

FROM 'FOLKISM' TO PERFORMANCE: A NEW SCENIC STRATEGY FOR AUDIENCE INTEGRATION

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Abstract

The performances of plays based on 'Folkism' are not accessible to the general audience due to the kind of staging techniques used for the performances of these plays. Instead of attaining total audience integration, the audience is alienated and estranged because of a natural gulf that exists in the proscenium theatre. This gulf prevents complete rapport between the audience and the actors contrary to the level of response required for performances of plays based on 'Folkism'. This article employs the analytical and artistic methodology in its approach at a critical analysis of Akpakaland (a play based on 'Folkism') and proposes the use of an environmental space for the performance of plays based on 'Folkism'. It is hoped that the environmental space will facilitate and enhance the natural communication process that exist between the actors and audience.

Keywords: Folkism, Audience integration, Akpakaland, Nigerian folkloric performance

Introduction

There have been a lot of controversies about finding a comprehensive theatrical principle to define and integrate Nigerian audience into performances over the past few years. A school of thought has proposed the importance of projecting a Nigerian theatre realistically in order to reflect African life in plays. To achieve this, Bakary Traore opines that we %return to the rich repertory of folklore [as] an authentic source from which workable themes can be drawn+(65). This call to return to the use of folkloric materials has been accepted and is now being practiced by a majority of contemporary literary dramatists in Nigeria.

However, the use of performance spaces that are appropriate to the traditional folkloric environments from where these materials are drawn has not been considered for the performances of these plays. Rather, these plays are largely written with the proscenium theatre in mind. This is against the traditional wisdom suggested by cultural norms and available spaces for

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folkloric performances, as well as other African theatrical festivities; these do not have definitive architectural structures like Western theatres, but are usually presented in open courtyards, marketplaces, town or village squares and such. Bakary Traore describes folkloric performance area thus:

The African theatre has no special building ...the place preferred for this type of entertainment is the village square... which signifies not only a place open to the sky, but a place of gathering ... The square symbolises the village and the entire (community). This no doubt explains why Africans have never felt the need to construct a building for dramatic performances. The idea of building was brought over by the colonisers. (55-56)

Isidore Okpewho in *The Oral Performer and his Audience* cites Harold Scheub's report on a folkloric performance by women among the Xhosa people of Southern Africa:

There is full participation ... by the members of the audience in the unfolding story. No Proscenium arch exists, there is no safety in distance or darkness. Everyone is known: the artist emerges from the audience and her narrative complete, is again swallowed up by the audience. The separate emotions and experience of individual members of audience are woven into the narrative being evoked. (161)

This kind of experience being evoked is typical of what obtains in a Nigerian folkloric performance. Some theatre practitioners in the past have performed plays drawn from folklore and have even performed these plays outside enclosed buildings. Typical examples of these practitioners are Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and Moses Olaiya, who made the Yoruba travelling theatre popular. Wole Soyinka describes their performance area thus:

The venue of course is an open-air arena, preferably with borders that are not difficult to control, such as market square, school, playing field, a semi-open family compound... the premises of a friendly church, and even sometimes the porch of a public building.(12)

It is therefore the quest to perform typical folkloric plays in an original environment that has informed the use of 'Folkism' as appropriate for this experimentation. Folkism therefore, is based on African folkloric performance formula. Sam Ukala theorises the concept of Folkism as:

The tendency to base literary plays on the history, culture, concerns, of the folk and to compose and perform them in

accordance with African conventions for composing and performing Folktale. (285)

The concept is coined as a response partly to the prevalent criticism of Nigerian literary plays as irrelevant and unpopular, and partly to his findings that the unpopularity and relative irrelevance of Nigeria literary plays derive from their unfamiliar dramaturgy which are alien to the folk and a majority of the supposed educated audience. He finds that:

Nigerian literary plays draw their subject matter from the histories and cultures of Nigerians and yet many of them are not accessible to the populace because of their difficult language, their distortion of source material beyond recognition, complex sentence structure, and mode of presentation that is foreign and strange. Because of these, the audience finds it difficult to comprehend and identify with the plays. (285)

Audience Integration and Folkism

The concept of Folkism is expected to re-integrate the audience into the performance as collaborators rather than impersonal consumers. The structure of plays based on Folkism is such that it allows audience to come or go out of the narration at will. Sam Ukala further observes that:

