

DRAMA AS IMAGINATIVE HYPNOTIC IMPULSE: A POSTULATE ROOTED IN THE AFRICAN DRAMATIC EXPERIENCE

*Charles AGHA and **Patrick AGHA

Abstract

There are still doubts in the mind of Africans even in the Diaspora, regarding the appropriateness and validity of interpreting the African dramatic experience under the same yardstick and parameters as the west, especially using the Aristotelian model of the mimetic form as an entrenching factor to underscore the totality of the dramatic worldview. On this account, quite a number of researchers have begun surveys into the vast unattended mass of information on African theatre and drama, to rediscover the African form for assigning meaning and value, for interpreting indigenous experiences, and constructing knowledge. Using the literary and analytical methodologies, this article reviews scholarly positions on the subject and attempts a formulation of a theory that is rooted in the African dramatic experience. It posits that the imaginative hypnotic impulse which transcends mere entertainment, herein called hypnosis, can be a reliable basis for examining African drama and theatre. This is ostensibly because hypnosis can be regarded as a primal force around which the African cosmic perception of life and dramatic experiences revolve.

Keywords: African drama and theatre, Imaginative hypnotic impulse, African cosmic perception of life

Introduction

The African dramatic ambiance has influenced greatly the need to re-examine African dramas written in European languages, and to carve out a clear-cut theoretical model, that will be explained in African terms and merit. In spite of this move, two schools of thought have generated arguments either to accept, or redefine the European theoretical model on drama, through scholarly works and critical discussions. The first school, which we choose to call the evolutionists as supported by Ogunbiyi (1981), holds tenaciously to the Aristotelian model of the mimetic form which lays credence to drama as the imitation of an action, especially those of men. While the second school of thought, the relativists, argue for an African dramatic experience, which can represent the mode and perception of Africans.

The Aristotelian concept of drama as imitation has continued to attract critical comments and discussions from the African scene, as it has also elicited moves by scholars to explore the vast unattended mass of information on African theatre and drama. The Aristotelian model has further spurred African critics, to survey, to rediscover the African form for assigning meaning and value, to interpreting indigenous experiences, and constructing knowledge from local experiences. Ejeke (2011) claims that the African

cosmic perception of life can be relied upon in interpreting African dramatic experiences because one sees certain heterogeneous factors at play in it. This is against the well formalized western worldview that breeds homogeneity to the point of becoming too individualistic, if not narcissistic.

More so, the artistic mania of art for art sake+popularized by Plato and his contemporaries, which fleshed out the arts in the western worldview is clearly bereft of the concept of the tripartite world+which Soyinka (1976), Mbiti (1969), and others envisioned as basis of African philosophical worldview. To rekindle hope and interest in the furtherance of a continuous search for an African dramatic theory, against the backdrop of the Aristotelian notion, relativist scholars such as Soyinka, Senghor, Adelogba, Uyovbukrhi, Ukala, Ododo have evolved paradigms such as spirit possession+, doadism, ritualistic communion+, folkism+ facequerade+, among other models which provide useful insights into the variegated African drama and theatre.

In line with the foregoing, this study attempts to formulate an African dramatic theory rooted in the African experience. It hopes to provoke intellectual debates which can possibly improve its articulation, refiguring it to become an intellectual model that can assign value and meaning in interpreting the African dramatic form. Gegeri and Agha (2012) describe the African dramatic scenario as arising from the primitive man's quest to comprehend the phenomenal trends in the cosmos. Hence, man developed his quest to seek the protection of the unknown and sought to manipulate cosmic forces to his advantage through propitiation, signaling a ritualistic communion, especially to those forces he regards as benevolent. Overtime, these events became cyclical and elaborated giving room for several attendant dramatic enactments that metamorphosed into drama. Akporobaro (2000) explains that:

ō Man's relationship with these forces involves some form of ritual acting intended to make the benevolent forces yield their bounties and ensure their supreme guidance and shield them from the adverse tendencies of the malevolent forces. By so doing man's fears were kept in check and the conflict of these forces in him reduced to the barest minimumō it is on these conflict(s) that drama thrives.

