

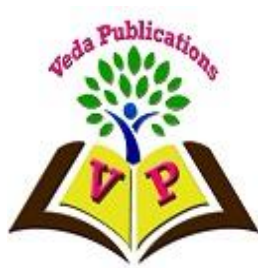
CULTURE, THEATRE AND LANGUAGE: CHALLENGES TO FOREIGN AUDIENCE/READERS' APPRECIATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORKS OF NIGERIAN DRAMATISTS

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Abstract



Every dramatic work is a representation of a culture through the presentation of a geographical area that is revealed through the various elements of production and predicated on the official or indigenous language of the people. Abe and Ajayi (387) are of the opinion that 'creative artists mould cultural elements to enhance and embellish their works. In this instance, culture becomes an enhancer that establishes a dramatic experience within a particular geo-cultural society ...' A government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and the preservation of cultures. Thus every citizen shall learn the language of the immediate environment. In the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child in Nigeria shall be required to learn one of the three Nigeria major languages: Hausa, Igbo Yoruba.

Keywords: *Culture, Theatre, Languages, Nigerian, Dramatists.*

The style of language of composition which varies from one dramatist to the other, gives the work the necessary identity. The dramatist 'is a small god, with a stage for his Eden, peopled by Adams and Eves of his own creation. And, like the supreme Creator, he skillfully manipulates his subjects in accordance with his whims and caprices, enriching one, impoverishing the other, creating conflicts and resolving them, as one character is played against the other' (Umukoro, 6). These dramatists

place interest on the serviceable value of art in their creativity.

This is because they choose a subject that troubles them and their society and make a creative piece out of it. Critical observations of the various creative currents show that these playwrights attempt to say one thing or the other about society with their works while playing with the language understood by their target audience. Whether it is poetics of fatalism, pessimism or animist metaphysics or literature of social realism, the point is clear that each work tells its own story about the society (Binebai 110).

Agreeably, an audience or reader, not minding his experience, sense of observation and imagination, enjoys the dramatist's work through his understanding of the dramatist's chosen language. However, no matter the genre through which a work is composed, it will only achieve popularity through the understanding, appreciation and acceptance of the audience or reader. Hence, the dramatist must consider the audience and readers in his composition since they are members of his dramatist society whose sense of imagination, appreciation and understanding of the dramatist's culture may not be easily bypassed. The audience, like the reader, is another creative mind whose understanding and knowledge of his culture cannot be downplayed. Therefore, it is important that the dramatist considers his influence on the audience/readers' knowledge. This influence, positive or negative, depends on the ability of the latter to understand and as well interpret the language of composition and other cultural elements which the former has creatively woven into his work. Suffice it to say that the creative use of language in a particular work is one major factor that interests or causes disinterestedness in the audience or reader. Hence,

the African dramatist shoulders a heavy responsibility towards his immediate society and humanity at large. His is the role of the seer or prophet in a predominantly ignorant community, a visionary artist, whose work points the way forward through the labyrinth of time... Thus, the African dramatist cannot afford to be aloof, or alienate himself from the collective goal of his people' (Umukoro, 15).

The Dramatist and his Audience/Reader

A dramatist is affected by the conditions under which he conceives and writes - his socioeconomic status, personal background, religious or political position, and purpose of writing, while his work or creativity and its stylistic elements will be influenced by his culture as well as his innovative energy. Things may go wrong when the intellectual or cultural background of the audience/reader does not permit a shared experience with the dramatist's work since the audience's cultural assumptions, holy or profane, local or international, social or political, may override all else in deciding the form and content of the creative work. These are large considerations that can take the dramatist into areas of sociology, politics, social history, religion, literary criticism, philosophy, aesthetics, and beyond in his confabulation or research into an event in history.

The Nigerian dramatist presents his society in a non-partial but congenial manner. However, the reactions to his work, which can only emanate from the understanding of the language and other elements of his writing, are borne out of the fact that the audience/reader sees himself in a manner that presents him for diagnosis. Agreeably, the Nigerian theatre conforms to Mayer and Richard's description of theatrical tradition as 'the transmission of a code of rules (conventions) to which players, playwrights and audiences conform, and a store of possible modes of representing action which accumulates over generations' (68).

