

Aquatic Theatre: Women as Performing Audience

Sunday Douthimariye Abraye, Ph.D.

Department of Theatre Arts,

Niger Delta University,

Wilberforce Island,

Bayelsa State.

E-mail: sundayabraye@gmail.com

Abstract

Aquatic theatre is an art form that was established from the days of classical theatre. In Africa the art form exists in traditional communities and is occasionally exhibited during communal festivals or important visitation of high ranking government officers. In recent history, this form of festival art is beginning to gain popularity among its audience in the Niger Delta. But have not been researched adequately particularly on the subject of aquatic theatre audience. It is against this backdrop that this study takes a critical look at woman participation in aquatic theatre and their role as performing audience. The essence of the study is to give visibility to women who are given less scholarship focus in traditional festivals. The methodologies employed in this work are the literary, the artistic and the participation observation methods. This study was able to highlight the effective ways female audience serves as a catalyst to performers by building the tempo and increasing efficiency during the performance thus creating a good performer-audience relationship.

Keywords: Aquatic theatre, women, performing audience, festival, traditional.

Introduction

Theatrical Performances that take place in, on or around water always have distinctive features from the normal conventional theatrical performances. Aquatic theatrical performances are particularly unique because of the nature of the performances and their performance environments. Aquatic Theatre can be defined as any theatrical activity that takes place in, on or around water. The origin of aquatic theatre or water related theatrical performances is traced to ancient Rome. K.M Coleman in his work “Launching into History: Aquatic Displays in the Early Empire” (48) traced aquatic displays to A.D 80 as recorded by Cassius Dio. Coleman states that the first stages recorded were artificially constructed lakes or improvised lakes like the Flavian Amphitheatre that was later called the colosseum in Rome which was improvised and the Stagnum Augusti that was constructed. Sea battles were recreated in these water stages for an enthusiastic Roman audience.

It is also in record that a great Roman poet, Claudius, re-enacted a battle between the “Sicilian and Rhodian” armies in the sea while the audience watched from the surrounding hill sides. Aquatic performances, according to the Roman ruler Augustus, as recorded by Coleman in his article, were put on to celebrate victories at war. The performances recreated history, the sea battles were re-enactments of actual wars fought and the purpose of these re-enactments was to show the Roman public how brave the Roman soldiers, their generals and rulers were. The narrative elements of these displays are drawn from myths and legends of the Roman Empire (49-52). and was resurrected during the middle ages. Wikipedia on the entry aqua drama supports thus:

Water based spectacles, especially those portraying great naval battles, had been popular in Roman Times, when they were known as Naumachia, and the custom was resurrected

at various times during the middle ages (Wikipedia 2013).

However, aquatic performances that gained popularity worldwide were mostly performances involving flooding the arena with water and sometimes performances in permanent water tanks. Martin Harrison in Wikipedia supports aquatic performances as a genre of aquatic drama asserts that:

The theatrical genre of aqua-drama that was popular in 19th century France; England and the United States involved flooding of the arenas of the circuses for recreations of major naval events; some venues participated to such great extent in...permanent water tanks on stage. (1)

Aquatic theatre was made popular by the Sadler Wells Theatre in the 1830s, when it changed its name from Sadler Wells Theatre to “Aquatic Theatre”, (Dictionary central. Com). This theatre was specialized in marine spectacle and nautical dramas. According to Lewis, the siege of Gibraltar; was the first aquatic theatre production staged on water by the Sadler Wells Theatre, explaining how this was achieved, Lewis states thus:

The ships, gun-boats, floating batteries etc. have been regularly constructed by professional men from his majesty’s dockyards and floated in a receptacle containing 8000 cubic feet of real water. (99)

In our contemporary world, theatrical performances relating to the marine or the aqua world have become an integral part of the Niger Delta Region. With regards to this, Abraye notes:

Aquatic Theatrical performances are unique performances that takes place in floating stages that are designed for specific performances. This form

of performing arts is common in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, (93)

The stage is a very important element in Aquatic theatre performances, these acting areas in aquatic theatre varies with the type of performance that takes place. Apart from the performances that take place in the water (which is known as the fluid stage) such as the *Odum masquerade*, the *Ogwein* and *Siki* performances of the Okrika people of Rivers State in Nigeria as noted by Bell-Gam (2002) in his article "Fine and Performing Arts" in the book *The Land and People of Rivers State*. There are other performance forms that take place in the water like the Beni-kamain Rituals where the gods that are believed by the Izon man to control the creeks and waterways are appeased. gods like Benikurukuru, Alutabobo, Odisigbeinakula and a host of others. John Pepper Clark captures this all important ritual aspect of appeasement in his play *Ozidi* when the narrator says:

