

Yorùbá Performance, Theatre and Politics

Staging Resistance

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2015 978-1-137-49278-4

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First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-58131-3 ISBN 978-1-137-49279-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137492791

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are sustained to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Odom, Glenn, 1975–

Yorùbá performance, theatre and politics / Glenn Odom.

pages cm

1. Theater—Nigeria. 2. Theater—Political aspects—Nigeria. 3. Theater and society—Nigeria 4. Nigerian drama—History and criticism. 5. Yoruba drama—History and criticism. 6. Yoruba (African people)—Rites and ceremonies. I. Title.

PN2993.IO36 2015

792.0966'9—dc23

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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Preface and Acknowledgments

During my first trip to Nigeria in 2009, the Yorùbá people gave me a new nickname that basically translated to ‘The Guy Who Asks Weird Questions.’ My questions sought to help me connect theatre, politics, and performance. One sprang from an oft-cited moment in Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forest* in which the main characters don masks and are then possessed by nature-spirits in a manner resembling several traditional religious performances. I wanted to understand the meta-physical dynamics of this replacement of a Cartesian self by a second self, and I wanted to know what this second self was, so as to comprehend the political thrust of this shifting identity.

I had gone to the southwest of Nigeria to study the indigenous structures of Yorùbá theatre and performance. As someone who began my academic career without any contact with or connection to Nigeria, I wanted to be certain I was as prepared as possible. Before embarking I had studied the language, seen the theatre, participated in some traditional performances, and read the scholarly literature. I knew the questions Western and Nigerian researchers had formulated, particularly within the field of postcolonial studies.

When I arrived, I queried dozens of performers, frequently resorting to the services of a translator to make sure regional dialects weren’t causing confusion. They told me time and again that I simply couldn’t ask the questions I was asking. They did not have any meaning within the local context.

This impasse led me to write this book in its present form. While the concerns of postcolonial theory rightly continue to circulate in the text, the overall structure and the foundational questions I ask stem from my apprenticeship at the feet of performers in Nigeria. The topics at stake – civil society, authority, morality, time, and identity – have been subject to innumerable explorations and critiques. As postcolonial theory readily reminds us, universality is a troubled term – perspective matters. The perspective offered by the performers, as filtered through my own perspective, is in dialogue with the perspective taken by postcolonial critics working out of the Western academic system, and this dialogue creates a new set of questions and approaches to these topics.

All of the Yorùbá words in this book are defined in the glossary. The interviews (and their translations) contained in this book were

conducted in collaboration with Olalekan Sunday Damilare. Despite the presence of a native speaker many of the translations provided are problematic. Elision in contemporary Yorùbá is different than it was in traditional speech, and thus many of the older songs and poems I have co-translated have mutated over time with some of the initial words existing now as the best-guesses of the performers.

Even the transcriptions of interviews was challenging given that Yorùbá orthography is an oddly academic pursuit – newspapers and popular literature in Nigeria do little to distinguish tonal markings. Bad English transliterations abound and the same word often has a number of variant spellings. The regional differences between usage are also great. Thus while I included the diacritical markings to assist those scholars who, like me, do not have a native grasp of the language, I recognize that several of the choices I made are debatable, and I suspect, given the complexity of some of the poetry involved, that I have made at least a few mistakes in transcription. These mistakes are mine alone.

The book could not have been completed without the generous financial support of University of California, Irvine, Whitman College, Grinnell College, and, of course, the Fulbright Foundation. Encouragement came from all quarters, but I particularly want to thank Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Femi Osofisan, Julia Walker, David Damrosch, and Richard Schechner for their continued interest in my work. My colleagues at Roehampton University have provided useful feedback during the final revision phase. Tom Hitchner, Michiel Vosveld, and Matthew Brown all listened to me painfully work out the ideas contained here – and then sent me back to the drawing board until I was able to explain said ideas. I also had a small cadre of dedicated undergraduates who got the unfinished first drafts of much of this material: my thanks to Catherine and Theresa Nguyen, Zyme Burris, Jon Wood, Ojas Patel, and Eric Ritter. While I never imagined that I would write this before I traveled there, I also want to thank the people of Nigeria for their willingness to tell me I was culturally clueless and then begin the task of educating me all over again.

