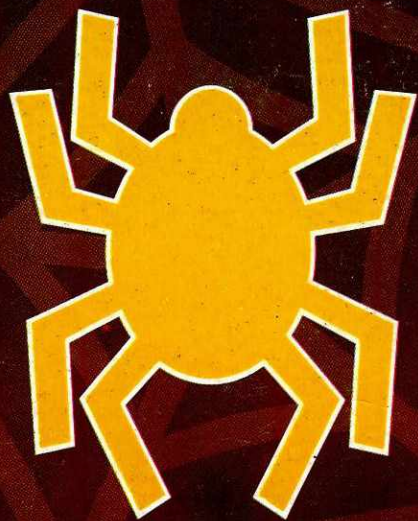


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POSITIONING THE AFRICAN SCENOGRAPHIC IDIOM IN THE EUROPEAN THEATRICAL SPACE-A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines scenography within the African theatre concept, vis-à-vis the ideological pressure from its European precursor (scenographically). It is important to understand the dilemma which African scenography faces due to the transformations African theatre performance has gone through in adapting to modern theatrical demands. These influences cannot be ignored while trying to re-invent, reposition or re-assert the African environmental portraiture in African theatrical performances. One of the factors remains the play-text which informs design, irrespective of its various sub-cultural contexts. The other is space which accommodates the intended outcome owing to the present status quo of theatre patrons and audiences. And the third is the technology which aids and modifies the final picture of scenery. A look at three categories of play shows that there is a shift in the portraiture of their scenic environments and the search for relative independence of each type.

Introduction

The African theatrical genre originally appears to be without form because it did not have a literary dictionary or encyclopedia supporting its practice. In other words, since traditional Africa does not have a method of written documentation for a near replay or reproduction, the lifespan of every African performance was between the beginning and the end of that performance, or between the beginning of a story and when it ends. That is, it existed by words of mouth or an enactment so definite but ephemeral yet alive only in the minds of the people. This is the oral tradition as we know it. So the image of African theatre or drama was what the European writers were able to write about it for centuries. That is why there is a continued

struggle to identify and reclaim what appears to be African as Africans know it and not as perceived and told by foreigners.

However, about 1981, a comprehensive volume was made available to scholars in Nigerian and around the world offering the broad spectrum of our oral traditions in Yemi Ogunbiyi's *Theatre and Drama in Nigeria*. That volume also threw a lot of light on the different performance forms of what many refer to as traditional African performance, African traditional drama, and literary/contemporary literary drama. In one volume, it provided the origin, the transitions (or growth), and the present admixtures of today's theatre or theatrical acts. Since scenery and performance are hand-in-glove, it can as well be said that African theatre scenography has acted in consonance with the transitions in the existing theatrical pattern under reference.

African scenography – A Question of Authenticity

There is need to delineate African scenography by the type of African play which it represents. They fall into three subcategories. They are the traditional performances, adapted plays of folk literature, and literary drama. Each type presents a different scenic environment. None of the three categories mentioned can be denied legitimacy because each occupies a position in the theatre history of Africa. Even though each has elements of African presence in it, a question of authenticity still arises in the quest for proper African scenographic picture. Which of the following category of African drama is authentically African - the traditional festivals and rituals as shown in the studies of Enekwe, Echeruo, Amakulor, Finegan etc? Or the "Alarinjo" that marked the beginning of formal theatre in the traditional sense; it was organized, recognized and it crossed boundaries as shown in a study by Joel Adedeji. Subsequently, Ogunde and the host of other Yoruba popular theater icons in what Akinwunmi Isola calls "Modern Yoruba Drama". Lastly, could it be Soyinka, Clark and Osofisan for the academic peculiarity of their plays as models for African literary theatre? (Ogunbiyi, 1981).

The answer is not far fetched. The most authentic African theatre, considering the true ingredients that are purely African in it remains the African traditional performances. These are the all-embracing traditional festivals, special masquerade displays, cultural dances and acrobatics and other ritual enactments which employ known "performative" (Brockett 1999) characteristics. They are authentic because they originate from the peoples tradition without any form of adulteration by foreign influence because they

existed before the coming of the Europeans. However, a lot of compromise exists in trying to stage these types of performances indoor in order to make up for theatrics. A major compromise is the abandonment of charms and magic, although, the European drama too has not escaped this problem completely. For instance, in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "Prospero's powers of magic can not be fully materialized being restricted within the limitations imposed by the stage" (Clark 1980: 75).

