

ELEMENTS OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN DRAMA IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN VIDEO-FILM

BY

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Introduction

This paper examines elements of traditional drama in Nigerian video-film. The home video has emerged as a very powerful and popular medium of communication in Nigeria. But in spite of this huge popularity, not many analysts understand the historical complexities that have shaped its current form and structure.

Traditional African drama not only provided the content for the emergence of Nigerian film, it also produced the personnel that fertilized the Nigerian film at its inception. Some elements of traditional African drama which have been adapted to literature and film include, songs and dances, mask and masquerades, proverbs, idioms and other aspects of language, history and myth, festivals and several others that we shall discuss here.

On the Three Schools of Film in Nigeria

Examining the emergent schools of film in Nigeria, Ogunsuyi (2007:21-39) identifies three schools of film in Nigeria. According to him, *the Yoruba film school* emerged from the incorporation of indigenous theatre expressions and the Yoruba traveling theatre traditions into film. He lists *Ija Ominiran* (1997) *Aiye* (1979) *Ayanmo*, *Orun Mooru* (1985) 'as some of the early Yoruba films. He states also that the Yoruba traveling theatre moved into screen in stages, first it was television then cinema and later video. He states that the Yoruba film has a follower ship that comes naturally from the Yoruba theatre goers of the theatre belt of Nigeria. The Yoruba film school combines the structural features of both the narrative and dramatic texts. Ossai (2006; 4) in his article, "Emerging political discourse in Nigerian films," states that the Yoruba film like most cinemas the world over evolved from the theatre. He notes that notable theatre practitioners like the doyen of Nigerian theatre, Hubert Ogunde and his pedigrees, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya, Oyin Adejobi and Ade Afolayan, opened the floodgate of film production in the Yoruba axis. According to Ossai, Ogunde adapted his stage plays into films wholesale with the same actors, commitment and devotion. Asobele- Timothy (2003: 4) says that the materials from which the Yoruba films are made are to a large extent the cultural realities of the people of the Yoruba countries.

The Hausa film school which is the second film school did not take off as early as the Yoruba. Kofoworola cited by Ekwuazi (2006: 57) states that 'the relative hermiticism of Islam precluded any indigenous secular performance tradition in the core north, added to this is the prevalence of Indian film culture. Ogunsuyi (2007: 31) notes that the business of producing indigenous feature film in the North did not begin until the mid-1970. He states that during the pre-independence era, films produced in the North were mainly documentaries, though according to him these did not sufficiently pass for what can be called Hausa film. Hyginus Ekwuazi (2006:3]) says that what comes across as Hausa films are the post-independence feature films and some documentaries on Hausa culture in the Hausa language about Northern Nigeria. He adds that whether the themes of such films are social, economic or political, they can always be linked to the store house of the griots and their diverse perspectives of narratively which tend to marry Islamic ethics and indigenous African ethics. Ogunsuyi (2007) recounts that with the

production and release of *Shehu Umar* (1977) by Alhaji Adamu Halilu, who also made *Kanta of Kebbi*, the true Hausa feature films came to the scene. The film is an adaptation of a book of the same title by the late Nigerian Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Other known Hausa feature films include, *Ruwan Bagaja* by Ramalan Nuhu and *Kurba na Barm* (1992) and of course the famous *Kasarmu ce* by Mallam Sadiq Tafawa Balewa.

Larkin (1997: 122) in his article, "Hausa Dramas and the rise of Video Culture in Nigeria", notes that the production of Hausa video films developed out of older forms of popular culture, particularly the 'wasan kwaikwaiyo' or drama which has a long tradition in the Hausa society and still continues to be popular. But they have become so popular that 'an average Hausa female writer wants her book to be adapted into movies'.

