

## RITUAL AESTHETICS IN AFRICAN DRAMATURGY

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### **Abstract**

*Overtime, the term "ritual" has been perceived with some fright by children and ritual illiterates who are fed with the notion that ritual dwells in the act of witch-crafting. To these people, talking of ritual or visiting their villages is a wilful suicide. This raises the questions: Is ritual really an evil act? Can anything good come out of ritual? Who is a 'ritualist'? This study employs the sociological-analytical methodology in its investigation of ritual as a concept and its union with drama. It further explores the aesthetic derivatives of drama from ritual. In doing this, the study analytically makes references to some ritual drama texts, X-raying how ritual qualities strengthen their plots.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Communication, Drama, Ritual, Ritual-drama

### **Introduction: Conceptual Background to Ritual**

The concept of ritual is often viewed from a religious perspective. This hinges on the belief that man craves incessantly to relate with his ancestors, deities and ultimately the supernatural being. The crave lies in man's appreciation of his helplessness thus relying on supernatural help for virtually all he does and needs. This help then to form a yardstick for man/supernatural relationship, a sacrifice/favour based relationship (Duruaku 16-17). Ritual becomes then a stylized repetitive pattern of behaviour associated with religious beliefs and practices and in some sense deemed to be sacred. Ritual contains a temporal element in that it holds at set times (during certain needs and occasions) with a liturgical order and spatial element, often taking place in a specified location with actors also being spatially coordinated<sup>1</sup>. Ritual forms an integral part of African society to ensure that (this) society survives for generations to trail behind it+ (Layiwola 4).

Richard Schechner (228) considers ritual to have evolved with nature and overtime has become part of man's socio-physiological existence. Schechner then considers ritual from a multi-faceted nature thus:

1) as part of the evolutionary development of animals; 2) as structures with formal qualities and definable relationships; 3) as symbolic systems of meaning; 4) as performative actions or processes; 5) as experiences. These categories overlap. It is also clear that rituals are not safe deposit vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative system generating new materials and recombining traditional actions in new ways. (228)

Andrew Horn explores the aesthetic essence of ritual and argues that:

The ultimate end of ritual is to have an effect on the spirits, to make the gods act. The primary purpose, then, of ritual is magical effect. Ritual is experienced communally; encouraging a sense of community amongst members. (12)

This aesthetic essence of ritual is critical bedrock of communal living in Africa. An event that makes market squares, village squares, road junctions and similar places notable theatres of African performances. Ritual has attracted various definitions based on communication values. Tambia, Turner, Grotowski, and Schechner discuss ritual from communicative and performative perspective. Tambia defines ritual as:

A culturally constructed system of symbolic communication constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). (Cited in Layiwola 127)

In this definition, Tambia unconsciously highlights colourfully some aesthetic drama-adaptable features of ritual. Such features are mimetically-adapted-life-giving ingredients to African drama. Scholars overtime, have shared a common idea on the meaning and essence of ritual. They seem to agree that ritual is man's constant attempt to communicate directly with forces beyond him or with the supernatural. Andrew Horn, Francoise Grund-Khaznader, Janet Snyder Neil, P.A. Ezikeojiaku among others are of the opinion that ritual is a supplication of man to the supernatural or transcend being for a favour. Andrew Horn opines that ritual is an attempt for man to communicate directly with the supernatural, with the world of forces beyond his control (12). Ola Rotimi in KURUMI likens this communication to the philosophy of a frog which he interprets to mean give and take (54-55). It is a bi-directional process whereby man offers reverence/sacrifices to the supernatural for favours/rewards. The request/reward could be rain, good harvest, children, health or successful battle or hunting expedition.

To ritual is ascribed the role of communication and interaction. Andrew Horn identifies a medium, the priest, in this communication process. To him, 'Any communication he (man) may make to the priest or the medium is not to that person but through him to the spirit and it is through the medium that the supplicant is addressed by the spirit', hence the word medium (Horn 12). Soyinka (108) recaptures this 'medium in The Swamp Dweller when Igwezu laments/questions the gods whose duty it is to protect/nourish him after sacrificing to them through his priest.