In furtherance of that limitation, the set as a dwelling place, house or village is a major encumbrance because most plays of folk origin require frequent scene transitions. These scene changes have rarely gone beyond the traditional method of movement by stagehands in a manner that tasks the audience patience. Beyond that, backdrops have come to the rescue in a rather discomfiting manner. A perfect example was experienced in the performance of Ososfisan's *The fabulous Adventures of a Sugarcane man* in the National Arts Theatre Cinema hall in 2009. An ill-sized, ill-fitting backdrop maintained constant village presence throughout the performance that portrayed several different villages, bushes and underwater scenes. However, these performances are done in order to satisfy the taste of the African-European elite class who no longer enjoy pastime under the hot sun or rain.

In staging African drama of any category in the European space however, the major challenge is the care taken in selecting not only the scenic objects but the images in them as well. The essence is not only to minimize ambiguity, but also to make scenery precise, more meaningful and communicative. In these new environments for African drama, the authenticity in African scenery has come to depend on the identity of selected scenic objects – props, costume, makeup, hairstyles, body adornments, and sometimes, fragmentary set pieces etc. In this regard, both the English and Yoruba versions had excellent runs.

A Befitting Language for African Scenography

Natural scenery is like racial identity, it is purely a geographical inheritance. Sometimes, the conditions that make a people different from another also affect the materials in its environment. These are weather, the trees and landscape. That is why there are significant differences between European landscape and that of Africa. No doubt, a painting of Europe in winter is different from that of rainforest Africa. Europe in summer is different from the arid or Sahara desert of northern Africa. There is no doubt therefore, that differences do exist between natural scenic environments the

world over. Dramatic scenery has never left out the objects of nature in an attempt to capture and portray each unique environment (Iwuh 2008). The African theatrical scenery paints its various identities in the different theatrical elements that make up scenery using the people's artistic language of traditional architecture for its sets, traditional dress codes for costume, traditional hairdo and body adornments for makeup, and traditional artifacts for props and décor (DeNegri 1976, Lo-Bamijoko 1983, Azeez 1983, Oyelola 1984).

Scenography emerged through artistic attempts to capture and recreate environments for dramatic activities since performance does not exist in the isolation of specific place of occurrence. Nature plays significant roles in scenery. In African drama so many plays of modern literary tradition have domestic settings of European taste but there still many with detailed African settings. Some of the works with limited influence of urban environments are the various adaptations of Achebe's works like Kalu Uka's *A Harvest for Ants* (1975), Basseff Effiong's *Things Fall Apart* (1992), the different adaptations of Fagunwa's *Ireke, Onibudo* by Osofisan and Ishola respectively. The uniqueness of African scenography is evident in its mountains and seas not because of the heights of the mountains or flowing patterns of the seas but rather in the seeming natural conditions which they exist. The fact that there is African art, attests to African scenography owing to the common factors that exist in them philosophically and materially. By African art, a visit of some of the local art exhibitions will reveal some collections with attractions so empathic that no amount of verbal description will be sufficient to capture the awesome aesthetic uniqueness of the created images or objects.

An African scenography then must be an environment with those material components that exist within the domestic homes of the African or the forms or images that surround the boundaries that define the African. Such material objects dominate his habits and which are seen and identified as unique to the African soil. These are mud houses and their thatched roof of grass and palm frond, the caves and shrines of his gods, calabashes, cane furniture and artifacts, bamboo chairs, mortar and pestle and many such objects. The other elements are the exterior greeneries like palm trees and iroko, banana plants and the ubiquitous bushes. If we can clearly differentiate and capture these clear differences in our scenic designs, in a manner devoid of adulteration by foreign images or ideas then the direction is clearer in the demand for African scenography.