Culture and the Nigerian Theatre

Culture remains a distinguishing factor in the existence of any society as it embraces the behaviour, language, beliefs, religion, politics, festivals, translations, rituals, rites, codes and administration. In Taylor's opinion, culture is '... that complex whole which includes

knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society' (16). In order to appropriately capture the tone of this paper as regards the place of culture in the works of Nigerian dramatists, we will accede to Piddington's postulations that the culture of a people is 'the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment whereby they satisfy their biological and social needs and adapt themselves to their environment' (13). It is important that people derive pleasure and satisfaction in what they do. Every reader of a work seeks for pleasure and satisfaction from such work, however, pleasure and satisfaction can only be guaranteed if the reader understands the language which holds the inherent message in the work. Every drama is a structured activity of various characters. However, one major nexus between culture and drama in the service of the society is the fact that 'while culture generates codes on which a people's behavioural pattern is anchored drama provides the vehicle with which these codes are passed from one generation to the other' (Gowon, 114). Therefore, we view culture as 'the totality of the ways and styles of live evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organisation' as distinct from other cultures [emphasis mine] (Idegu, 315).

Right from the beginning of theatre practice in Nigeria, when performances were predicated on improvisation to the emergence of the dramatist through the establishment in 1948 of the University College, Ibadan that played primary influence on the art of playwriting through the establishment of an English Department and the later emergence of a Department of Theatre Arts in 1970, the dramatist has always give the audience what it expected. Taking Soyinka's two plays *A Dance of the Forests* and *Death and the King's Horseman* into consideration, the foremost dramatist creates tragic experience through the Yoruba cosmology. Obi Maduakor succinctly summarises these works as 'Soyinka's metaphysical and materialist perspectives in evolving a dramatic aesthetic' (Gowon 147). Theatre relies on culture for its materials while the promotion of any culture is predicated on the theatre through performance. Thus, 'theatre and culture are largely environmental phenomenon as they interplay at various levels to produce a picture of the casual complexes that characterise a society. It is therefore not debatable that every theatrical/dramatic piece presents before the audience/reader a society with its peculiar antecedents which nourishes its

uniqueness...’ (Gowon 144).

Culture and Language in the Works of Nigerian Dramatists

Adeoye in Abe and Ajayi (391) is of the opinion that, ‘the issue of cultural degradation experienced in Nigeria and other nations of Africa, which has gradually metamorphosed into neo-colonialism remains a significance of the colonialists’ ideological programme. Even today, the influence of the Western nations on most African countries has become a phenomenon on the sociopolitical and economic terrain of most developing countries in the Black continent of Africa. Taking a cursory look at the origin of literary works of the earlier African writers, it is clear that most of the earlier works of the Nigerian dramatists were a ‘search for identity and sorts of response to the problem of cultural degradation. This is one major reason why the earlier Nigerian dramatists of Yoruba origin ‘wrote in English, but, in locally fabricated and flavoured English’ (Osofisan 180). This indigenous flavor mainly displayed in the use of proverbs, idioms, and dialectics, raises the interpretation of our drama above the understanding and interpretation of a Euro-American reader/audience who may find all these elements of our culture a hard nut to crack. Thus, Osofisan’s play *Twingle Twangle – a Twynning Tale*, which presents us with the lives and adventures of a set of twins and, portrays a general knowledge of a vital principle which has to do with the concession to each person or individual character even if it may not be pleasing to all. In the dramatist’s culture, the twins are created in pair and they must remain so, even at death. Hence, the act of carving an image to complete the pair when one of them dies is a significance of the Yoruba’s (a tribe in Nigeria) concept of completeness. Ulli Beier in his explanation of the Euro-American short of understanding of the Yoruba’s concept of completeness which dwells on the African belief in the nature of completeness and togetherness enunciates in his conversation with Professor Wole Soyinka: ‘do you remember that outside the gate to the *Osun* (a deity in Yoruba land) grove there were three mighty trees? These trees were interlinked in their crowns, and they made a very powerful group. They were very sacred, and you really felt you were in the presence of *Orisa*. The European visitors invariably said, ‘what beautiful trees.’ But Susanne Wenger used to say, ‘perhaps we simply call trees beautiful in our culture because we are incapable of understanding or defining their spiritual being.’ One night, one of those trees suddenly fell to the ground, which to the *Osun* worshippers was a great disaster. They then commissioned a carving to be placed in the *Osun*

shrine at the king's market as a replacement for the tree which perhaps indicates that the spirit of that tree had to be transferred to that *ere* (the carving)' (66).