The Functionality of the “Imaginative Hypnotic Impulse”

The Imaginative Hypnotic impulse+ model functions in this order. The brain permeates a kind of illusory image like a silhouette, forming a picturesque resemblance of an idea, either in the past or present, and replicated into an enigmatic figure, until it is transported to the present as memory recall or memory projection through the sensory organs. The final outcome becomes a full projection of an idea or a concept for a later examination or a full recall of a historical event, or an experience which assumes the form of ritual, festival, religious ceremonies, etc. There are two levels to Imaginative hypnotic impulse+model. The first level is enshrined in

%magination+, which was earlier looked at. The second level focuses on %hypnotism.+ But for the purpose of clarity, a definition of terms will be necessary to foreground this discussion.

Hypnosis, according to the Oxford Illustrated Encyclopedia, is a condition which refers to two slightly different phenomena, %one in human and the other in animal. Human hypnosis is a trance-like state of helplessness, being ordered by an uncontrollable force+, while %impulse+ on the other hand, %is a sudden desire to act, usually without a careful thought.+ To illuminate more on this standpoint is to re-awaken the idea of an African performer in our minds' eye, as he radiates with expressions generated through emotions or reaches the level of equilibrium, where he begins to manifest an impulse that is not of the ordinary. This level can be likened to Soyinka's gulf of transition; the home of the tragic spirits and the domain between man and the godly. Beattie and John Middleton (1969) previously acknowledged this transition in their work on %Spirit Mediumship. They contend that:

There is an immense literature on spirit mediumship, spirit possession, shamanism and a related phenomenonō The most comprehensive account is probably that by Eliade (1951). However, it contains relatively little African material, and it is not written from an anthropological or sociological viewpoint but rather from that of the historian or religion, concerned with symbolic interpretation and the diffusion of items of cultureō (203)

Though in a slightly different context, this expression signals an unconscious state of helplessness of the performer, reflective of hypnosis or likened to possession in the African context, and assumes a total control of the body. This line of thought is corroborated by Horton (1983), whose understanding of the subject comes across in his treatment of an aspect of Kalabari possession termed %bringing the gods into the village.+In that study, Horton declared that:

ō there is possession, in which the god is alleged to %come into the man's head+and displace the teme in control of his bodyō ; for all alike serve to bring the gods into contact with their people. (91)

The possessed body is put into 'sleep' and the spirit of possession comes alive through the physical body. Sleep here is relative or metaphorical; it shows that the body assumes a sleep-like quality (dormant). The manipulation of the body at times to its disadvantage is a clear indication of spirit possession. A typical example is the cult of the Bori spirit among the Hausas. Michael Onwuejeogwu (1969) in an essay on the Bori cult gives a comprehensive account of a typical Bori dance and the circumstances surrounding its possession syndrome. He expounds that:

ō in a typical Bori dance, the woman puts on the colour appropriate to the spirit and in some cases carries the miniature symbolic object, bow and spear, etc, in her hand.

She is now the spirit and acts as the spirit. If, for example, she is possessed by the spirit called Mallam Alhaji, she walks around bent and coughing weakly like an old learned Mallam and reads an imaginary Koran. If she is possessed by Dan Galadima, the prince, she acts like a nobleman wearing kingly robes. She sits on a mat hearing cases, and people around make obeisance. If she is possessed by Mai-gangaddi, the nodding one, who causes sleeping sickness, she dances and suddenly dozes off in the middle of some act and wakes up and sleeps again and wakes, etc. If possessed by Ja-ba-fari, either red or white, a spirit that causes people to go mad, she eats filth and simulate copulation. In some cases she leaps into the air and land on her buttocks with feet astride-thrice. She falls exhausted and is covered with a cloth. During this state she may foretell the future. Spectators wishing to obtain a favour from or appease the spirit that has mounted her place their gifts and alms on the mat. Then she sneezes, the spirit quits her, and she becomes normal. During this period she is never referred to as herself but as the spirit.