The Quest for Authentic African Scenography

There are spirited efforts made by theatre academics "to evolve an African theatre idiom... It is also commonly held that this new art should not ape European art and should not be a mere copy of traditional African art" (Nwoko 1981: 468-469). Scenography is different from fine art because it is not a painting for visual enjoyment. Rather, it is an environment for dramatic action – all conceived and created from an informed demand. Although scenography is about scenery (including the art of scene painting), it goes beyond that. If we are to understand scenery beyond pictorial appendage, then scenery would be as some authorities defined it, "the total environment of the actor" including the moving actor in costume and makeup (Heffner et al 1963). Its functionality is in spatial terms, considering actor's furniture, props and actors movements in physical terms.

The idea of authentic African scenography demands putting the different play types in their proper perspectives. In the first place, it will be inappropriate to think that the three types of African theatres discussed require the same type of scenery. In fact, discussing authentic African scenography demands that the issue of authentic African drama must be addressed first. The word 'authentic' tends to demand undiluted African theatrical scenic environment. This is a daunting task considering the kind of spaces in which majority of African plays are performed. Often, the exercise usually marks a return to symbolic, representational, or fragmentary scenery.

Again, it is important to clarify the theatre tradition that determines the pattern of African theatre scenography. African theatre cannot claim to have been propelled by Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Surrealism or Expressionism or the like. African theatre has transited not by any particular theatre ideology but by socio-economic attitudes occasioned by colonialism. Likewise, the staging styles have been determined by the author's preferred genre of drama as scholars of drama. A look at the history of theatre scenic practices reveals that each theatre tradition defined the kind of scenery which properly complemented the idea behind its movement.

Theatre is performance - nothing more, nothing less. Performance takes place in a defined space. The visual condition of that space appears to be where opinions differ.

Scenography cannot be discussed in the isolation of some contexts which positions, defines and creates an identity for the particular performance under reference. Therefore, there is need to clearly identify the category or subcategory of the particular African theatre before tackling its scenography.

Scenography as it were involves a consideration of the total factors leading to the physical creation of an environment for a dramatic performance.

Historians and Critics may choose to put African plays into two or three categories but the subdivisions here are chosen due to the differences in their scenic compositions. I will mention but a few. The first is the African traditional performances. The second is the Yoruba popular drama. The third is the plays of the "folkist" ideology, and finally, plays of the European tradition. Today, the various categories have become one under the proscenium theatre despite the thin line created by audience interaction.

The traditional African performance comes with traditional customs, beliefs, dances, tales and other orally preserved forms within a particular language practice. For them, Bakare Traore (1972) recommends a return to the "abundance" which abounds in the folkloric genre. However, that "abundance", appears to be a call for a more thematic preoccupation using the characteristics above. Scenographically, that call cannot be completely out of place since whatever comes out of it would not leave behind its attendant scenery. But it is important to note that Traore's African performance in question takes place in the open without any form of additive scenery. If anything, the only visible sign of violation to the natural scenery is the open space which originally was a bush before it became a village square. This type of theatre is clearly opposed to buildings or artificial lighting, makeup or preconceived audience formation and so on. So where does this fit into our search for authentic African scenography in the present theatrical practice which our society engages? The only way is by adapting much of the scenic features that are possible into the European theatres all around us. These scenic approaches have been adopted for our traditional dances, masquerade displays and many more in the performances that have taken place in contemporary times, including Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). Here again, the emphasis were more on costumes and makeup (including body adornments), props and the aesthetic nuances of racial behaviours.

The other kind is that which relies purely on story telling, which in fact produced some literatures of peculiar kinds. Of particular mention are the works of D. O. Fagunwa like *Ireke Onibudo* adapted from two different angles by Femi Osofisan and Akinwunmi Ishola and performed (2009). The other is Ogunmola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* adapted and performed (1972). Soyinka also translated *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale* as *My Life in the Forest of Ghosts* or *Lamgbodo: My Life in the Forest of a Thousand Demons*. *Ogboju Ode* has since been re-adapted and performed in English

and Yoruba (2009) in pursuance of a cultural vision by a Nigerian company. The arduous demands of these plays in terms of scenery leads to the question whether the African story is meant to be set to dramatic dialogue for performance or simply left to be narrated. If it is for performance, it means that some form of adaptation must take place. If adaptation takes place, then we are talking of true theatre wherein scenic additives become inevitable. Once adaptation is permitted and set to dialogue for performance, it cannot run away from the inevitable encumbrances which the European infrastructure and its defined acting boundary presents in realizing African scenery for African stories.

