

The Evolution of the Yoruba Theatre and its Role in the Emancipation of Nigerian Politics from the Pre-colonial Period to the Post-Independence Democratic System of Government

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Abstract

This discourse examines the relationships and interactions between politics and theatre which are two compelling phenomena in human life realities, bound by dissembling, appearances, simulation, verisimilitudes, and dialogues in various stages of reality and illusion. It discusses the evolution of the Nigerian theatre and the role and impact of politics on the evolution. It concludes that although theatre is the lens that captures the beautiful and ugliness of politics, both are human ephemeral activities that share similarities in practice. The theatre is an omnibus discipline that examines the sociopolitical issues of its immediate society through various genres and politics remains a major subject for criticism by dramatists and other stakeholders. On several occasions, Nigerian dramatists have experienced maltreatment in the hands of the state as they attempted to expose injustice and corruption that exist in governance. Suffice to say that, there are long established scenarios

as politics exists in theatre as there is constantly observable theatre in politics.

Keywords: Evolution, Yoruba theatre, Monarch, Politics, Historical, Governance

Introduction

Origin of the Nigerian Theatre

Human activities are as old as man's existence on earth. Suffice to say that, there are no pre-dated human events prior to his existence. While some traditional events could be traced to the emergence of man on earth, some emerged through his subconscious efforts. Practically speaking however, the African man's spiritual activities are significance of his search for communal peace, harmonious co-existence and relaxation while some may be as a result of migration and or, deification. The origins of some existing human activities especially in Africa remain obscured due to inadequate and or, lack of records. Hence, events such as: religious festivals and ceremonies are passed through oral sources. Religious festivals and ceremonies, like theatrical performances, are some of the occasions that bring a community or society together. All over the world, many festivals and ceremonies abound. The heterogeneous nature of this aspect of man's life is so glaring that no community is devoid of one ritual ceremony, festival, ritual or rite which Soyinka (1976, p.40) refers to as, 'one arena, one of the earliest that we know of, in which man has attempted to come to terms with the spatial phenomenon of his being. Osofisan (2001, p. 182-3) in corroboration of Soyinka explains that, '...each of these occasions is a theatrical spectacle on its own, involving actors and dancers, singers and acrobats, mummers and musicians, clowns and priests. They demand hours of rehearsals and preparation, skills of composition and *mis-en-scène*, the talents of designers and song writers, of carpenters and decorators.'

Nigeria, like most other black African nations can boast of being the custodians of many popular festivals, rites and ceremonies that have now

turned to tourist attractions for the outside world. A very good example is the *Osun Osogbo* festival which attracts many international observers annually. As there are many gods or deities, tribes and lineages, so also are different festivals and ceremonies to invoke, appease, placate, mark the migration of a lineage or celebrate the exemplary feats of deified personalities. In a clear confirmation of the existence of several festivals and ceremonies in Africa, Olaniyan and Quayson (2007, p. 354) assert that:

Africa is home to several traditions of theatre, conceived as an ensemble of culturally marked and consciously staged practices in space and time...In many African communities, the foremost indigenous cultural and artistic institution is the festival organised around certain deities or spirits, or to mark generational transitions or the passage of the season whether of climate or agricultural production, festivals are sprawling multimedia occasions – that is, incorporating diverse forms such as singing, chanting, drama, drumming, masking, miming, costuming, puppetry, with episodes of theatrical enactment ranging from the sacred and secretive to the secular and public.

Also, Nwosu (2014, p. 108-9), in his critical appraisal of the true position of Africans and their relationship with religious and traditional events, attests to the fact that:

the African has a holistic mind that enables him understand the phenomenon in his environment as irreducible truths hence the traditional theatre cannot be totally divorced from her religious, cultural, economic, political and agricultural activities... Hence, traditional African theatre manifests in the seasonal festivals, ritualistic performances,

mythologies, folklore and fertility dances (for earth and man) that define the existential essence of the African.