The traditional African audience feels a primary obligation to collaborate with the performer. Its singing, completion of line; correction and commendations are thus aimed at improving the performance while it lasts. But the audience also detaches itself when appropriate for the purpose of cognition, appraisal and criticism. (286)

In the folkloric theatre of Ukala, provision is made for the audience to collaborate with the performance at will with the introduction of 'M.O.A' (members of audience). These members of audience are rehearsed and placed in strategic positions in the proscenium audience in order that they can integrate freely during the play performance. To achieve this, he utilises a convention that he crystallised into eight aesthetic principles of composing and performing the African folktale which he calls the eight laws of aesthetic response. They are: The Law of Opening, The Law of Joint Performance, The Law of Creativity, Free Enactment Responsibility, The Law of the Urge to Judge, The Law of Protest Against Suspense, The Law of Expression of Emotions, The Law of Ego Projection and The Law of Closing. (256)

From the first law of the aesthetic principle to the very last, we are reminded of the relationship that exists between the narrator and the performer during a folkloric performance. These laws have been well articulated in the play we are analysing for this research, except that the laws and the stage description in the play do not consider the traditional staging techniques under which these laws operated.

A Synopsis of Akpakaland

Akpakaland is based on an Ika folk story centred on a jealous wife who transfers a cow's tail to her co-wife in order to gain higher sexual and financial attention from their husband. In the play, Ukala twists the original tale beyond a mere polygamous frivolity into a very important state matter. This transcends the domestic context of the play, to a very serious political setting where the ruler and 'have-all' perpetually dominate and oppress the ruled and less privileged of the society. Akpaka, the President of Akpakaland, is married to five wives, in order: Fulama, Yeiye, Seotu, Unata, and Iyebi. He selected each of these wives from different geo-political zones. The first three wives are picked from the province of the rich, while he picked the last two from the province of the poor. Whenever he thinks of the dwindling state of the financial resources of his kingdom he finds solace in trying to knock out the solution of the problem from his bottle of gin. It is on one of these occasions when he is thinking of the state of insecurity, hunger, squalor, disease, corruption, empty treasury and armoury that have bedevilled Akpakaland that Fulama his first wife, who is the daughter of a very influential past president, Dan Mali the great, brings to his attention a flimsy gossip that one of his wives has a tail. Instead of dismissing Fulama and her domestic frivolity for the more serious state matters he is trying to solve, Akpaka handles the tail matter even more seriously than Fulama expected. He decrees that his wives must strip naked before the entire Akpakaland. Unata is the unfortunate wife with the tail. She and her father Idemudia seek spiritual solution from Enwe, the traditional Doctor who had earlier prepared a charmed rope for Fulama's cow to regain its tail, which is lost to some thieves. On Unata's request that the tail be returned to the sender, the oracles asked Unata to bring, amongst other sacrificial items, an unripe plantain, which would be used as bait for the one who sent the tail. To further ridicule Unata, Fulama, in the company of Yeiye and Seotu, continuously mocks her to take her bath in their presence in order for them to see her tail. On one of these occasions, an unsuspecting Fulama smells a roasting plantain and begs for it. Unata who, with this symbolic act, transfers the tail back to the sender gladly gives her the food. On the day of the public tease, Fulama is the one with the tail and her shame escalates to high heavens. Her mother tries to lobby for the dismissal of the case, while some of the corrupt ministers persuade Akpaka to administer a light sentence because of Fulama's parentage, and also because of the unavailability of armoury to execute her. Akpaka eventually pronounces a sentence of three months imprisonment, as against the public execution earlier decreed. Idemudia is not happy with this since, according to him, %aif my daughter were found guilty, the executioner would have had the wherewithal to execute her. If he has no guns and bullets to execute Fulama, we have our hoes and matchets+(50).

This instigates a pandemonium in the crowd who becomes mad and seizes Fulama for jungle justice and execution. But fortunately, the law of nemesis catches up on Fulama as Afianmo (Akpaka's Minister for war, and the executioner) suddenly produces a gun that could not be found earlier to

execute Fulama. In an attempt to shoot blindly at the irate crowd, a stray bullet hits however Fulama. The crowd, constituting mainly the poor impoverished masses, sees this as an opportunity and seizes power from Akpaka and his ministers.