It is important to appreciate how these two works were realized. Both performances are dramatization of adventure stories that are possible only in dreams even though the principal characters are recognizably human. The reasons for their setting out were also credible enough. But the events in them are more surrealistic than realistic. The locations in them are quite numerous that technically, there are only a few methods of realizing such scenes. One is through the use of profiles, fragment or symbols which Dennis Nwoko applied in the first production of *The Palmwine Drinkard* in 1972. And in 1991, this author designed the same production under the Performance Studio Workshop with a German director, Lukas Hemleb in a different adapted version without the knowledge of Nwoko's design. The methods were alike. The other is through constantly changing scrolls of backdrops to indicate different locations, and the third is lighting as a major design technique. No doubt the best result would be a combination of the three methods.

The demands of such stories will naturally call for the abandonment of single or static scenery. The environment usually sets off from a human dwelling, then bushes, rivers etc. The dramatic characters are usually a combination of humans, animals and fairies. Usually, the desired patterns are drawn or traced out on plywood/hardboard, which are then cut out and painted as desired to create tree leaves/branches, flowers, crawling plants etc. These profiles are then belted onto the actors to form forests and tree braches. Additional forest elements are created using the manipulative movements of the hands and fingers.

The other is mask profiles or full masks worn or carried by actors as well. All the profiles are designed not independent of costumes for scenic complement. All costumes where they are recognizably human are the Yoruba buba and sokoto complete with the native cap. The props include the native basket, calabash, horse whip and drinking horns as the case may

be, while the majority of the actors were given tribal marks on their faces. The houses of course were dressed with mats and grass roof tops. These gave the productions African identity in scenery, character, costume and makeup. The performances of course took place in the University of Ibadan Proscenium stage and the J.K. Randle Memorial Hall, Onikan Lagos.

The third kind of performance which is still in search of performance space is Sam Ukala's "folkism" I have tried to follow the arguments in favour of folkism led by its major proponent, Sam Ukala. But I have also seen the new direction of Adeighon (2010), theoretically. And I submit that the "laws" of folkism appear more credible than any attempt to propose a scenographic concept. The simple reason is that the original setting satisfies the need for the folk narrative in the form which the people tell and listen to them. The other form is for a specialized local audience which has either lost the opportunity of ever returning to that rustic environment, or has transited to a new social realm and therefore craves a different entertainment platform, even for the same material.

Considering the underlying factor which supports Ukala's theory of folkism as "the tendency to base literary plays... in the conventions of folktale" (1996:285), it remains an attempt to transplant or translate the oral folktale tradition into literary dramatic form inspite of whatever contemporary interpretation critics would append to it. So far, it is an attempt to transform African tales into European dramatic format in order to transmit, and reach out, especially to those parts of the world whose audiences relax under European architecture. Sam Ukala therefore has not prescribed any scenographic pattern or corresponding scenic alternative to the dramatic style which he advocates for African folktales other than that under which its European counterpart is orchestrated. This is particularly so because all performance paraphernalia except costume and props remain essentially European.

Eunice Adeighon, Ukala's former student and disciple is everything in agreement with Ukala's theory other than that folkism is yet to be given its perfect space. Clearly, an examination of Ukala's plays show that they are set in the spaces best suited for European illusionistic performances. So far she is totally opposed to the performance of the "folkist" plays in any space which has not considered the characteristics of the village square and the interactive ambience of its audience. One strong reason is that the forefathers according to Traore (1972) never designed any formal architectural space for their performances. There, Adeighon seeks a

marriage between the African performance space and the European architectural concepts.

But what makes Adeighon's proposition uniquely different is that she advocates modern architectural comfort for her folkist audience. In her call for a new space, she proposes a walled enclosure, roofed top and modern stage lighting. Therefore, she is not against the existence of European theatrical influences in African theatre besides the restrictions which the European stage space creates in a manner that limits interactions between the performer and her audience. Adeighon holds tight to that observation as the Greek mechina anchored to the skene.