The work of the Nigerian dramatist at the beginning was characterised by past movements and tradition and, a unified system of beliefs and culture. Today, however, the Nigerian dramatist has attained a new level that grants him recognition where and when issues relating to the art of playwriting are discussed. This is a consequence of his clear understanding and interpretation of his culture and the creation and reflection of an African identity which are notable in the artistic interpretation of 'the spontaneously ceremonial format of performance, and the play's fundamental animist ethos ... which distinctively identify the African play production' (Osofisan, 184). Femi Osofisan, a well-known Nigerian dramatist is of the opinion that, 'although these elements hold significant implications for a non-African, they are employed to create an African identity in dramatic works' (184). These cultural factors, that expressed the African identity in the dramatist's work, will always hinder the aesthetic judgement and appreciation of a foreign audience/reader, who may raise aesthetic questions at the productions of Osofisan's *Twingle Twangle: a Twyning Tale*, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) and Wale Ogunyemi's *Ijaye War* (1996). These plays in performance are the display of traditional elements which include dialogue, songs, dance, large cast, mime, narrative technique and costume.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* portrays aesthetic of the Yoruba's traditional *gbesele*, (I place my foot on her), a privilege that applied not only to the reigning monarch, but also to the *Arema* (the monarch's first son) and the *Elesin Oba* (king's horseman) which of course may be beyond the understanding of a Western audience who may see it as an abuse of right and freedom or as an act of oppression. This also applies to the ritual of someone's decision to die with the king which to the Western critic is simply suicidal. Beier, due to his knowledge, and understanding of the Nigerian culture, justifies the African notion of the ritual as against the Western idea when he explains with references to Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Duro Ladipos's opera *Obakoso*

the European notion of suicide is very far from the ritual that takes place in Death and the King's Horseman. If you

look at the mythology about the Orisa you will find that there is always some form of so-called 'suicide' involved. Sango actually hanged himself. Otin, deified as a river goddess, throws herself on the ground and becomes a river. Oluorogbo ascends to heaven on a chain and Ogun descends from the bowels of the earth. In each case there is metamorphosis from one form of existence to another. It always arises from a sense of tragedy, from a feeling that without this transition you cannot become what you are meant to become (68).

Kofoworola observes that, in *Death and the King's Horseman* for example 'the long shadow of the British intervention could not breach the cosmology where the living, the dead and the unborn are perceived as a consortium, hence Olunde, the eldest son of Elesin, could not be prevented from the required obligation in spite of his Western education' (81). The metaphysical content of the play, inherent in Elesin's obsequiously submissive personality to the King both on earth and the world beyond, will generate arguments if placed before a Western audience/reader. Hence, 'the colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind – the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numerous passage which links all' (Soyinka 56). Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi raised a similar issue in *Kurunmi* and *Ijaye War* respectively – two historical plays with a similar plot but different conceptual approach. The main issue that leads to the war in these plays is the first son of Alaafin (Aremo) who like the Elesin in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* must die with his father simply because he enjoys equal rights, freedom, and access to human and physical properties in the land.

The use of dialectics and magical power is another cultural aspect in the works of the Nigerian dramatists. These are displayed in Duro Ladipo's *Obakoso*, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* and most of the plays mentioned earlier in the foregoing.

How do you explain to a foreign audience that the recitation of some magical words could force a man to sleep or dance,

or that the mere stretching of a carved stick (Sango's wand) could provoke lightning? This is far above the scientific expertise of the Western world. No wonder then that the Editorial review of the performance of Ladipo's Obakoso in Berlin in 1965 exposes the creative inability of the Western theatre to achieve such an aesthetic height in the dramatic performance. The Spectator a British Weekly Magazine carries in its review that, here was something Europe cannot do. Also, the use of words, pronounced in the right order, can impact an existence even more efficient than physical power as displayed in 'Obakoso' will beat the imagination of a Western audience/reader. The inability of the Western world to understand and as well interpret this aspect of our culture made them to discern and refer to the African's indigenous creativity as barbaric, ugly and outdated. (Kerr 99 in Abe and Ajayi, 393).