The third school, the Igbo school, according to Steve Ogunsuyi (2007:31) is very recent. Apart from *Amadi* (1975) by Ola Balogun there existed no Igbo feature film in the first decade of Nigerian film making history. He notes that today the Igbo video films are many and represent a proportionate percentage of indigenous films in the country. Films like *Living in Bondage* (1992) *Circle of Doom* (1992) and *Taboo* (1993).

Elements of African Theatre in Video-Films

From the preceding discourse, it is apparent that Nigerian film from its historical origins, derived a lot from the indigenous traditions. We shall, therefore, proceed to examine some of the elements that have been exploited or adapted to film.

History and Myth

History and myth are very important factors of African histrionics, theatre, film and literature. History and myth also provides for the artist materials for the examination and projection of a people's hopes, fears and aspiration. Obafemi and Yerima (2004: 129) state that, history and myth are evident in the works of many African theatre artists and dramatists. Many Nigerian films are based on the historical materials as well as on the myth and mythology of the Nigerian people. Amoboni (1996) Ajani Ogun (1976) Shehu Umar (1977) Amadi (1975) for instance earlier mentioned are historical stories that have been adapted into films.

Language

Language is also crucial and central to traditional African drama, and is one aspect of African histrionics whose essence seems to be increasing in appreciation especially in video film productions. Many Nigerian film makers are finding traditional African language increasingly important in the conveyance of meaning and thematic construction. Patronage of language films has been on the increase, so much that there are 4-5 new channels on the cable station DSTV and other service providers like HITV and MYTV. Language is presented in verbal form and in other expressive forms such as in dances, gestures, chants, signs and other forms of physical communication: Language in traditional African drama is expressed in the traditional speech convention of proverbs and idioms, virtually every African community employ the use of proverbs and idioms in their narrative. Proverbs and idioms in language embellish the dramatic dialogue and convey deeper meanings and essence, most times with deep philosophical meaning. Indeed the Ogundes, Kelanis and other notable filmmakers have adapted or incorporated one form of traditional or indigenous language use in their film productions.

Songs, music and dances also play very important roles in the construction and presentation of traditional African drama. Apart from the entertainment content they bear, they also function meaningfully in conveying messages and meaning. For Soyinka (1976:3), it is unmusical to separate Yoruba music from myth and poetry, the nature of Yoruba music is intensively the nature of its language and poetry, highly charged, symbolic. Like language, music is very key to the growth of Nigerian video film. Sometime meanings and messages are conveyed through music. And because of the universality of music, Nigerian music in Nigerian video film has contributed immensely to the widespread acceptability and popularity of Nigerian video-film.

Praise and chants are important and crucial aspects of traditional African drama, they are reflected in the culture and traditions of all African society. Importantly, they make philosophical statements and always express the norms and value of the society.

Costumes and make-up also play very functional roles in traditional African drama. Costumes are a visual reenactment of a people's history and a reminder of the cosmic traditions. They tell transformation of time and space and re construct them for contemporaneous meanings. Wilson (1986: 36) describes the import and significance of African signs and symbols and categorizes them broadly into 'the instrumental, the demonstrative, iconographic, extra mundane, visual and institutional. He says that visual mode of communication consists of the use of colours and dressing, appearance and general comportment to communicate certain feelings or emotions and attitudes. Visual materials especially in costumes convey depths of meaning, and they tell mythical and historical stories. Feathers, beads, chains etc which may appear ordinary assume thematic and philosophical import if properly used and put in perspective, especially in film productions.

Functionality

But the greatest attribute of traditional African drama, which it has continued to reflect, is its functionality. Traditional African drama is known to create cultural re-awakening. It reconnects society and community to itself by re-energizing the relationship between the living, the dead, and yet unborn. It is Zerbo (1962:267- 287) who states that:

It is often said that African art has never been art for art sake. It is for the most functional art. An art that was part of the principal arts works of a society, that had its aim and objective, the augmentation of the vitality and potential strength of the social body. It has for example, been stated that African art is utilitarian.

