

THE PLACE OF DRAMA IN RITUAL AFRICAN THEATRE

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Abstract

What we intend to show in this paper is how ritual drama is staged in traditional African festivals. Ritual drama is defined as the drama which emerges from the traditional festival celebrations of the Yoruba people. This drama is not Aristotelian. Ritual drama is a drama of music, masking and dance. It relies heavily on mime and symbolism and that is why the open-air stage is the typical one. In general, African ritual performances are staged in large open spaces big enough to accommodate actors and audiences who are sometimes in thousands. The main determinant of location, however, is not just availability of space, but a place that is ritually significant in the experience of the people. At festival time this place assumes its metaphysical reality and is a piece of sanctified ground. Taking into consideration both sanctified ground and available space for performance, the following are the typical stage locations in Yoruba ritual drama: the outskirts of a town or village; market areas; road junctions; historic places; One of the main differences between ritual drama and other forms of drama is that the place of performance is crucial to the drama. The performance is non-transferrable, for once it is transferred it loses its character and its authenticity. The popular notion of the stage in traditional African festivals is that of the stage-in-the-round, with actors and orchestra in the middle and the audience closing on them. While this is the most typical form, there is the risk of over-generalizing it for all. The stage form and the staging techniques adopted in any given African festival depend on the nature and the artistic goal of the festival. We would like to finish our paper explaining how this type of ritual theatre ultimately ends up adjusting to the proscenium arch stage.

Keywords: Space, performance, ritual, drama, Yoruba.

In many communities in Africa today, except those already totally overrun by foreign religions, traditional festivals are staged from time to time. Such ceremonies are woven around diverse beings and physical phenomena ranging from powerful gods and goddesses to hill and water spirits and the generality of illustrious ancestors. This is particularly true of West Africa where local gods and spirits have continued to thrive in spite of the great challenge of modern civilization and foreign culture.

The term 'traditional festival' will be held here to mean an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries and which has, therefore, developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practiced by many of our contemporary artists.

It is true that every traditional festival is attached to a supernatural being or deified ancestor and to that extent may be said to be religious in base and inspiration. But in its realization a festival's religious origin or foundation is too often and too easily superseded, the festival, thereby becoming veritable carnival, dance drama or ritual drama.

Ritual drama is a drama of music, masking and dance. It relies heavily on mime and symbolism, and the high point of performance is often the attainment of possession in dance, a state of ecstasy in which the dancer is transfigured and is in perfect union with the god, spirit or ancestor being celebrated.

Prior to the advent of the white man, Africans did not have 'theatres' in the western or oriental sense. Nobody in Africa built structures specifically designated 'playhouses' which served the purposes of entertainment or dramatic instruction and nothing else. Though there were arenas for performance, they were not constructed in strict geometric dimension like those of the ancient Greeks. Most African cultures do not even have a word for *drama*, although they have words for *play*, *music*, *performance*, etc.

In ritual drama the open-air stage is the typical one, although certain performances (usually secret or night ceremonies) are held indoors. Indoor ceremonies are often of a sacrificial nature and exclude a non-participating audience, whereas much of ritual drama is staged consciously for public enlightenment or edification and requires a full display in the open.

In general, performances are staged in large open spaces big enough to accommodate actors and audiences who are sometimes in thousands. Groves are often huge tracts of land sufficiently spacious to take the large dramatic

actions of gods and ancestors. But the main determinant of location, as noted above, is not just availability of space (even though space is important); it is rather the place that is ritually significant in the experience of the people. Such places often look commonplace enough at ordinary times, and may even be converted to other uses, like serving as children's playground. But at festival time the place assumes its metaphysical reality and is a piece of sanctified ground. Indeed, it is the ability of the community to make these psychological adjustments that facilitates the symbolism of ritual, so that a place which an hour earlier was just an improvised market place suddenly becomes the holy place of a god; and a tree which had appeared ordinary enough a short time earlier suddenly becomes the abode of spirits and ancestors.

Taking into consideration both sanctified ground and available space for performance, the following are, according to Oyin Ogunba (2000: 55-57), some of the locations in this ritual drama:

The outskirts of a town or village – here the groves are located and they are the traditional reservation areas for gods and ancestors.

Market areas – The market is a convenient place for performance, largely because of a ready audience. More importantly, however, gods and ancestors are interested in the market place as a center of the community, that is, a place where the earth has eyes. There are quite a lot of examples of market places as stage locations in the African literature.

Road junctions – The road junction in traditional Yoruba thought is regarded as a mysterious place, the abode of spirits. Supernatural forces in the Yoruba universe tend to congregate at road junctions at particular times of the day and night, and therefore it is necessary for anyone in ritual performance to appreciate this point and pay homage to these forces whenever he reaches such a junction.