Towards a New Spatial Environment for Folkism

In designing for Folkism the designer should bear in mind the nature of the rapport that takes place in folkloric sessions between the actors or (narrator) and audience. To achieve and enhance this exciting experience a primary consideration should be given to the establishment of an out-door performance venue for Folkism, particularly because of the attention it will attract from the generality of the public, especially the youths. During folk tale performances there is always a narrator, around whom the spectators gather with an expectancy of an eloquent and articulate narration. In most cases, the stories told are familiar tales, or tales woven around controversial contemporary issues already known by the members of the community. In either case, the listeners are acquainted with the story or can easily relate it to contemporary issues. Then as the narrator relates his story, another narrator could join from the audience to corroborate his tale. If the new narrator, who could be one or more members of the audience, corroborates the story, they could contribute to it through songs, dance, mime, or even gestures (See Law Three and Four of Folkism). When this is done, the attention of the audience is shifted from the first narrator to the latest performance of the story.

If we are to go on to consider the typical theatre space for real traditional theatre, we will not have to look far since our traditional festivals are celebrated in the open with a fluid ability to move from one location to another. Although in folktale, it is only the narrator or other collaborating members that move the action, in our traditional festivals both performers and audience move from one point of the festival area to another. Therefore, if movement of action and spectacle is a common feature in our traditional theatre, then it is inappropriate to constrain Folkism in a totally enclosed theatre building with a distinct acting area completely separate from the audience area. This will constrain the audience's opportunity to interact meaningfully with the actions. We shall look at the positive response and interpersonal relationship that could be derived in an environmental-styled theatre space if designed and used for the performance of plays based on Folkism.

A lot of experiments have been engaged in conventional theatre spaces for the sole purpose of enhancing the proximity between actors and audience. In Nigeria, especially in the educational theatre where the importance of actors/audience relationship is stressed, modern Nigerian plays have been performed in totally enclosed theatres but with scenographic designs that are approximations of the traditional performance space. In spite of these the relationship that is so much sought for is not wholly achieved. The reason for this failure is not far from the fact that these theatres and designs are not built or designed for plays that have in their

matrix opportunities for the audience to collaborate. Some commonly used theatre spaces in modern Nigerian theatre range from the proscenium, the proscenium thrust, or apron and theatre-in-the round (though a resemblance of African spatial folkloric forms but totally enclosed). These varieties of theatre spaces have been used in place of the traditional performance space. However, there are other forms of performance spaces that are more audience inclusive and easily adaptable as performance spaces for Folkism if considered. These spaces are the Promenade and the Transverse theatre spaces. Simon Cooper and Sally Mackey describe Promenade theatre space as an acting area which has:

The actors and audience occupying roughly the same space. The actual performance of a scene is indicated by an actor speaking loudly and/or that particular area being lit. In addition, there will sometimes be small areas of raised staging or rostra placed strategically around the area... occasionally used by actors. (62)

They also describe Transverse theatre space as one that is directly between two parallel groups of audience+ (62). The Transverse space is usually an elevated cat-walk and the major difference between the Transverse theatre space and the Promenade is that while the latter allows a free flow of movement between the actors and spectators, the Transverse acting space restricts the actors to only the elevated spaces. Because of the flexibility of the Promenade theatre, it might be possible to consider its advantages with that of the Transverse space to achieve a workable space for Folkism. In doing this, it is important to note that the immobile aspect of these spaces shall not be adapted along with it since we are actually considering a theatre space that can be adaptable to any form of African play. The proposed space should have been ideally a totally open space to suit the typical traditional space as has been discussed before, but if we are going to consider a space along that line, then it will be difficult for the theatre to be functional at anytime of the day and even all year long.

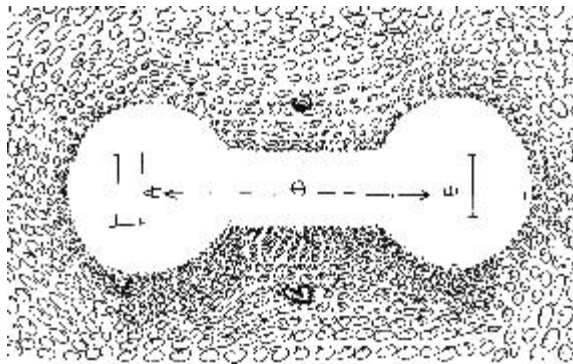
In the traditional setting, everybody has a common occupation of farming. Therefore, folkloric performances are mostly done during the harvest seasons when there is only little work on the farm. This break from farm work enables the members of the communities to plan and execute festivals and folkloric performances. In the present day society, the economic activities of the masses have been influenced tremendously by industrialisation. There is no longer a set time of the year or day that everybody in the community is free to participate in folkloric activities as seen in the past. Everyone is aiming at achieve western civilisation a hunger that is completely new to traditional contented folks thus, inspiring in our youths a change of attitude towards existing culture. As a result, a new theatre should be able to accommodate these changes to suit the new lifestyle of the present day man. In line with this, some factors to be considered in proposing a new theatre environment for Folkism should

include: Weather (for instance sunshine and rain); the use of lighting equipments, and funding (which essentially comes from tickets).