In a nutshell this exercise cannot be described as an imitation from the western perspective; the essence of the spirit mediumship, spirit possession is conspicuously embedded not only in the Africans' perception, but in the entire worldview especially as recorded by Eliade (1951).

To advance the concept of imaginative hypnotic impulse a look at possession and trance-like performances in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria would be pertinent. First, take the Orukoro possession dance, a ritual among the Ijaw people in riverine communities of Nigeria. This cultural practice transcends mere entertainment; the performance is essentially supplication or appeasement of a supernatural force against evil occurrences. In the African belief system, especially among those living in riverine communities, the water goddesses also known as or mammywota (mermaids) have been noted for betrothing themselves to humans of their choice and then establish them with the gift of an inner eye/transcendental insights to see the future and extra terrestrial planes. According to Adelugba (1981), those invested with this kind of gift easily become chief priests/priestesses, who at certain seasons are possessed according to the choice of the god. During this period they are transformed into the essence of the god/goddess himself/herself. He/she is then thrown into a trance characterized by ritual sacrifices, incantations, music, song and dance, and the possessed gains a prophetic insight, communicating with man as a first person representative of the deity. Through the inspiring praise songs and chant of the god, the possession expands into ecstatic performance, thus, transforming the possessed into the essence of the god. A priest known to be old and weak or in his ordinary life as effeminate can automatically gain a transformation of a fierce, agile, bold and inspiring figure capable of commanding the whole worship.

This is the point Horton (1981) made in his paper, *The Gods as Guests*, which was on an aspect of Kalabari religious life. In it, Horton opines that, there is a clear manifestation of spirit possession in the worship of their many gods. Even when it takes the form of mime, masquerading and impersonation, they are all culminated in seeking the face or essence of the unseen god. Thus, possession in the African context reveals the height which the possessed or impersonator have reached signalling what may be referred to as the Soyinka's chthonic realm. In the words of Horton:

The key idea here is summarized in the maxim *'to be with their names that the gods stay and come.'* By *'name'* in this context is implied any word, object, or act which can be taken to symbolize the god-either its name in the literal sense, the sculpture, the masquerade and its carved head-dress, or the sequence of action by means of which a human being represents it. For all of these, the fact of their presence or occurrence in a given place is enough to secure the presence of the god they refer to. Whether one utters the name of a god three times, drums it three times, makes a new sculpture, and purifies an old one, dons a masquerade or acts out behaviour attributes to the god, one is doing something which brings him automatically close because it is his symbol. This is why the mime and masquerade are just as effective means of bringing the god into the community where they are performed as is the induction of possession. By *'playing'* with his impersonator, the villagers are playing with the god himself no less surely than when they confront a possessed medium. (91)

The foregoing buttresses this article's claim of *'imaginative hypnotic impulse'* of African dramatic experience. Another instance of this spirit mediumship/possession is among the Okirika people, a riverine community in Rivers State, Nigeria. In recent times the Okirika enclave has become a rallying point for dramatists, historians and other researchers due to the attendant mysteries that envelope the *'Adun'* festival coupled with the huge academic materials it provides for intellectual discourse, especially as it relates to the art in general and African theatre and drama in particular.

Okirika indigenes believe that the Adun festival is more of a cleansing rite celebrated to ward-off evil forces and to cement the people's relationship with the python deity. To further demystify the mystery which engulfs the performance of the python deity especially that which holds audience agog in awe over the puzzling performance atop the sea, is to be abreast of the original mythical/historical python, believed to assert its protective coverage on the people and their universe? The preparatory stage of the festival usually begins with a divination and afterward the naming of the houses and individuals to embark on the arduous task. Those favoured by the oracle are isolated from the community to undergo fortification. Propitiations are also made to the god whose favour they seek, and finally a formal presentation of the pantheon carriers before the shrine of the river god, whose essence they are to play. The series of events is suffused with songs, chants, music and incantation. During the performance there is a clear indication of spirit possession, as Adun's appearance unleashes a