Historic places – Palace grounds, old or abandoned palace sites, particular spots where more important events took place in the experience of the community, for

example, sites of hills which served as protection for the people at certain crisis period, are important locations for performance in ritual drama. This is particularly strong in the royal traditions of the Yoruba people and examples are to be found in virtually every sizeable community in the land.

Women's Cult houses – The frontage and environment of cult houses and of the houses of cult chiefs are important stage locations. Yoruba women tend to make use of the cult house more than their menfolk, for they hold regular weekly and monthly meetings, dance and drum all night, and occasionally bring out their *orisa* in a masquerade form.

Water surfaces – In the coastal and riverine areas of Yorubaland, water surfaces and the adjoining beaches are also important areas for staging performances.

One of the main differences between ritual drama and other forms of drama is that the place of performance is crucial to the drama. The performance is non-transferable, for once it is transferred it loses its character and authenticity. The performance location is, therefore, just as important as the action being staged, for it is the "special space" which, together with the masking in some cases, allows the transformation from man to character or man to god to take place.

The popular notion of the stage in traditional African festivals is that of the stage-in-the-round, with actors and orchestra in the middle and the audience closing in on them in all directions and virtually suffocating them. While this is the most typical form, there is the risk of over-generalizing it for all. The stage form and the staging techniques adopted in any given festival depend on the nature and artistic goal of the festival. Whenever the aim is to demonstrate a total or near-total communal act, the tendency is to use a stage-in-the-round. But where there is differentiation or the need to show a distance between man and spirit, or between king and the populace, other forms of staging may be adopted. Oyin Ogunba (2000: 58-60) distinguishes three patterns of staging in Yoruba ritual drama namely, (i) the stage-in-the-round, (ii) the roughly rectangular stage, and (iii) the picture-frame stage, and within each form there are significant variations:

The stage-in-the-round: this stage accommodates different degrees of audience participation, depending on the type of festival or the particular act or episode being performed within a festival. In case of Egungun maskerades, for example, they have ample space for performance, including somersaulting, and, to that extend, this is a good example of a well-laid-out stage-in-the-round.

The rectangular stage: this is the case of mimed dances in which it is the distance between where the dance starts and where it ends which is really important in the setting.

The picture-framed stage: In this case the audience is kept at a great distance from the performing masks and as it is usually performed at night with purposefully inadequate lighting, what the audience sees are silhouetted figures at a distance which trickily become smaller or taller as they veer or approach the audience.

I would like to finish this study with an analysis of a play by the Nigerian Nobel Laureate playwright, Wole Soyinka, and explain how this type of ritual theatre ultimately ends up adjusting to the proscenium stage.

In large part due to the relative lack of productions in Europe, the plays of Wole Soyinka have mostly been approached from a literary point of view rather than analyzed as theatrical events. Because the plays rely heavily on non-verbal conventions, the neglect of visual and acoustic patterns promotes an incomplete understanding of Soyinka's idea of theatre.

On the 22nd November 1990, the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester was the scene for the second British production of Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman*. For western directors the staging of the play causes problems on a formal as well as thematic level, the main obstacle being the dramaturgical importance of music and dance as the two other basic means, apart from verbal dialogue, of communication in African culture.

A major factor in determining Phyllida Lloyd's decision to direct *Death and the King's Horseman* was the very architecture of the Royal Exchange Theatre:

This is obviously a very particular theatre space, a particular design. I've been directing a lot of classical plays in the last couple of years and I was looking for a modern play that had something important to say and also did it in a way that would do justice to the physical life here. And the fact that part of this play is set in a market place, and this theatre is built in a nineteenth-century market just seemed somehow too good to be true. (Rohmer, 1994, p.58)

The significance of the space in which a performance takes place and the fact that it plays an important role in the conveyance of meaning is generally accepted. Yet as Lloyd has pointed out, it is of special interest for her production. Moreover it is widely known that Soyinka, not only as author but as an experienced theatre practitioner, has clear ideas about special issues in the staging of his plays. The architectural peculiarity of the Royal Exchange Theatre is as a 'building within a building' – for the theatre is constructed inside the huge Victorian hall that was once the city's famous and busy Cotton Exchange. To avoid the colossal echo-effect the stage has a separate acoustic entity.

An examination of the Victorian building reveals its function as a conveyor of meaning on various levels: on the level of urban development, with its central situation close to the market and in the heart of the inner city, accessible from St. Ann's Square and Cross Street; on the optical level with its visual appearance emblematic of strength and prosperity; and on the historical level, thanks to its age, the tradition of the Cotton Exchange being as a busy market and distribution center for goods from the colonies, at a time when Manchester was one of the wealthiest communities in Britain or even of the old empire. As Phyllida Lloyd pointed out, this historical aspect made the Royal Exchange Theatre an ironically apt venue for the play.