Weather It is almost impossible to predict the exact period of raining season from that of dry season in a year, because weather conditions are not static. To combat this, the theatre should have a roof since it would not be proper to propose a completely open-air theatre environment, so that the audience would not be discouraged by rain or sunshine from participating in theatre activities. If the theatre spaces are covered, it will then be possible to treat the roof with acoustics, as this will enhance the sound out put of the performances and inspire the use of lighten equipment for visibility at night.

Funding There is the need to collect gate fees from the audience, which was absent in the traditional folkloric mode. In the present day theatre, there is a need to maintain the theatre, and also to pay the actors and eventually to realise profit. To be able to achieve this new theatre shall be barricaded on all sides with a raised wall that will also allow opening on all sides in order to have an illusion of a traditional setting. The barricade will then be able to control the audience traffic from having a direct access to the theatre before performance. Most importantly, the area to be considered for this kind of theatre must be spacious. It is also advisable that a design of this magnitude be erected first for the university environment so that the students of theatre arts would begin to get used to performing indigenous plays in them. Let us consider the sketch below.

A Proposed Theatre for Folkism

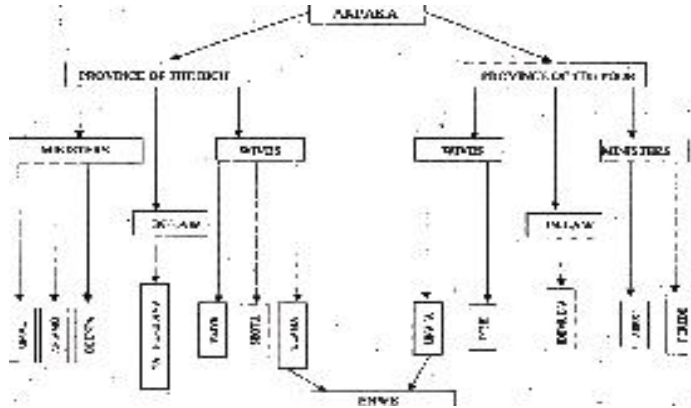


The sketch is divided into five major areas. They are areas A to E. The different areas represent various acting areas in and around the total space.

From the play, Akpaka has under his rule two groups of people from two distinct economic and social backgrounds. They are the group from the province of the rich and that from the province of the poor. Since M.O.A.'s is considered as members of the cast and collaborators in the play, their sitting positions have also been arranged to suit their roles as collaborators in the play. The M.O.A.'s sitting in point B of the sketch in the play is considered to be people from the province of the rich alongside the major actors, M.O.A.'s and M.O.A.'s who would also be sitting with them. This arrangement also goes for the M.O.A.'s and M.O.A.'s sitting in point C of the sketch.

In distributing the major actors to their various areas, the playwright has already categorised the characters into their stratum. The chart below gives a clear picture of this.

Flow Chart



The flow chart reveals clearly the different areas the various characters in the play belong to. It has also shown the different capacities of ruler ship obtainable in the play. As we already know, Akpaka at the top of the chart is the political, administrative head of Akpakaland and so act in the capacity of a president. Enwe at the base is the spiritual head of the people of Akpakaland and is always the last resort to the resolution of problems.

With the aid of the flow chart, we shall locate the different locations of major actors, %M.O.A. I+ and %M.O.A.'s+in the five areas on sketch 1. Area A: The area is the largest open area among the three-reserved area unoccupied by actors. The president's state house is located here and it is in this area that most of the actions in the play will be presented. Area B: This area will be occupied by the class of people from the province of the rich. And any %M.O.A.'s+ that finds his/herself sitting in this part of the audience area automatically becomes a member of this province. Area C: This area of the space will be occupied by the major actors from the province of the poor and %M.O.A. I+ Area D: This area is a link between area A and area E. It is not occupied by %M.O.A. I+ but it will serve the following functions: As a street linking area A to E; A gulf between the province of the rich and that of the poor; Performance area for Loma and Unani, Fulama and Unata's daughters; Performance area for the %M.O.A. I+ who will come out to impersonate Fulama and her daughter in scene six (36). Area E: This is Enwe's house/Shrine. As stated earlier, the area an %M.O.A. I+ and %M.O.A+ sits in automatically becomes his province as an active member of cast. This is because major actors and %M.O.A. I+ will be seated with them in the audience area. This kind of interaction will evidently mark the beginning of an exciting interpersonal relationship between the actors and audience. This will also help in enhancing a healthy rivalry between both areas of the audience space for a better audience-to-audience interaction. From the audience area D, the narrator will start the play by leading the audience in the opening song as stated in Law One of Folkism. For instance, the play