hypnotic effect not only on the audience, but also the drummers and even the performers or the Adun carriers. Another dramatic twist is when the possession becomes weighty on the performers, the python suddenly transits into an erratic movement that is undefined, best described as movement tending towards aggression. This outward display clearly indicates spirit possession and may lead to disaster if not properly managed. A clear point of reference is the case of the Bonny people of Rivers State, whose Adun was lost to the sea during one of such performances.

The premiere of Julie Umukoro's play, *Oshimili* in 1993 at the University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre, Rivers State, shows extent to which the recurring subject of the water people has been viewed with acquiescence. Hence, it is no surprise that the Ndokwa ethnic extraction living around the eastern bank of the River Niger in Delta State, is used in her play to reaffirm her resolve and a strong traditional belief that the water people abound in numerous African riverine communities. *Oshimili* intensifies the interest and role of the water people in relation to human quest and desperation for material and spiritual blessings or powers, which establishes their societal ethos or status in their peopled environment. This heart touching drama demonstrates in high hopes some degree of possession, as the priestess, Ngwede is constantly in trance throughout the performance of the play. The artistic synthesis that carries the whole foreshadowing is embedded in the %~~m~~imaginative hypnotic impulse+ as demonstrated in this undertaken.

The Egungun cult used by Leroi Jones (1983) through the materials gathered from Joel Adedeji and Ulli Beier to examine the mime dramatic elements and their strictly ritual functions also contains a profuse amount of materials on possession. He observed that:

ō .As bearers of ancestral mask, their voices change, for people are not supposed to recognize them anymore and they are frequently possessed by the ancestor, and sometimes the orisha which they represent. But in these phenomena of possession there is an element of drama, of gratuitousness, which certain researchers have pointed outō (49)

In another development, Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) in his opening address, of the 2011 commemoration of the International Day of the World Indigenous People in New York, with the theme: *Indigenous Designs: Celebrating Stories and Cultures Crafting our own Future*, reaffirmed the UN's resolve to back the rights and the preservation of indigenous cultures, with a commitment to advancing the values of equity, justice and dignity for all. The arts column of the *Compass* (in Nigeria) of August 11, 2011 captures a section of Ban's address:

We see their creativity and innovations in the arts, literature and the sciencesō We must work harder to recognize and strengthen their right to control their intellectual property,

and help them to protect, develop and be compensated fairly for the cultural heritage and traditional knowledge that is ultimately of benefit to us all. (25)

The UN's goal is in agreement with the aspiration of this study: that there is need for Africans to strive to determine what constitute their universe of thought and leverage models that would help them to interpret their experiences based on local perception.

Conclusion

In Nigeria and indeed much of Africa, there abound lots of festivals, rituals and masquerade displays that are rooted in the African dramatic experience. Some of these include the Eyo, Edi and the Egungun festivals of the Yoruba; the Ekpe and the Mmanwu of the Igbo; the Ekpe ritual dance of the Efiks; the Abua ritual dance of Abua; the Nwaotam of Opobo; the Ogbanje, Adofi, Uyo, Ikenga, Ukpabor and the Erishi of the Ndokwa; among others. These shades of performances add up to the description of drama and theatre as imitation by some African scholars in relation to its interpretation within the context of the African dramatic experience. More so, a considerable experience of ritual, festivals and religious ceremonies are reverberated through imaginative impulse, and the magnitude of possession that arises. It is along this line of thought we are positing that drama from the African perspective is an impulse shrouded in imaginative hypnotism. However, whether the African dramatic experience is presented in the form of Soyinka's ritualistic communion, Senghor's participation, neo-Aristotelian theory of the mimetic form, Uyo's conjunction, etc, or not, they all circuit around an hub where imagination is overtly the motherboard.

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