I would also like to acknowledge the editorial teams at *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *TDR*, and *Comparative Drama*. Portions of the chapters contained in this book appeared in article form in these journals.

Of course, I never would have met any of the above people had it not been for my graduate advisor, Jane Newman, who spent countless hours during the dissertation phase patiently correcting my rookie mistakes and has continued to offer astute advice on everything from writing, to job hunts, to publishing.

A Note on the Archive

The Yorùbá words in this text appear in their own font (when not being quoted from other sources) in order to correctly display all diacritics. There is a remarkable historical consistency both in form and the attitudes expressed through the performance with regard to the performance of àṣẹ. However, tracing historical development of àṣẹ in Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ and sculptural performance is problematized by the fact that understanding the authority in Yorùbá performance and theatre requires some degree of access to àṣẹ – you must be sufficiently authorized by spirits and community to participate in or understand certain esoteric portions of these performances. Thus, much of the archive, constructed as it was by outsiders, shows a limited understanding of the issues at stake. Given that I am an outsider, I am reliant on the confluence of written and oral archives, self-reporting of my field subjects, the physical archive of the performative sculpture and objects of power, and an outsider's historical views.

In terms of the reliability of the written and oral archive, contemporary oríkì (praise songs) performers claim historical continuity of performance. Many of the earliest recorded oríkì and itàn (oral histories) deal explicitly with the establishment of some of the primary sources of àṣẹ in the Yorùbá world. For instance, the traditional legend of Moremi, one of the central characters of *Morountodun*, is about the establishment of the Yorùbá branch of the Egungun ceremony, which is devoted to invoking the authority of the ancestors and spirits. This legend, in the oral archive, has a relatively stable form, and this form reinforces the concept of àṣẹ as it is found in contemporary performance. In addition, as Babatunde Lawal points out, the understanding of the authority of the performance of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ presented in written and oral archives has stayed relatively constant even with the encroachment of the alternative modes of authority presented by Christianity and Islam.¹ Margaret Drewal and Lawal both note the variation in some specific aspects of the songs and masks in Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ festivals over time, but these are variations in content, not in formal properties. As Lawal notes, the Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ masquerade will often contain direct reference to the concept that 'È ẹ̀ se é bí wọn ti nse é, kí ó ba à lè rí bí o ti nrí' ('Follow precedents in order to obtain the same result').² Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ is constructed around continuity. There is no evidence in the performance archive, then, that suggests

the core interpretations of àṣẹ have shifted, and some evidence that no shift has taken place, and my interviews and observations support this conclusion as well.

Endnotes

1. Babatunde Lawal (1996) *The Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in and African Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), p. 274.
2. *Ibid*, p. 273

Glossary

Ààlè	Sculptural items often found on thresholds of houses. These items provide warnings, curses, or blessings.
Abiku	The spirit of a deceased child that will return to a woman's womb and continue to cause still-births.
Alárinjò	A hybrid form of theatrical performance including dance, song, short sketches, and other entertainments. Some academics consider this to be the precursor to Yorùbá theatre in Nigeria.
Àṣẹ	The Yorùbá concept of authority.
Ara	The body.
Àrokòà	Sculptural message, usually coded so that only the correct audience can interpret it.
Asuwada	The idea that humanity shares a single spirit.
Babalawo	A wise man, storyteller, healer, and prophet.
Èmí	Translated as body, self, or even as the unified idea of self.
Èṣù	The god of the crossroad and of interpretation. He has been characterized as a trickster figure, but his place in the Yorùbá pantheon is richer and more ambiguous than this.
Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀	A musical festival in which a masked dancer is taken over by a spirit. This festival has more female participation than other Yorùbá masked forms.
Ide	Sacred staff used in Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ festivals.
Ifá	Both a city in Nigeria and the name of a corpus of prophetic texts, which until recently existed only in oral form.
Ìfọgbọntáayéṣe	A philosophical concept that describes all knowledge as the same knowledge. This concept insists that knowledge is working toward a pragmatic effect.