It is important to state here that as functional drama, therefore, traditional African elements and symbols as well as issues have continued to inspire and prevail in Nigerian Video-film. The festival is the classical reflection of traditional theatre and drama in Africa. Describing the essence of traditional festival theatre or drama in communication in Africa, Ogunba (1978:4) says it is, 'an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over the centuries' that which has therefore developed distinctive features and whose techniques are sometimes totally different from the borrowed form now practiced by many contemporary artist'. He adds that a festival is an integral, dynamic part of the culture of an un-alienated African, an occasion to which he responds spontaneously.

Character and/or Characterization

Character and or characterization is a very important feature of traditional African drama. In the traditional narrative or drama of Africa, the choice and signification of character is vital and fundamental to the expression and conveyance of meaning. The Kings, Queens, Priests and other characters of traditional Nigerian society are constantly used in Nigerian video-film.

Names and titles of traditional rulers in Nigeria have become so popular and well used in other parts of Africa and across the world due to their vast usage in Nigerian video home. For instance the Igbo title and salutation for a king 'Igwe' has become very well popular in the Eastern parts of Africa due to its usage in Nigerian video-film.

The characters are symbolism of values, beliefs and philosophy of the community, that which binds them all in a manner that is collective and bonding. The characters assist in the realization of the thematic thrust of the story, which normally is a reminder of the moral code and order in the relationship between the ancestors and the living. Modern African drama especially has explored characters in traditional African drama, especially the kings and priests to create archetypes. Archetypal characters are at the core of the social and moral order of the community. They are the ones that maintain the morality of society and at times are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the good of society, by their position they occupy a position that confers on them a moral responsibility for the good of society. Names of characters in traditional African drama also bear meaning; they could be used to signify periods, mark relationships or attributes or used to celebrate certain personal or communal virtues. Names are not given arbitrarily or ordinarily.

Conclusion

Regarding the interface between traditional African drama and film, it is our firm belief that adapting African literary archetypes and oral narratives into home video can serve the industry and the Nigerian audiences better. Ogunsuyi (2001) emphasizes this imperative when he explores the why and purpose of adaptation. He points out that through analysis and appreciation of one work of art through to another the work gets better, adding that through the process of anticipation and retrospection, our imaginative involvement is brought into play and the stronger such an anticipation the more intense our interaction with the original text. No doubt, Nigerian video films will expand their intellectual and artistic potentials through the use of traditional African elements. This is perhaps most shared by Ahua (1997: 121) when he notes that the pool of raw materials from which television or video can take traditional African content is unfathomable and the potential products can be mind boggling. He acknowledges that most of the materials are embedded in the traditional and cultural norms of the people, the dramatic and folkloric performances, the environment, its musical components, its flora and fauna, its history, its culture, the stories in the minds of old men and women.

It should be noted that traditional African drama, is also well endowed with the pastiche characteristic of postmodernism. It is imbued with myth, mystery and mysticism or magic, which are hallmarks of postmodern art, that of fascination and make believe. Bakare (2006) recounts that during the early days of Ogunde films and theatre, magic, effects and pastiche were readily employed and achieved. But beyond pastiche and magic, traditional African drama is an art of essence and meaning, that which has at its centre, the wellbeing of the community in a way that is economically, socially and philosophically significant to the people.

The Nigerian video film has creatively borrowed *from* the oral texts and literary forms of traditional African drama, and this has contributed to its popularity and acceptability. The Nigerian video- film has emerged as medium of mass-culture or popular culture, carrying with it a popularity that cuts across and influencing the broad spectrum of society, i.e regardless of the economic, social and political classifications of society. It is a fact today that the Africa Magic Channel on the South African station DSTV, is the most popular channel on DSTV'S bouquet in Africa and among Africans in the diaspora, It is patronized by the middle and rich elites of the Nigerian society. The channel predominantly features, Nigerian home movies. That perhaps is the enigma of the Nigerian video, its acceptability by the entire classes, groups and ethnic tribes of the Nigerian society.

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