One of these festivals or ceremonies served as the womb that carried the foetus of what today had turned to crafts or professions for many. These crafts and arts, through professionalism and universal acceptance, had grown larger than the wombs that carried their embryonic stage. Theatre practice for example, has grown to a level which at the beginning was beyond the prognostication of the earliest practitioners. Looking through theatre history, it would be discovered that the emergence of the Western theatre tradition cannot be discussed without mentioning the Greek Dionysus festival that gave birth to it. Hartnoll (1985, p. 7) notes that '...the first great theatrical age in the history of Western civilization is that of Greece in the fifth century B.C. It was there that tragedies and comedies, some of which still exist, were first performed by actors and not by priests, in special buildings or precincts which though hallowed were not temples.' Like the Greek theatre, the Yoruba Masquerade festival played significant role in the emancipation of the Nigerian theatre which today has moved into a state that reflects noticeable changes in all the fields of the arts of the theatre. These changes are as a result of the unrelenting efforts and the desire of the theatre practitioners to improve on the existing phenomenon inherited from past traditions. For example, in place of the unscripted traditional plays of the pre-colonial era, the travelling theatre of Esa Ogbin, the colonial folk-opera theatre tradition, and the popular theatre of the post-independence period, the contemporary artists have developed new and different styles of theatre production that, although contain Western values, yet, reflect the people's attitudes, beliefs, or practices. This change in particular, created a dichotomy between the traditional theatre practitioners and the contemporary theatre of the academics. The origins of Nigerian drama lie where they have been found among other peoples of the earth, deep in the past of the race. This implies that, as it was in Europe, so it is in the other parts of the world when and where issues relating to the

emergence of drama and theatre are raised. In Nigeria, Jeyifo (1984, p. 33-4) while quoting Gidley (1981) Enem (1981), Horn (1981), and Adelugba (1981) observes that,

to the North of the country there are, to take for example, the 'rhetorical mode of the Hausa Yakamanci itinerant comedians', satirical Kwagh-hir puppet theatre of the Tivs,' and the exceptional acting and mimetic troupes of the Bori spirit-medium cult in which face, voice and gesture are literally 'deconstructed and transfigured to achieve spectral make-believe and fantastic impersonations.

This observation is strengthened by Ogunbiyi (2015, p. 17) who asserts that,

the specific origins of Nigerian theatre and drama are speculative. What is however not speculative...is the existence in many Nigerian societies, of a robust theatrical tradition...For as an expression of the relationship between man, society and nature, drama arose out of fundamental human needs in the dawn of human civilisation and has continued to express those needs ever since.

However, the Yoruba stand out among other tribes in Nigeria for the vigour and range of religious and traditional events which scholars like Adedeji (1981), Armstrong (1978), Obafemi (2008) Kerr (1995), Jeyifo (1984) have identified as the womb that bore the embryonic stage of the Nigerian theatre. The rich cultural heritage of the people of the southern-western states made performance the natural means for political debate, social cohesion, lamentations and celebrations. The Yoruba dramatist grew up in a world where theatre literally takes place on the street, in the performances

of such masquerade figures as the *Egungun*, or the festivals relating to trades and seasonal rhythms. Williams (2010, p. 474) comments that, 'Nigeria...is rich in performance traditions such as the Yoruba people's masquerade festival, *Egungun*. It also has been rich in theatre critical of both its colonial ruler and those after.' Obafemi (1982, p. 112) in an encapsulating observation explains that:

...this theatre had as its source and inspiration, in both aesthetic/technical and ideological/political terms, the fused tradition of the indigenous Alarinjo masquerade itinerant performance and the church-groomed open air opera (which was largely entertainment and profit-motivated); this tradition played a significant activist role in the anti-colonial struggle in Nigeria. Strike and Hunger, in particular, was staged with a sympathetic identification with the 1945 General Strike of workers led by the late Michael Imoudu against the colonial authorities in Nigeria, which marked the beginning of robust trade unionism as a political weapon in Nigeria. Later, in post-independence Nigeria, some of Ogunde's plays also served as the cultural arm—as instrument of cultural nationalism—to the growing political nationalism of the independence struggle.