The modern glass building that forms the inner theatre space is constructed as a theatre- in -the -round, and this corresponds to Soyinka's intentions for his play. A director with experience of both picture frame and arena staging, Soyinka leaves no doubt about his preference: 'As a decidedly anti-proscenium stage artist, I hope to see fewer and fewer of those mind-constructors left in the world'. (1988, p.116)

Concerning *Death and the King's Horseman* the communicative advantages of the arena stage match both the metaphysical concept of what Soyinka defines as 'ritual drama' and more particularly the notion of what he terms the audience's choric function:

The so-called audience is itself an integral part of that arena of conflict; it contributes spiritual strength to the protagonist through its choric reality which must first be conjured up and established, defining and investing the arena through offerings and incantations. (1988, p.39)

In Soyinka's plays with metaphysical implications the arena's function as a magic microcosm cannot be overestimated. During the performance it is turned into a spiritually energetic place where the actors may re-enact the basic conflicts of Yoruba mythology to regain cosmic harmony and to bridge the gap between the gods and the man.

The conditions of a theatre-in-the-round and the spatial integration of the foyer avoid the conventional and paralyzing illusionism which is so easily created by the proscenium arch form. Another dramaturgical advantage of the arena stage is its flexibility concerning the setting, whereby Soyinka's demand for rapid scene changes can be fully realized.

The spatial conditions of the Royal Exchange Theatre thus perfectly match Soyinka's aesthetic concept in relation to its tradition as an Exchange, or market, with a colonial history which correlates ironically with part of the play's setting; and owing to the building's roots in the city's community, the functioning of its stage as a 'magic microcosm' which positions the protagonist in

the center, surrounded by the choric circle of the audience, and through its huge foyer, which allows a spatial extension of the play's action and so intensifies its dynamics.

Death and the King's Horseman opens with a grand panorama of the Yoruba market place. Here, Soyinka deploys all his artistic power to paint a picture of grandeur and vitality. Apart from its obvious economic importance, the market occupies a cultural, political and spiritual position in the Yoruba cosmos. First, it is a site of political and cultural ferment. Second, it doubles as that numinous zone in which the distinction between the world of the dead and the living evaporates. Finally, it serves as a barometer for the spiritual well-being of the community. It is therefore a stroke of genius on the part of the playwright to have focused his artistic lens on the market place.

In the first scene the audience immediately understands there is a celebration going on in the market. Elesin, the protagonist, and chief horseman of the king – one of the highest positions in the community – enters with his drummers and praise-singers, and soon the place is filled with market women and others who join the festive atmosphere. It is only after a while that the audience begin to suspect the reason behind these celebrations – which becomes completely clear in the second scene, when Simon Pilkings, the white district officer in his bungalow, urges his native Sergeant Amusa and his house-boy Joseph to tell him the true meaning of the unusual drum rhythms which are audible, and which gradually start worrying him. Their response finally makes not only Pilkings but the audience aware that this merry atmosphere is nothing less than a preparation for death – since, according to custom, the horseman has to follow the king, who has died shortly before, by committing ritual suicide. The play tells the story of a failure – Elesin's failure to fulfill the demands of this ritual, due to a combination of external and personal factors.

To expect a man to surmount the overwhelming historical and political forces ranged against him is to expect the impossible. In the final analysis what Soyinka has done in *Death and the King's Horseman* is to counter-pose the

dominant culture of the ancient Oyo Kingdom against the equally hegemonic culture of the white invaders. This is a profoundly decolonizing venture and in an age characterized by new forms of cultural domination consequent upon the economic marginalization of the Third World, it remains to be seen whether it is not a more pressing project than analyzing the class content of indigenous culture. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the playwright is an unabashed horseman (like his character Elesin) of a besieged culture, fighting a desperate rearguard battle against the cultural "other". In such turbulent circumstances, he could not direct his gaze at the inequities of the traditional set-up, lest his resolve be weakened; neither could he bring himself to recognize the fact that the very culture he was defending has already succumbed to the alienating necessity of history, lest the rationale for fighting disappears. But by the same token, his radical critics are also complicit horsemen of the cultural and colonial "other". For by insisting on the decadent and oppressive nature of the indigenous culture, they are in ideological collusion with that genetic evolutionism and naively uni-linear historicism which seeks to justify the cultural atrocities of colonialism as the inevitable consequence of historical 'progress'.

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