starts with an opening Ika Song (3). If the narrator starts the song at a point in the audience area, and is joined by the actors and %M.O.A.I+in both areas, then it is very easy to predict that all other %M.O.A.+would joyously join since the song is very easy. For instance, the opening song for Akpakaland is as follows:

Lu n'ili	Tell a tale
Ilu Nwokoro	Tale about Nwokoro
Do n'udo	Tug at the rope
Udo kpiri-kpiri	Rope kpiri-kpiri. (3)

The narrator could also begin by first informing the %M.O.A.+that the play would soon begin and that the actors are seated amongst them. They could also be instructed to look around to try and identify any major cast or %M.O.A.I+This introduction could be used at first to awaken their interest to their role as participants in the play. The costumes for the major characters could be placed at the entrance to area A from area D, so that when they are introduced, they come out of their areas and pick up their costumes and even put them on in front of the %M.O.A.+ After capturing the attention and interest of the entire %M.O.A.+with the opening, the narrator should move out of area D to C, from where he shall introduce the major characters who will appear from their various class areas for identification and move back to the audience area after putting on their costumes.

When Akpaka is introduced, he should enter area A from behind his throne. This should continuously be his point of entrance and exit while his wives and ministers should naturally enter area A from their various class areas in the audience. The next scene on page 11 should take us from Area A to E where the light should meet Enwe already seated in his shrine or moving from any area of the audience to his shrine by %calling for clients and 'free things'. Occasionally, he rattles a slim gourd to which cowries have been strung..)+ (11). Idemudia should be seen emerging from area C through area D to Enwe's shrine. Unata should also move from her point in area C through D to join her father in Enwe's shrine. The third scene (18) is originally designated to be in front of the state house, but because of this kind of environmental arrangement, the scene could begin from area C and progress to area A with the fight between Loma and Unani. Unata's bedroom scene should be in front of the state house (Note that the transition from one scene to another is usually punctuated with the narrator's interjection. Therefore, these interjections could be used advantageously with songs for scene changes.) The aspect of the play that is most sensitive to audience participation is the impersonation played by the %M.O.A.I+in scene six (36).

The narrator should invite %M.O.A.I+from both points B and C. At this juncture it will almost be difficult to ascertain if the people called out are actually %M.O.A.I+ or M.O.A.+ As this scene unfolds, the wives of the president should try as much as possible to get into the costumes they would

need for the final scene, since they are seated amongst M.O.A.I+they and M.O.A. who would naturally and willingly assist them. The costumes for the play should be designed in such a way that they would be worn on top of each other so that it will be easy to pull out the top costume to reveal an inner one. If they need to change completely they could be assisted by members of cast as well as members of the audience seating at their area of action.

In the final scene, the President should, as usual, emerge from behind his throne while his wives and ministers should emerge from their area and sit amidst the M.O.A.II+in area A. With this, M.O.A.+in this area would also serve as M.O.A.I+ because at this time of the play, they would evidently have been completely integrated to support and sympathise with the stratum their seating arrangement has delineated to them.

Conclusion

One of the major reasons a proscenium theatre building is not needed in folkloric performances is because, by its very nature a folk play is designed to encourage complete audience integration both as audience projecting their views on issues raised in the play or as actors themselves who by the traditions of folktales are eligible to function as co-performers during performances. With a new form of environmental space, the gulf within a proscenium theatre will be completely eradicated as demonstrated in the experiment above. The fluidity in space that occurs in an environmental theatre does not only integrate the audience into the performance, but entrenches in actors/actresses and audiences a natural communal relationship that is necessary in invoking a sense of unity and common play in an urbanised community that has completely lost its traditional value system. Folkloric tendencies therefore can only be achieved when space and style amalgamate to foster performances as replete in a traditional folkloric theatre

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