Iluti	The ability of a piece of art to hear and respond to the world around it, including the audience.
Itage	A general word for non-ritual performance, often used to refer to modes of traditional theatre. In the context of ritual performance, itage can be used dismissively.
Itàn	Story, legends, fable, or history (often transmitted orally).
Irubọ	Literally sacrifice. A term used to refer to ritually significant performances.
Inú	Conscious self or self-awareness.
Ìwà	Eternal unchanging essence – often of an individual, but also of objects and places.
Odu	The written version of Ifá.
Ohun	Voice, often used to refer to the ability of art to ‘speak’ to its audience.
Olódùmarè	The head of the Yorùbá pantheon and the most ethereal of Yorùbá deities. Early Christian missionaries often equated him with the Judeo-Christian God.
Oríkì	Poems designed to praise qualities of individuals, towns, regions, or significant objects. These can vary in length from a single word to several dozen lines, and there is no set form.
Ori	Destiny.
Oro	The embodiment of justice.
Şere	This is non-ritual performance that takes place in informal settings. For example, a praise poem recited by friends on the street is neither ritual nor staged. This word often denotes a playfulness.

Introduction

Performance and Ịfọgbọntáayéşe: Genre, Knowledge, and Politics

Corruption in Nigeria has become a conversational commonplace given the rise of online fraud. Long before emails purporting to be from wives of deposed Nigerian rulers started circulating widely, Ken Saro Wiwa's execution at the hands of the government brought the scandal of Nigeria's divided populace to the attention of the world. On the other hand, the recent Broadway success of *Fela!* brought the literary and cultural prowess of Nigeria into the popular American consciousness, and Wole Soyinka's autobiographies abound with moments of peace, tranquility, and beauty that are the markers of contemporary life in Nigeria. For better and for worse, Nigeria is a distinctive place.

With New Historicism and Postcolonial Studies both major forces in the academy, we take for granted the idea that artistic production is linked to historical and political facts on the ground. When dealing with a system like Nigeria, however, arguments about theatre's political thrust tend to focus on content (e.g. the tyrant on stage represents the dictator in life or the confused communal celebrations staged in a number of contemporary plays represent the fractured community of Nigeria). In addition to its content, Nigerian theatre also intervenes in politics by suggesting alternatives to the political formulations of the basic structures of Yorùbá discourse. The structure of theatre is itself political, and due to the semiotic density and cultural specificity of performance phenomena, this structural level has not been fully explored in the Nigerian context. There are core structures in Nigerian discourse that are found in performance, theatre, and in politics. When theatre deploys these structures differently than politicians, this expands the structure of theatre from the aesthetic realm into the political one. Nigerian society has its distinctive characteristics, which have produced a theatre that has its own structures – structures which may appear

similar to Western structures at times, but which emerge from radically different impulses and have radically different significance.

There is no shortage of Nigerian theatre and performance to serve as the subject of a structural analysis. The Yorùbá people, one of over two hundred indigenous people groups in Nigeria, produce a panoply of traditional performances. The intricately carved masks that serve as centerpieces of various festivals show up in museums and have been the inspiration of numerous contemporary artists. The ever-present 'talking-drums' provide a rhythm behind performances whose eerie imitation of the human voice lingers in the memory. The fiery passion of an improvised song in a village celebration cannot help but be contagious. These performances and many others exist side by side with the recognized theatrical craft of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan, as well as the emerging talents of literally thousands of other playwrights. All of this creative outpouring exists in spite of (or perhaps in response to) the corruption, violence, division, and uncertainty that have characterized the Nigerian political landscape since independence in 1960. Yorùbá theatre responds to traditional performance and to the political situations in Nigeria, and, in doing so, becomes a vehicle for the expansion or creation of civil society which shifts Nigeria toward the peace about which Soyinka and others write.

This book examines four particular moments in the politics of Nigeria and four theatrical responses to these moments: in each of these moments, politicians manipulate a certain structure of traditional Yorùbá life, and theatre responds to this manipulation. For example, after the Nigerian civil war, the government declared a policy of 'no victor, no vanquished,' and unlike the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), this policy papers over the past without first hearing and responding to it, quite simply implying that, while the government would deal with the economic effects of the civil war, it would not treat either side as being the winner or loser of the conflict. While 'no victor, no vanquished' had a number of positive effects, it also imposed an idea of temporality – namely that well-intentioned individuals (in this case politicians) could reshape the present without regard for the past. Time is also a basic structural element in Yorùbá performance. This political idea of the absence of a past did not reflect the functioning of time in traditional Yorùbá prophetic performance, which relied on the idea that the future could only be correctly responded to in light of a diviner's spiritually guided interpretation of the past. Thus, rather than a political rhetoric which erased the past and focused on human action in the present, Yorùbá prophecy placed human action in the context of

