
Theatre Aesthetics in Pre-Colonial Africa

By

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To assert that the indigenous cults and rituals, as well as traditional religious festivals, are not mere 'dramatic circumstances', erudite scholars of African literature have carried out a lot of research extensively on the subject.

For example, Andrew Horn, in his study of the spirit medium cult of Bori as practiced in the Hausa speaking communities of northern Nigeria, observes that the performances entail the elements of ritual,

the spirit-cult, and the ceremonial. He admits that the trance of Mai Bori, as a medium of the cult is induced through sequence of music and

dance: "It is at this point that the audience enter into the performance and make direct appeals to the spirit."

The Iska may converse with the spectators, foretell individual fates, offer guidance in personal conduct, issue orders, or 'speak in tongues'. Such ritual performances, to Andrew Horn, have in them the forms that could rightly be called "theatricality of drama...men acting

out human situations for other men: to stimulate thought, feeling, perhaps even action." This view is supported by Benedict Ibitokun .He concurs that the Efe or Egi songs and dances that take place in Gelede

the fertility cult of women make use of elements like pantomimes, chorus and role-playing which 'produce a dramatic tension of suspense.'

Joel AdeyinkaAdedeji maintains that ancestor-worship, which is one of the indigenous religions, involves the use of mummery, receptacles and appurtenances combined with a costumed-figure to depict the deceased

father. To Adedeji, the religious significance of the concept is not only cultic but entertaining. The ominous significance of Yoruba religious ceremonies is embedded in dances and chants. Therefore, it becomes crucial to associate dance with ritual and rites of passage which, as argued by Helen Thomas are essential components of traditional structurally simple, pre-

literate cultures. Consequently, the concept of dance in traditional religious worship is exclusively centred on the heightening drumbeats which are expressed in a variety of codes and... aesthetics, some of which are relatively stable while others are in a state of continuous flux. This analysis, as maintained by Helen Thomas, is quite fundamental to the understanding of dance in the context of traditional African ritual and festivals. Dietz and Olatunji put it more succinctly: "Music and dance are important to religious expression. The Yoruba tribesmen who worship the god of thunder sing and dance vigorously during the Sango ritual. The spirit enters their bodies as they dance to the powerful, complex rhythmic patterns. They are overpowered and sometimes collapse. The religious effect is so great that the dancers expose themselves to fire without danger. They do not feel the fire nor do their bodies show evidence of being burned. The chanting, accompanied by the rhythm of drums, gongs and rattles, seems to transform them." The 'possession phase' is done intermittently and believed to form

the 'progression of the rites', as reinstated by Ibitokun (1983:5-6). However, it is worthy of note to consider that most Yoruba traditional rituals, as observed by C.O. Adepegba, have their own forms of drums and ensembles, peculiar to each deity. Such instances like 'the quick step of bata dance,' according to P.A. Ogundeji, is one of the features of restlessness and irascibility which are "characteristics of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder." The frenzied movements and ululatory chants are, for example, the indicator of the role played. To A.M. Opoku: "The fullest expression of the African(traditional religions and festivals)is the dance." He describes the religious dance called 'Akem' of the Akan people of Ghana that involves 'fast intricate steps, spin turns, leaps, jumps and virtuosity' in order to depict the 'attributes' of the deity. The cultic aspect of dance is also exemplified in the dance of the Yeve cult among the Anlo people, as indicated by Opoku. However, Edwin Ardener correctly notes that the efficiency of ritual dances is based on the ability of the members of the society to

transform themselves into the body of their totem. In Elephant dance among the Bakweri tribe of Cameroon, as identified by Ardener, the 'Elephant doubles' of the impersonators are believed to carry out the trampling effects on the farm of their enemies. To the Bakweri tribe, 'Veambe' which is exclusively a ceremonial dance is symbolic of the 'Elephant herd through the forest'. The definitive peculiarity of ritualized dance is emphasized through the use of imageries by the impersonators (usually the priests, medium or devotees) of the deities implied in the ritual drama. This is illustrative in the ritual dance of OrisaOko where the priestess "goes into some sort of trance at the shout of Eepa Lodumare" the panegyric reverence to the deity. But J.R.O. Ojo in his presentation, "OrisaOko, the deity of the Farm and agriculture among the Ekiti" ,emphasizes the need to understand that "spirit possession does not occur in all (dances)." Thus, it is noteworthy that certain dances like Tsough, Akombo and Giraya of the Tiv, as clearly shown by Peggy Harper, are some of the deritualized dance performances that are

mainly for funeral ceremonies, propagation of communal ideas or adapted for 'contemporary needs'. Hence, Stephen Makun finds it quite important to present 'the reason for the licentious nature' in some festival performances as 'the desire of the society to create the right atmosphere for the release of the caged feelings'. In his interesting study of the traditional festival drama of the people of Owe Kabba, Makun admits that the deity (Opelu) though dreaded by the women has in his repertoire various songs and dances that are performed by the women in the community. The ritual drama is laden with bawdy statements and satirical references to men's use of penis. The dance enactment, which is known as 'Iye Mose' is said to be characterized by feminine sexual urge, which is mimed through sensuous bodily movements. Such artistic expression predicated on mime and musical ensembles is used in some ritual festivals to depict the analogy of past events. The story that revolves around a certain symbolic character can be thematised through the accompanying songs (Adedeji 1972, Ogunba 1978). To this, it is pertinent to quote C.M. Bowra: "In most primitive song

words are only a part of a complex unit. In the first place, they are sung, and the singing is done to a recognizable, if simple, tune, and though each people has its own way of composing such tunes, they nonetheless follow regular rules and qualify to be called musical.” These ‘regular rules ‘are emphasized by Dele Layiwola in his analysis of traditional African ceremonial dances. To him, “Mores, archetypes and traditions are discernible from definite patterns of movements.” He speculates that there is always the index of a dual goal in the conception and achievement of dance as purposeful action ,or in the context of vagary (Layiwola 1989:97).

It is considered that aspects of ritual dance are participatory and communal only as far as they bear the collective worldview of a people whose customs they represent. This “collective unconscious”, as Catherine Acholonu puts it, is central to the whole enactment: “The (ritual) dances of a people are group representations of their collective worldview, born out from their folklore, their memories, their fears and aspirations. The

dancers demonstrate feelings that are buried in the collective unconscious, through ritual enactment the dancers and the audience partakes in an experience, which is at once mythical and real, religious and secular.”

This ‘dramatic phenomenon’ as Layiwola would put it, is most aptly described in J.A.Adedeji’s (1966) article, “The Place of Drama in Yoruba Religious Observance”: “The cults and the religions of the Yoruba have yielded evidences of their theatrogenic character like those of ancient Greece...Although the ritual play is not ‘staged’, the whole festival has a form or an outward appearance, which gives it an artistic pattern.”

To rebuff the conception that ‘African festivals are either an orgy of merriments or a string of weird, primitive sacrifices and dances’, OyinOgunba declares that: “The festival is not just a religious occasion...things which in other civilizations are regarded as merely secular are treated with a certain degree of awe and sacredness and things which could otherwise be regarded as sacred do accommodate

“surprising profanities” (Ogunba 1978:4-5).

Thus, it is quite important to agree with the postulation that pre-colonial African festival in its appealing aesthetic is not only religious but theatre.

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