that produced Echeruo's notorious injunction to Igbo masquerade theatre: 'do what the Greeks did: expand ritual into life and give that life a secular base' (1973:30). Such a notion proceeds from a fundamental misconception of the aesthetics of the Igbo masquerade theatre.

Finally, the counter-discursive strategies of postcolonialism and postmodernism certainly make such perspectives in Igbo masquerade performance as the politics of representation and the contingency of knowledge possible. Questioning the 'authority' of the discourses (who authors, authorises and who ultimately benefits?), for instance, would certainly offer refreshing perspective on Igbo masquerade theatre. Similarly, the definitional boundaries which surprisingly continue to exclude traditional African

performances from the discipline of mainstream postcolonial theatre and drama should be contested as an instance of the Foucauldian power/knowledge dialectic which continues to impose a notoriously reductionist western criteria on non-western cultural expressions even in this 'postal' age.

NOTES

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1. This is obviously a generalisation. Many western scholars, especially in Europe, criticize both postmodernism and postcolonialism, and several African scholars are their flag-waving enthusiasts. Nonetheless, these cases are more in the minority than the majority.
2. 'Igbo' is the identity as well as the language of one of the three dominant ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.
3. I deploy 'theatre' in its more contemporary broader sense to include practically all forms of signifying cultural performances which involve a live performer(s) and audience, as distinct from 'drama' which is used here to designate written plays and performances which follow the narrative frameworks of these plays or 'dramas'.
4. 'Traditional' here is used in a stylistic sense to refer to those oral and communal performances that witness a blend of several forms such as songs, dances, music, story-telling, gymnastics, mime and so on. Such performances are deemed 'traditional' because they adopt a style of performance that is essentially indigenous, not because the performance itself is old and fixed; not because it is resistant to change.
5. 'Contemporary' is used in a temporal, rather than a stylistic, sense, with reference to the variety of theatrical forms that exist *today* in Africa.
6. Firstly, the compulsory male rituals of initiation which have attracted the attention of classical anthropologists are today so relaxed that in many communities they are no longer practiced. Secondly, Chinyere Okafor (1994) provides an

example of a masquerade performance in which the women play the central roles, including the wearing of masks.

7. For example, the Egbenuoba masquerade ensemble of Umuoji comprises an orchestra of costumed and masked drummers, while the Ajikwu masquerade ensemble of Abacha also constitutes part of the orchestra by playing individual instruments.
8. Nnabuenyi Ugonna's study provides an exception to this observation. Although he acknowledges that masquerade performances are generally held in open communal spaces, he observes that "In some cases, however, *mmọnwụ* theatres are constructed specifically for *mmọnwụ* drama" (48-49).
9. The *Atu* (buffalo) and *Anyinyakwulu* (camel) of Umuoji are two instances of the influence of Hausa culture on Igbo masquerade performance.

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