...we need seven young women, and whatever for? I can see some of your raising eyebrows. I hasten to assure you we intend nothing dishonourable. Trouble is that, before we can perform for your pleasure and benefit tonight, we must first have a sacrifice to placate our hosts from the sea. Oh, yes, there are special spectators streaming all around you right now, even though you may not see or touch them. And the seven girls we ask of you, all virgins mind you, alone can bear offerings to our guests from the sea, and so establish between us a bridge... (1)

Many other performances are done on a float (Floating stage) on top of water. (Abraye 2011, P. 93). These floats can come in various sizes and designs and are used in different aquatic stages (creeks, rivers, lake etcetera). Owing to the fact that the Aquatic theatre is not like the conventional theatre that is performed on a normal stage, the Aquatic

Theatre performer must be very conscious of his or her environment. Such performers must be good swimmers. According to Benedict Daukumor a practitioner in an interview in 2012 posits that:

A good performer must be conversant with water and must be a good swimmer. If you are in a boat (float) and you are fretting, you will not be able to concentrate and as such cannot perform well. You can also endanger the lives of other performers because you will be shaking at the slightest instance making the boat unbalanced.

However, aside the floating stage, there are other forms of stages identified in aquatic theatre which is an aspect of traditional African theatre. Clive Ilami Krama identifies some of the stages in his book *African Traditional Theatre and Drama: Themes and Perspectives* as follows, The Fluid Stage, Shoreline Stage, Avenue Stage, and The Arena Stage. (2006) Abraye in his work "Aquatic theatre Tradition: A study of the Amasinghan Love Boat Regatta of Aleibiri Town" (2011) did not only identify the stages alongside Clive but goes further to add the Floating Stage as one of the types of stages that one can find in the Aquatic theatre parlance. To discuss the various stages in the Aquatic theatre which is the area in the performance that is most affected by the audience - performer relationship, let us take a brief look at some of the stages in relationship to the feminine audience as a performing audience in the aquatic theatre parlance. Take for a starts the Shoreline Stage, Abraye (2011) The shoreline stage is the water front from which the performers embark or disembark from the Floating or Fluid stages. The shoreline stage among the numerous functions it performs also serve the performers in the following ways. The shoreline stage plays a transitional role from the arena stage to either the floating stage or the fluid stage. Though the shoreline stage

does not hold a performance for long, it plays the very important role of coordinating the flow of the performance to or from either the floating stage or the fluid stage. On some occasions the shoreline stages serve as a forum to consolidate a performance before moving on to the arena stage. On occasions where the Float is invited to the water fronts of villages on the route of the performance to be presented with gifts by the people of the villages, the shoreline stage is used to display one or two of the special dance steps of the Float as a show of appreciation for the gifts.

The shoreline stage performances by the lead dancers in such communities are considered very important as these dance performances serve as a signature of the dynamism of such a Float. While the main dancers in the Float may not be allowed to execute the Agene or Penge dance steps which may affect the balance of the float, the lead dancers perform these vigorous dance steps (A gene and Penge) as well as the Owu sei buo to the accompaniment of the akwa Ozi (Masquerade talking drums) when they come on land from the float. When this happens, in most cases women who have come to form part of the audience of the float performances join the lead dancers in these performances on the shoreline stage. One other very important function of the shoreline stage is that: it serves as a suitable place to receive the blessing of the King of the village, town or clan as the case may be, before the float is allowed to set out for the performance.

The love boat returns to its source after it had journeyed through the creeks and rivers that make up its route (p.84). The performance space in the shoreline stage which is the waterfront or the riverbank plays the very significant role of serving as the natural auditorium for the audience as well as the performers, with about 80% of the audience being women. The remaining 20% is made up of say 15% children and 5% men. The joy of entertaining and welcoming aquatic performances seems to be the prerogative of the women folk in the towns and villages

in the Niger Delta. They come out in large numbers to welcome such floats and the identify where the float is from, the women who are from the community the float coming from quickly align themselves with their kinsmen to do the most at times familiar dance steps to the admiration of the audience.