the past and under the auspices of the divine. Traditional performance, particularly prophetic performance, set up a cultural baseline for the function of time which was at odds with political deployment of time. Ola Rotimi wrote several history plays, each of which emphasizes the mundane, causal nature of the progression of time – making the flow of time reliant on the past even in absence of divine intervention – which is different from both political and performative uses of time. The structure in question is that of time or history, and even when not writing allegories of civil war, Rotimi was able to resist governmental manipulations of time through further interaction with the temporal structures provided by Yorùbá performance.

There are four core structures in traditional Yorùbá performance that emerge in both political and theatrical arenas: authority, identity, time, and morality. In addition to the analysis of the specific political resistance of specific playwrights, reading the structures of theatre makes it apparent that Western structural analyses (frequently Brechtian in the African context) are inadequate methods for explaining the specificity of Yorùbá theatrical structures. In absence of attention to structure, analyses of a given play's content often underestimate the political impact of the piece.

The structures of African theatre seldom become a focal point of critical arguments, despite the vast quantities of insightful work done on the structures of traditional performance. A notable exception to this trend involves the communal mechanism of theatre for development. These texts, of which Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's work is perhaps the best known in the African context, tend to be relatively straightforward. This theatre's power is directly related to the community's participation in the creation of the work. Karin Barber and Ingrid Bjorkman explore the cultural, literary, and political implications of shared authorship and the related formal conventions in both Nigeria and Kenya respectively.¹ The basic argument advanced in these cases is homologous to that advanced by Western avant-garde theatre – new social conditions call for new relationships between actors, directors, and audience members. Political resistance and resistance to Western theatrical tradition are synonymous in these arguments, and the violent response of African governments to community-driven theatre suggests the efficacy of such an understanding. While astute, these analyses do not often consider the idea that, in addition to resistance in the context of Western theatrical structures, these African structures exist in the context of their own set of performance traditions and this context provides an additional avenue for resistance.

Scholars such as Christopher Balme and Diana Looser are attentive to multiple performance contexts on the macro-scale, placing the structures of world theatres in a postcolonial context. Balme argues that the ‘combination and amalgamation of indigenous performance forms within the framework of Western notions of theatre’ works to ‘decolonize’ the African stage.² Balme’s argument is not for the efficacy of any particular theatrical innovation/tradition – such as community-driven theatre – but rather an argument about the general utility of traditional forms in opposition to Western theatre. For Balme, echoes of traditional performance are resistant precisely because they speak in a different voice than that employed by contemporary political figures, although Balme assumes that political power speaks in a Western voice. Diana Looser’s work stays focused on the contemporary Pacific Islands, but she fluidly weaves her local critiques into a global framework while maintaining their specificity.³ While Balme makes his quest for a world theatre methodology central, Looser’s method is implicit.

Balme’s, Barber’s, Bjorkman’s, and Looser’s work was instrumental in developing this book. However, rather than focusing on the outwardly directed postcolonial political resistance of African forms as Balme does or the idea that only certain structures carry political resistance as implied by the work of Barber and Bjorkman, I contend that a distinctly Nigerian theatre comments on a variety of structures in a distinctly Nigerian performance as a means of critiquing a distinctly Nigerian politics. This reading does not exclude or contradict the broad strokes of the postcolonial analysis of forms. Nigerian politics exists in dialogue with the postcolonial situation, but is not wholly reducible to the terms of postcolonial theory.⁴

The Action and Structure of *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe*