Another aspect of culture that distinguishes the African dramatist is the proverb. Proverbs give the work of a dramatist the African touch that is a misery to a Western audience/reader to unravel in its context and meaning. Zulu Sofola in her play *Wedlock of the Gods*, creates scenes that are filled with proverbs and the idiomatic expression that may demand the interpretation of a native: 'some of you young men need to be reminded that not all cutlasses that went to the farm are used. Some just don't cut deep... A man is a not a man simply because he parades an okra sprout...it is only a slave who sees the truth and ties his tongue with silence...' (15).

The Nigerian drama is the reflection of fecundity of ideas which is another vital principle in the language of indigenous dramatists. It is a sort of paradoxical use of words. Lawuyi Ogunniran in *Aare Ago Arikuyeri*, a satire that exposes brave men and war generals as weaklings at the sight of or mention of death, uses such words to create aesthetics in the play. Aare Ago (a character in the play) eulogises his slim wife as '*obirin teere ti o nye oko lojo ijo*' meaning, a slim woman that befits a husband in a dance contest. Incidentally, Ulli Beire appreciates this very aspect of the Yoruba culture when he recounts the eulogy of a

slender woman in one of his writings. In his eulogy, he praises a slim woman: 'she falls on a plate; the plate does not break, she falls on a mortar; and the mortar splits right down the middle.' To these he explains that, he tries to convey the idea that even though the woman is slight of build she is not insubstantial' (Omodele, 69). Here is another form of language in which the Yoruba ideas on beauty differ very much from those of other culture.

Also, the main concept in the play – *Ori* (head) - may pose an esoteric situation to a foreign reader or audience who needs to address the metaphorical status of the head and the implications of the ingredients gathered for such sacrifice. The Yoruba believe that *Ori* (head) is the pathfinder that guides him to this world and therefore must be accorded the right respect through regular sacrifice. All the ingredients for sacrifice have cultural implications with the object – the head. Thus the Yoruba proverb that, *Ori la ba bo, ti a ba f'orisa s'ile* meaning the head should be worshipped at the expense of the deities. Isola observes that 'the Yoruba dramatists incorporate materials from oral poetry in most of his works.' (401). His reference is based on the earlier mentioned play: *Aare Ago Arikuyeri*. In the play, Isola, 'Aje (a character in the play), wants to offer sacrifice to his head, to thank it for bringing him so much luck...the religious poetry in the form of *Ifa* corpus remind the audience of the important role of the human head in the affairs of men. Other vices enjoin men to take good care of their heads and advise them to put or recognise the importance of the head even before the deities (*Ori la ba bo, ti a ba fi orisa sile*). The head to a foreign audience remains a part of the body therefore, to worship or offer sacrifice to it is as crude as to die with a king. *Ori* (head) to a foreign audience is a part of the body that houses the brain and other senses and what it requires is just daily care of washing. To embark on the artistic search for its metaphor and link it with other paraphernalia of sacrifice remains a herculean task to his imagination and a stumbling block to his understanding.

Also, the concept of the ashes and the shaving of the head of a widow presents by Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* is another cultural aspect that may require the understanding of a theatre director and the audience. These are salient aspects of the Deltans' culture in Nigeria. An audience or reader needs to unravel the concept behind the shaved head, the ashes and the ingredients in the worship of the head which are unfamiliar terrain to a foreign audience/reader. That a widow must shave her head and remains in the ashes for a period of

time to honour her late husband may sound balderdash to a foreign audience and thus hinders his understanding and appreciation.

Conclusion

Culture remains a constant aspect of theatre, while theatre through the dynamism of the culture has shown a shift from what it was in the pre-colonial and colonial periods while still preserving the factors that qualify a people as one ‘with a holistic mind that enables him understands the phenomenon in his environment as irreducible truths. Hence, the theatre cannot be totally divorced from her religious, cultural, economic, and political activities...’ (Nwosu, 108-9). The major reason of reading or watching a play is to derive pleasure. The work of a dramatist, any dramatist at all, showcases his immediate society. Therefore, to understand and be able to appreciate a work of art requires a study or familiarisation with the culture of the author.

Moreover, every dramatic production is a signification of the artistic collaborations of many artists whose common bond is culture. From the efforts of the first generation of dramatists of the Nigeria Premier University established in 1948 to the present day, Nigeria indigenous dramatists’ have not turned their backs to their immediate society as they exhibit and promote the people’s culture in their works. Nevertheless, language remains the factor that lubricates the relationship between the dramatist and his followers.

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