Boat Regattas

The origin of boat regattas in Izon land is traced by Henry Bellgam to the advent of the first European traders who arrived in the Niger Delta in the 15th Century. In his article “Boat Regatta” (21) in Martha Anderson and Phillip Peeks Book *Ways of the Rivers*, Bellgam asserts that Kings and Chiefs of the Niger Delta travelled in boats either for the purposes of visiting their counterparts in the neighbouring city states or to convey their commodities of trade in boats from one market to the other. The boats that carried these valuables were paddled by men from the kings’ or the chiefs’ households. These treasure boats (Alali-Aru) were provided with security by another boat manned by warriors, the war boat (Omu-Aru).

The war boats were introduced after the chiefs had been attacked severally by pirates in the water ways who carted away the precious merchandise that they carry in their treasure boats. The treasures carried in these boats were items like mirrors, combs, canned food and other items of European make that was used as a means of exchange (Trade by barter) for the goods produced locally. After the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, a new legitimate trade in palm produces and palm oil flourished in the region. The Niger Delta Chiefs became the major marketers in this legitimate trade. The markets for the commercial venture were established in the hinterlands where the chiefs who retained their slaves had to travel to sell or buy palm kernels, oil and other palm produce. This was a highly

competitive venture which required able-bodied well fed men to paddle fast to make sure that the chiefs arrived first at the markets. This was necessary because it was an established unwritten code that any of the Chiefs who arrive at a location where this palm produce was available first as a first bidding right to the produce, it is only when such a chief turns down the offer of the locale traders and decide to turn them over to another competitor that such a competitor can come in to buy such produce. This healthy competitive atmosphere gave room for the first come first serve attitude that required the chiefs to arrive first.

To be able to arrive first at their destinations, the able-bodied men in the chiefs or king's household practiced their paddling movements to synchronize them with traditional drumming, singing and dancing as the case may be in the different war-canoes to ease the strain of the tedious job of paddling. Bell-Gam asserts that it is these creative practices that gradually developed into the aesthetically designed ceremonial events through which sports, entertainment and heritage of the people are showcased in the present day.

The Aquatic Theatre Audience

The audience is a very important aspect of the theatre business, they are so important that it is considered that, there is no theatre without an audience. It is one of the key elements of performance that cannot be done without. Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball in their book *The Essential Theatre* see the audience as thus: ... "audiences vary widely in terms of tastes, education, economic status, race, age, and other factors." So the audience of the aquatic theatre performance is one such special audience that is conditioned by culture and environment which distinguishes it from any other form of audience

in the conventional sense of the theatre audience. Audience behaviour in the aquatic theatre is conditioned like Brockett and Ball states:

Although we tend to think of an audience's response as immediate and Spontaneous, they are conditioned by cultural expectations. Depending on the type of event and expectations of the group for whom it is performed, audience behaviour is in part a product of cultural conditioning....

Today, audiences of different cultural backgrounds show approval in Different ways. In the United States there is a fairly standard practice of applauding on well- known or well-beloved actor's first entrance. In London, this practice is generally frowned upon as disruptive to the flow of the performance. At Kabuki performances in Japan, audiences practice "kakegoe" shouting out encouraging phrases to the actors not only Upon their initial entrance but throughout the performance. There is no Curtain call for kabuki performances so the only opportunity to express

Appreciation is during the performance itself.....

The aquatic theatre audience is like the kabuki audience as quoted above that appreciates the performers from their indigenous homes with their collaborative dance and song performance alongside the float. This is a specialty of the women folk. The float performances are given a communal colouration that give them a uniqueness that is peculiar to individual owner communities of these floats. The wrestling boat performance of the Kpakiamas people of Bomadi Local Government Area of Delta State cannot be imitated by any other community in Izonland or beyond because of the peculiarity of their drum signals or drum beats. A Kpakiamas woman married anywhere in the Niger Delta does not need to see the Float before deciphering her community's specialty and will so come out dancing to welcome her

kith and kin. The same is the case with the Aleibiri woman in Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State whenever she hears the drum beat and songs of the Amasinghan Love Boat performance. She will rush to the water front without waiting for any further encouragement.