The above observations, comments and discussions are attestations to Osofisan's claim that the 'Nigerian theatre has proven to be the most vibrant on the continent so far, and for various sociological reasons it is among the Yoruba that theatrical activity has been the most flourishing...for without contestation, virtually all the trends in theme or technique that are being explored on the continent will be found in the repertory of the Yoruba dramatists' (2001, p. 179). Also, in his conversation with Jeyifo (1984, p. 33) Osofisan claims that, 'drama and theatre are so

prominent among the Yoruba society, because the civilisation which the Yoruba city-state fashioned was, in its expressive non-material cultural features, a ritual and ceremonial civilisation which placed great emphasis on modes of feeling and expression which are hierarchically structured, highly dramatised, and extraverted.' In order to arrest the tone of this paper, the examination of these sources is pivotal and instrumental to the understanding of the origin of drama among the Yoruba in particular.

Nigerian Politics and her Theatre

Theatre reveals the immediate society of the dramatist. It may therefore, be difficult for theatre to bypass politics, economy and religion and still influenced the people. Theatre and politics have become parts of our social conversations and remain the circulation and exhibition of the politicians and artists' social energy for the benefit of the society.

Hence, politics and theatre exist in veritable symbiosis, each taking the mechanics, praxis, forms, language and structure of the word for actualisation and fulfillment. Whether in the pre-colonial period of monarchical system, the colonial period of the slave-masters or the post-independence era of corruption and maladministration, the theatre had played and still plays a conscientious role in the political life of the people. However, the works of theatre artists shape the society in a way that may not be fast, and may not be direct, but strong and deep as we also capture the power of the theatre in practice for social mobilization, such as political theatre, democratic theatre, community theatre, political theatricians, theatrical politics, etc(Obafemi 1982, p. 120).

The Nigerian experience of theatre and politics is not dissimilar from experiences the world over. There is politics in theatre, from script to staging; issues of ideology (thematic concerns from conflict generation to its resolutions), material and human management, and so on. Similarly, partisan politics involves a great deal of theatricality—platform actions, simulation, persuasion, suspense and so on. Although theatre remains the mirror through which the image of politics is displayed, the latter aids the freedom of speech which is a major ingredient of theatre. While comedies and satires lampoon political ideologies that are incongruous to the life of the people, tragedies retell the stories of great politicians in a way that suggests a meaning of these old tales for a new democratic and civic audience. However, Ngugi (1982, p. 78) is of the opinion that, ‘the performance space of the artist stands for openness while that of the state, for confinement. While art breaks down barriers between people; the state erects them... Art yearns for maximum physical, social, and spiritual space for human action. The state tries demarcation, limitation and control.’ Obafemi (2008, p. 116) also identifies with the fact that the ‘theatre practitioners’ panache for defending the truth and denouncing falsehood is best understood from his evocative and memorable songs, some of which survived today and must be well preserved in our national archives as evidence of the role of theatre in building and sustaining democracy.’ A very good example is Ogunde’s *Yoruba Ronu* that was part of the songs composed in the performance. Eburn Clark comments on the performance of ‘Yoruba Ronu’ and its impact on the audience when it was performed on 28 February, 1964. According to Clark (1979, p. 58) the political satire shows the nature of theatre as an art with the toxicity of words. In her words,

Ogunde duly showed the play for the inauguration of the Egbe Omo Olofin ... In the audience were, Chief Akintola and other prominent political figures. Halfway through the show Akintola realised that the play was a direct attack on his person as well as his rule, and he walked out of the

show, followed by several others in the audience. The play however continued to the end and was greatly enjoyed by those who stayed.

Politics and the Evolution of Yoruba Theatre

Historically speaking, the emergence of Yoruba theatre cannot be divorced from political occurrences of the pre-colonial era. Hence, our earlier submission that, theatre and democracy move in a juxtapositions. The indigenous festivals and oral performances,

express themselves politically in their subtle and unequivocal denunciations of devious, deviant, unethical and immoral conduct of society, both from the high place - the traditional institutions, Obas, Obis, Emirs and chiefs, religious chieftains in their shrines - and individual political actors/captains of industry which at times attracts brushes in various forms. These brushes which come in various forms of humiliation, incarceration, banning of performance and so on, went on for three decades under the colonial administration...(Obafemi 2008, p. 116).