However, with regard to scenography, the space in which our African plays are performed should not be a problem but rather the content or the selection of the kinds of elements which constitutes the scenic environments. For one reason, Ukala is focused in the direction of his theory. For the second reason, if Ogunde, Ogunmola, Ladipo, Olaiya whose materials are traditional oriented could perform and adapt to venues of all shapes and sizes with or without backdrops, it means that an ingenious assemblage of scenic materials would considerably satisfy scenographic requirements of all similar performances. Finally, there is no doubt that traditional folk stories remain what they are, that is, stories to be narrated by skilled narrators. Beyond that, any dramatization of such folk stories remains an adaptation. Performances as well have succumbed, adapted and conformed to spaces that are convenient to the principal stakeholders.

African Scenographic Exressions in European Theatrical Spaces

The theatre of today cannot be separated from the transitions and the theatre culture of our time; neither can it be separated from technology. That theatre culture is the one that has clearly created, nurtured and separated its audiences. They are two types. First is the one in the villages with its known festival and traditional performances and second is, the literary plays of the European tradition. It is also important to note that the traditional one is not begging for acceptance, neither does it seek any form of merger with the European type either for staging technique or audience formation. Rather, it is the plays of European tradition which borrowed African sources that have sought all forms of methods to integrate the traditional forms into its own both technically and thematically. So the issue has been how best to realize these new African plays in the new performance spaces without losing sight of the African materials. Examples

abound in the plays adapted from D.O. Fagunwa's novels, Chinua Achebe's Novels and many more.

Both the traditional performances and plays of modern literary tradition have existed in theatres and halls all over the country with or without scenery. The reasons for lack of sets as backgrounds have ranged from inappropriate architectural shapes of the stages to the complete absence of stages and spaces for scenery. However, poor financing can hardly be advanced in this circumstance.

The plays of modern tradition are scripted. Since scenographic practice cannot act in the isolation of the script, the talk should be how best to realize that scenery. Every play would normally recommend the kind of environment which its performance requires. Ola Rotimi did that perfectly well in his production of *Ovónranmwé Nògbáisi* in the 1993 performance in the University of Lagos auditorium. The unique and striking thing about that performance and its scenery was the amazing assemblage of most significant Bini arts and carvings. Significant among them was the mask which became the FESTAC symbol. It is a good example of a props dependent set and props designer provided a good detail in that collection. It was complemented by the royal and chieftaincy costumes of the Edo people. It is one best way to demonstrate African scenography for African plays.

Another play of the modern tradition is Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath*. The setting is the living room of permanent secretary in the Nigerian civil service. As it is expected, the environment is the illusion of wall and draped curtains. There is a settee, dining table and chairs, wine bar, television set etc. The costumes are English and Arabic and they reflect the social status of the different characters.

The next point is that of space or the architecture of the performance space. The mere fact that this form of theatre is mainly orchestrated indoors demands some kind of illumination. That form of illumination is sine-qua-non with its environmental creation using the required and appropriate scenic pieces. Two, theatre without some form of theatricality- or make-believe would not have any kind of hype for the audience. The African traditional method of make-believe is traditionally unique to it in a manner that equates its experience with the European performance experience. Wherein, the European theatre employs all the arsenals of illusion supported by its technology to trap its audience, the African performance uses magic, charms and other forms of raw stunts to engage its own audience.

Conclusion

African theatre scenography now rests on three variants - the traditional performances and display, adapted plays of folk literature, and literary drama of contemporary African life. Each type presents a different scenic environment. Irrespective of the content of the scenic ambience, the European theatre structure, the African performance variants seem to have adapted beyond the call for primordial return. In effect, what is referred to as *authentic African scenery* is that which ignores the structure which the performance finds itself to rely more on the combined effects of aesthetics. Marinho (1997) notes that Africans have no better aesthetics than the way and manner African artistic expressions exist in African design.

The many forms of theatre in Africa have come to stay. But many practitioners still miss the traditional form with nostalgia. But only a new proposal will foreclose the argument that supports Traore's a return to African theatre devoid of all forms of European additive. That is, two kinds of theatre from the twenty first onward. One is that which must hold in the village squares where the hooting of the owls, the chirping of birds and the whispering winds interfere at nature's will without offence. The second is that which should happen in the European architecturally designed theatres and equipped with all the technologies that create and support the modern theatrical wonders.

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