There is a Unique audience performances' relationship in the aquatic theatre. In the book *The Art of Theatre Then and Now* by William M. Downs and Co. the writers quote theatre critic Margo Jefferson as saying in the *New York Times* that "there is something almost 'primal' about the relationship between a theatre audience and the actors because of their physical proximity and the power the audience has to affect the actors' performance." (26) The Aquatic theatre performance audience is not a conventional audience; the performance is not staged in one particular locale but moves from one location to another like the "Pageant Wagon" productions in the medieval era. The audience performer relationship in the aquatic theatre parlance is so unique that Sunday Abraye in his work *The Amasinghan Oge of Aleibiri Town in Bayelsa State* gave it the term the "Hyphenate" audience (2008: pg. 112).

The performance style in this part of the country is such that the performers move through the creeks and rivers with their floating stages, performance for the people of the various villages that are scattered along the route of the float. The people that populate these villages who come out to watch the float are the audiences of these performances. The audience mostly women of every community is able to watch the performance only as long as the performance in the float lasts as it travels through the water front of that community. This is to say that the audience of a community cannot follow the performance to the next village because the villages are separated by thick rain forests. So in every village that the float performs the audience is uniquely different. It is indigenes of that particular village

that makeup the immediate audience of the float. The audience is therefore described as hyphenated, because the audience is only joined together by the performance of the float as it moves from one community to another therefore creating a chain audience that is only linked by the experience of the aquatic performance that they had all experienced or watched.

It should be noted at this point that the aquatic theatre audience is mostly made up women and children with only a few man. This is as a result of the fact that the Izon man has a notion that it is only lazy men who loiter around the village that have time for such float performances. Most men only ask whose community the float originated from when the women return from the water front after entertaining the performers in the float. But men who have a strong sense of socio-cultural affiliations with communities around weave away the earlier mentioned notion to go out to entertain the floats to maintain already existing relationships between the communities and give the women the necessary moral as well as financial support that they need.

With its audience type that is known as the hyphenated audience, there is a change of audience pattern, behaviour, and demand at every point as the float moves from one target audience to another. This may be as result of the number of women who makes up the audience of these communities who are from the host community of the float in question. The audience type and mood from one settlement is different from that of the next settlement. The different communities located in the route of an aquatic performance has an audience type that portray likeness for different cultural displays, for instance, the Ojobo people a community in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria, love the owu (masquerade) dance, so it is important that the Ojobo audience is entertained with the masquerade dance steps with the women who are from the Ojobo community from where the float

originated ululating in excitement as they welcome their brothers and sisters. In Torugbene town another community in the same local government area and state in the route of the love boat, the people here love wrestling, and so for the performers to arise and meet the aesthetic needs of this community, the performers have to change their songs and dance steps to wrestling dance when the float gets to Torugbene community. Therefore, the float performance is dynamic owing to this hyphenated audience phenomenon and the desire of the audience for a different performance styles at every point.

The audience participation in the aquatic theatre parlance as earlier mentioned in this work is majorly women. This is so because the geographical location of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is marked by the creeks, rivers and lakes with a thick rain forest that provides the flora and fauna of the region. These rivers serve as natural boundaries for the villages and towns that populate the Niger Delta as such marriages are contracted between men and women who live in this communities.

It is these women that are married to men in the neighbouring towns and villages that provide the audience that celebrate the floats that originates from their indigenous communities as a show of solidarity when these floats come around. It is a known fact that women marry to neighbouring communities and as such provide the necessary audience for their community floats. For instance, women who are from Aleibiri town that are married to men in Isampou town all in Ekereomor Local Government Area all in Bayelsa State, Nigeria and all in the route of the boat regatta known as the Amasinghan Love Boat regatta of Aleibiri people. It will be noticed that when the float gets to Isampou town the women from Aleibiri town who are married to men in Isampou will be the first to come out to celebrate their kinsmen and women. They provide the participating audience that boosts the morals of the performers when they arrive a new town. This is the case with

every community in the route of the Amasinghan Love Boat Regatta of the Aleibiri people and any other such performance that takes place in the Niger Delta. When the performance gets to a town, it is the women of that town or villages along the river bank that comes out to stand at their water front to watch the performance that serves as the audience of the performance.

Conclusion

It is an established fact that the aquatic audience participation in the Niger Delta is made up of 80% women, 15% children and 5% men. The audience participation ratio in the aquatic performance is influenced by the number of women from the town the performance float originates from who are married and living in the host community of the regatta as at the time of the discuss. The ratio for children is low because as at the time most performance floats are passing the water fronts of our communities, the students are in school taking classes while the men may either have gone to the farm or to fishing.

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