A projection into the history of the theatre in Nigeria reveals that, the 'Ghost Catchers' performance of 1590 served as the foundation of the Yoruba theatre that eventually gave birth to several theatre traditions. This play was as a result of the political imbroglio between the Alaafin and his chiefs. Adedeji (1981, p. 222) recognises the performance of 'the Ghost Catchers which took place at Oyo as a court entertainment under the management of Ologbojo during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu, who acceded to the throne in Oyo Igboho about 1590' as the beginning of the Masque dramaturge and the origin of theatre performance in Nigeria. Also, Kerr, (1995, p. 12) quoting what he refers to as an admittedly speculative research

of Adedeji, corroborates that 'Alarinjo (travelling theatre) started in Oyo at the court of Alaafin Ogbolu in about 1590, with six *Egungun* characters representing such stock physical deformities as the hunchback, albino, dwarf and leper, under the leadership of an *Egungun* singer, *Ologbin Ologbojo*. Consequently, Adedeji (1981, p. 223) in an elaborate manner explains that,

Ologbin Ologbojo founded the Alarinjo theatre ... it is claimed that it was on account of his hybrid son, Olugbere Agan established the theatre as a permanent part of court entertainments. To launch him, Ologbin Ologbojo got Olojowon, the master carver, to carve a wooden mask and Alaran Ori, the costumier, to build a set of costumes. With these Olugbere Agan careered as a costumed actor and a strolling player. Ologbojo himself served him as the masque-dramaturge or animator who handled the improvisations while Akunyangba, the palace rhapsodist, provided the choral chants.

With the above observations, we can submit that theatre practice in Yoruba land, which was passed down in adaptation through the Yoruba masquerade festival to the first popular theatre tradition that was reintroduced in a more refined form prior to independence evolved from one main source – the pre-colonial political upheavals of the Oyo Empire. Therefore, Nwosu's (2014, p. 108) submission that 'the roots of African drama and theatre lie in Africa's pre-colonial history and the subsequent colonial enigma and the complexities of her post-colonial experience' is not a ruse. Hence, Clark (1981, p. 58) affirms that, '...the origins of Nigerian drama is likely to be found in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the Yorubas *egwugwu*, *mmo* masques of the Ibo, and the *owu* and *oru* water masquerades of the Ijaw.' Kerr (1995, pp.7-8) however, points out that,

...of all these cultures, festivals, customs, rites, traditions and rituals, one form of entertainment which has contributed immensely to the origin of the Nigerian theatre is the Masquerade festival...the troupe of these masquerades could adapt to almost any topical, social or political context; invocation, and self authorisation, curse, prophecy, allusion to sexual conduct and morally comment on foreign and domestic politics, as well as remarks on religious hierarchy, history and funeral commemoration.

Looking at the entirety of the functions of some of the traditional Nigerian festivals and their attack on politics, Obafemi (1982, p. 118) in corroboration to Kerr's observations comments that,

the performances in the courts of traditional institutions have their entertainment purposes laced with satirical butts and moral and didactic messages to check excesses in the use of power. In the Masquerade traditions, we find such biting criticism in the songs and dances of the Masques. The Isale-Eko, Lagos Gelede Masque, for instance, has the Efe, a phase of social commentary and diatribe satirising deplorable and deviant acts in society as perpetrated by the high and low in society. Other theatrical forms with such social regulatory duties abound all over Nigeria—the Yoruba Etiyeri, the Hausa Bori, even as a spirit medium art, the Okebadan of Ibadan, the Tiv Kwagh-hir—and all have political roles to play. These have been carried to contemporary theatre practice in post-independence, postcolonial Nigerian society.

Adedeji (1981, p. 231) in his records of the travail of pre-colonial theatre practitioners records that,

there were cases of troupes who were banned from performing in certain areas on account of their unrestrained flair for social criticism...A classic example was that of the troupe of Abidogun of Agbaraoko's house, Oyo in the 1920's. King Ladigbolu 1, the Alaafin of Oyo banned the troupe from further performance of the Masque of Kudeju because it was a satire on the institution of the Aare. The play was a historical sketch on Kudefu, the famous Aare of Alaafin Adelu.