The idea of connecting structures of performance and theatre to political intervention is not exogenous to Yorùbá culture. *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* is the Yorùbá concept of the unity of knowledge across disparate fields for pragmatic purposes: while the word itself is a bit esoteric within Yorùbá culture, the concept is widespread. The movement between fields of knowledge is explicitly a part of traditional Yorùbá philosophy and lived experience. The interconnectedness of knowledge is fundamental to the Yorùbá world-view – homologies and analogies across fields are not coincidental but exist because all knowledge is the same knowledge. *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* ‘suggests the working together of natural scientists and social scientists, historians, theologians, and

other scholars in the humanities and life sciences.⁵ *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* is simultaneously prescriptive and symptomatic: it shows things as they are for the explicit purpose of moving them toward what they could be. Since *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* is not simply knowledge but a way of understanding, deploying, communicating, and representing this knowledge, it provides an ample heuristic for theatre's and performance's specific attention to representation and communication. According to the philosophy of *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* political discourse is also based in the same cultural milieu that gave rise to the forms utilized by performance.

Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe is an evolving indigenous concept that responds to new socio-political moments: the structures that are important at one moment may not continue to be so. However, a comparative approach across theatrical and performative genres from the 1960s through the present reveals that Yorùbá performance has consistently given attention to four formal elements: the use of representation and interpretation to establish *authority*, the constructions and definitions of *identity*, the exploration of multiple conceptions of *time*, and the deployment of a structurally determined system of *morality*. These elements occur across genres and disciplines but function very differently in different places and they are discussed by performers, traditional practitioners, and directors in explicit, direct ways. *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* suggests that these same elements will occur in politics as well. The inconsistency of their treatment across disciplines suggests that these four concepts are sites of contention in contemporary Nigerian culture. Yorùbá performance generates and elaborates on these structures while both politics and theatre manipulate them in various ways. A nuanced understanding of the importance of authority, identity, time, and morality within performance provides an indigenous vocabulary with which to explain the structural political resistance generated by theatre.

Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Stella Dia Oyedepo, and Tess Onwueme – the playwrights whose work I examine in the following chapters – stage aspects of traditional performances that mirror and later problematize a philosophical tradition.⁶ Because *Ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* is constantly evolving, theatre's structural manipulations of performance conventions also evolve. This evolution stands in marked contrast to avant-garde Western theories of theatrical resistance – Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Antonin Artaud, etc – which assume that a given form will maintain its revolutionary qualities by virtue of its formal elements despite shifting contexts: Brecht's Epic Theatre and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty are both quests for an ideal theatrical form, whereas the

structural manipulations performed by the Nigerian playwrights in question are specific responses to specific moments in Nigeria's social and political history. The specificity of this Nigerian response obviously doesn't preclude these playwrights from speaking to other issues (as seen by the worldwide attention they have garnered). These universal moments have been extensively explored – often at the expense of the particularly Nigerian structures within these texts.

In each of the book's next four chapters, I analyze the emergence of one of the four structural elements – authority, identity, time, and ethics – in traditional and contemporary performances alongside a theatrical text that problematizes the formal element in question. Some of the philosophical concepts detailed in these chapters – specifically authority and morality – do not appear to the Western viewer as formal elements of a text or performance in the same way that something like time (plot) or identity (character) might. My inclusion of authority and morality rather than setting, dialogue, music, or any of the other traditionally identified formal elements of Western theatre is simply a difference in cultural focus. Authority and morality create and are created by specific structural features of the text. There are forms that grant authority and forms that do not. There are moral forms and immoral forms. Yorùbá performance cannot exist without engaging with these concepts.

There are a number of possible relationships between theatre, performance, and politics, and, as noted, the allegorical one draws the most attention in analyses of African theatre. Reading for common structures across theatre, performance, and politics provides access to another mode of analysis – a mode that is in keeping with the idea of *ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* in traditional Yorùbá philosophy. Two portions of the definition of *ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* are particularly relevant in terms of literary and performance studies: the idea that *ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* shifts and responds to the contingencies of contemporary society rather than forming a rigid pattern, and that the connections implied by *ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* exist at the level of structural elements. The fluidity accounts for contemporary Yorùbá theatre's remarkable versatility and variety, while the idea of homologous structures forms the core premise of the methodology I employ to explore this variety and versatility.

The sociological work of M.A. Makinde, Akinsola A. Akiwowo, and the co-authors O.B. Lawuyi and Olufemi Taiwo provides the primary academic discussions of *ìfọgbòntáayéṣe* in a series of articles and responses. The stated aim of the initial article and its rejoinders is to define the philosophical terms of an African approach to sociology.