Also, Obafemi in his participatory criticism of the works of some of the leading theatre practitioners of the colonial period observes that,

the traveling theatres of Ogunde from the forties and, later, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya, Ade Afolayan and more than two hundred companies have themes that are overtly political. The plays of Hubert Ogunde, such as Crime and Punishment, Garden of Eden and Strike and Hunger (1945) carry unbridled and uninhibited criticisms of the colonial governments, those of taxation and other oppressive strategies of governance.(1982, p. 120).

Nigerian Dramatists and Politics

It is Lavine (cited in Abe, 2014, p. 248) who in his prognostication of democratic system of governance and the possible inhuman and selfish attitudes of its players that arises from Plato's conviction explains that,

... after Socrates was put to death Plato was more than ever convinced that a democratic state, a state ruled by many is doomed to disaster. The many he believed can never know what is good for the state: they lack the necessary level of intelligence and training: they are concerned only with their own immediate pleasure and gratification, and they are swayed by unstable, volatile emotions which render them susceptible to clever demagogues or to mob passions. He believed that a democratic government, run by the many cannot produce good human beings, and in turn, good people would find life impossible under such a state.

Lavine's observation is in essence the charging current to the creativity of Nigerian dramatists whose work right from independence had served as critiques of our politics and the players. Theatre scholars, critics, and practitioners have not ceased from establishing the fact that, 'theatre, as a public, communal, and thus a democratic art, is aesthetically most suited to mediate in the art of designing, reshaping and reconstructing the democratic environment of our democratising state.' Obafemi, (2008, p. 130).

The existing theatre tradition today, inherited the genre of political satire from the pre-colonial theatre traditions and has not ceased to raise its voice against the rule of governance since the practitioners realised that one of the ways through which true democracy could be established is to, utilise the theatre vibrantly to interrogate and demystify these totalitarian ideologies of neo-scramble for geo-political and territorial aggrandizement constituting a major threat to our nation-hood, especially since all our political parties have grounded themselves, for all practical purposes and the National Assembly has become a pathetic joke or a mere circus show. Obafemi (2008, p. 45) in his observation explains that,

the present agitations of the Nigeria dramatists towards having a true government of the people is inherited from the activities of the earlier theatre practitioners of the pre-colonial and the colonial theatre traditions in Nigeria. The pre-colonial masquerade theatre was not mainly for entertainment and neither were they restricted to a particular mode. Sensitive socio-political issues were raised in their performances which led to being banned or suspended.

Kerr reiterates that,

the pre-colonial African theatre was not a simple or static activity. It was not merely a useful escape mechanism for repressed emotion, allowing the traditional society to function in an unchanging way. Nor was it a mere repository of spiritual values defining the African personality. It was an avenue which reflected economic and social realities, political changes, shifting power relations and ideological struggle (2004, p. 78).

Although the works of theatre artists shape the society in a way that may not be fast and direct, but strong and deep. Since theatre reveals the immediate society and the world of the dramatist, it may be difficult for theatre to bypass politics, economics and religion and still make a direct contact to people's hearts and minds. Theatre has become part of our social conversation and remains the circulation of the artists' social energy for societal re-engineering that is of benefit to the society. Whether in the pre-colonial period of monarchical system, the colonial period of the slave-masters relationship or the post-independence era of corruption and maladministration, where the Nigerian politician according to Farah, 'is a

blind man who moves only in one direction – towards himself’ (1983, p. 11) the theatre had played and still plays a conscientising role in the political life of the people.

Looking at the role of theatre today, it will be discovered that, while comedy lampoons political ideologies that are incongruous to the life of the people, as experienced in ‘Femi Osofisan’s *Midnight Hotel* (1997), tragedies do retell the stories of great politicians or monarchs in a way that suggests a meaning of these old tales for a new democratic and civic audience. In the tragedy, *Kurunmi*, (1988) the *Ijaye* Warlord and the Yoruba War General - Kurunmi - lost his face in defense of the people’s tradition in a period when Alafin Atiba, with the support of his chiefs, feels that there should be a stop to the dastardly act of making the heir apparent, who is the first son of the king, to commit ‘death’ as against the Western belief of suicide each time the monarch joins his ancestors which is part of the shared identity of the people’s tradition. This traditional issue is better dramatised in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

Theatre practitioners of all the traditions that existed from the masque dramaturge to the contemporary have never been tacit on issues concerning the politics of the land even during the military regime when the fear of incarceration dampened the swiftness of the pens of most Nigeria dramatists. A good example is Iyorwuese Hagher’s play *Swem Karagbe and the Second Circle* which in Kofoworola’s appraisal, ‘probed the commitment of the civilian government to the elevation of the poor masses from abject poverty, to a state of economic viability’ (2004, p. 78). The struggle for a government that will be beneficial to the proletariat has remained the focus of most theatre practitioners in Nigeria theatre history. Obafemi comments that,

the commitment of art to democratic struggle in Africa is a heritage. The griots, bards, storytellers and raconteurs and masque performers of ancient

Africa used their art to undermine the feudal hegemonies of the time. From this tradition of pre-colonial intervention of artists in the political experience of kingdoms, empires and so on, the modern artist has picked, almost inexorably, his role (2008, p. 114).

Conclusion

An attempt has been made at discussing the meeting and shifting points in politics and theatre using theatre and democracy interchangeably. We were able to link the origin of the Yoruba theatre to the monarchical activity of the old Oyo Empire as well as examined the role of the indigenous and contemporary theatre in the political affairs of the pre-colonial and post-independence Nigeria. Our prognostication into the traditional forms of theatrical performances of the pre-colonial Nigeria has revealed that drama, like any other art, has existed in one form or the other along with politics and that, Nigerians were already accustomed to the use of satire in the treatment of political and religious matters in their drama even before there were contacts with Europe's colonialism. This discourse has revealed that, theatre practitioners from the pre-colonial era to date have never ceased from exposing politics. Artists like Ogunde, rose to the occasion of oppression, intimidation and misrule and, like his predecessors of the pre-colonial theatre tradition, tasted the wielding baton of power of the government. Ogunde's play '*Yoruba Ronu*' produced in 1963 is a political satire which exposes the government of the day in public and was banned in 1964. Hubert Ogunde tasted the baton of power of the government when he performed *Yoruba Ronu* as a reaction and as a conscience piercing tool against the bad governance of the Western government led by Samuel Akintola. Kerr comments that the action of the government 'led to disturbances in Ibadan, a bloody riot in Ilesha, and vehement protests in that section of the press which supported the Action

Group' (a political party), (1995, p. 99). Some of Ogunde's plays have been mentioned earlier in the foregoing.

The post-independence period as discussed in the foregoing was characterised by the responses of the Nigeria dramatists to the inhuman activities of the rulers against the ruled. To mention but a few, there is Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) which according to Kofoworola, was an 'attack at corruption, the empty rhetoric of politician sloganeering, and the manipulation of the mass media to legitimatise dictatorship and the cult of personality' (2004, p. 54). There are *Madmen and Specialists* (1984) and *Jero's Metamorphosis* (1984) in which the playwright expresses his disgust with both the imbecilities of war and the nation's political ineptness and corruption. Osofisan, another Nigerian dramatist re-visits history in *Morountodun* (1984). Other plays from the stable of this foremost Nigerian playwright in response to misrule are: *Who's Afraid of Solarin*, (2006) *Midnight Hotel* (1997), *Another Raft* (1988) and many more. There is Ola Rotimi's *If: a Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983), J. P. Clark's *The Raft*, (1964) and many more. The activities of these Nigeria dramatists as reflected in the thematic background of these plays is proved right by Nwosu who claims that,

contemporary African theatre dwell so much on political issues and in most cases the theatre attacks the ruler's tyrannical tendencies on one hand and on the other hand spurs the governed on to rise up for their rights. The process of reawakening the hitherto morbid socio-political consciousness of the people through theatrical enactments leads to reformation and socio-political re-orientation of the society (2004, p. 100).

The summary of it all is that, politics and theatre exist in veritable symbiosis, each taking the mechanics, praxis, forms, language and structure of the word for actualisation and fulfillment.

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