## Aesthetic Potency of Ritual

As stated earlier, ritual has been and remains part of human activities as far as life and its sustenance is concerned. Ogundeji considers the origin, function and potency of ritual and opines that ritual:

Is believed to have emerged from the attempts of the primitive man to grapple with the problem of his environment, nature and his very existence. He discovered that some actions, which he took, gave him courage and reassurance about his natural and psychological concerns. He therefore, continued to repeat the actions periodically. The inherent mimetic instinct of man was brought into play in the achievement of this purpose and other arts followed suit over time. (3)

Mimesis then forms an umbilical cord between ritual and drama. The act of rain making in African society, especially the Igbo accentuates this fact and further confirms Ogundeji's view. I believe my childhood personal experience/witness of my grand-father's act of rain making will support this discussion. In my village, Umunohu Nsu, Ehime Mbanu of Imo State, there is stream called Nwanjuobi which forms a valley with two big hills. This Nwanjobi valley divides my village into two. You may wonder why this description? Now, one raining season, someone died at the other side of the hill and on the day of his burial, a heavy rain threatened. The deceased family quickly ran and cried to my aged grand-father to help them hold the rain. Nze Nwanaju quickly moved to action. In a ritualistic mood, he collected his tools and moved to the centre of the road. Meanwhile, the weather clouded heavily. As a small boy I followed him silently carrying out whatever he asked me to do. Amidst incantations, he placed a broad cocoa-yam leaf on the ground, next the stone and finally he pegged a spear through the leaf to the ground. He then waved his broom to the four parts of the earth and sang what I could clearly hear to mean:

Rain go o! Rain go o!

Rain go o!

(Pointing to the east)

Rains go to Umuezeala. Rain there until night falls.

At this point, it has started raining as he shifted to the directed area without crossing the point he pegged his spear. From that point through my entire village, we did not experience any rain until night-fall. In fact, it was the heavy flood that flowed across that testified how heavy the rain was. Watching this ritual performance was not just interesting but also revealing and instructive. Something beyond make-believe as Akporobaro thinks that drama implies a co-operative act of make-believe by which it becomes possible for an imitator to present and for a spectator to receive an explanatory image of those physical and spiritual conflicts which govern

human conduct+ (373). The point being illustrated here is the aesthetic dramatic potency of ritual elements in traditional rain making.

Francoise Grûnd- Khazneder regurgitates that the primary focus of ritual is the coming together of the world of the living with the world of the dead. This theatrical manifestation becomes a formative element of the social structure and perpetuates cultural values from one generation to another+to continuously recreate and sustain African drama. This arguably is connoted when Soyinka talks of rites of passage+, various realms of existence, %cosmic whole+or fourth stage in the Yoruba cosmology (Soyinka 36) which he dramatically brings together in *A Dance of the forests* where he presents a bilateral communication between the living and the dead. He emphasizes a tripartite relationship between the living, the dead, and the unborn showing the complementary influence of this relationship on the whole. Hence, he speaks through the Dead woman and the Dead man in *A Dance of the forests*:

Dead Woman: I know they told me to come. I know I was summoned. (What is it to them from whom I descended if that is why they shun me now?) The world is big but the dead are bigger. We've been dying since the beginning, the living try but the gap always widens. What is it to them from whom I descended!

Dead Man: it was a mistake from the beginning. It is a long way to travel the understreams to be present where the living make merry. What is it to me? I want nothing more. Nothing at all.

(Soyinka 8)

Ezikeojiaku sees ritual as a religious consciousness, a conglomeration of sacraments which are considered very essential for the welfare and development of the individuals and community involved. Man's adherence to ritual is informed by his belief in the need to remain alive and be nourished. He affirms that:

Subjectively, religion is the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship Him; objectively religion is the body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Beingō . It has been suggested that if the phases of human life are not celebrated through rituals and hard work, there would be no rewarding harvest, no good health and consequently no able bodied population which is, indeed the bedrock of any development. (80)

V.W. Turner enlarges rituals and emphasizes human welfare and sustenance as the primary essence. He categorizes the essences of rituals into three, namely: Redressive Ritual or Ritual of Affliction

- (i) Ritual of life crisis and
- (ii) Liminal Ritual. (203)

He observes that 'redressive' ritual redresses some sort of calamity or affliction, which plagues the affairs of a social group. It is in this vein that A.M. Hocert (53) opines that ritual is not merely a quest of life; (but) it is a social quest. However one sees ritual, either as a religious or secular event, or a social quest that adopts theatrical arts in articulating the beliefs of a people, it would be taken that ritual and theatre are related. There is a tension between religion and entertainment and the mutual accommodation or compromise arrived at is called ritual drama (Ogunba 53-66).

### **Ritual: A Theatrical Aesthetics**

It is indeed fallacious to think that the African has really nothing called theatre either as a building or performance. Each hour in an African's life affords him opportunity to express emotions: emotions of joy, sadness, victory or thanksgiving. These expressions are exhibited often with songs, dance or music and often all put together. The hunter who kills a wild game is often heralded with music and his act ritually animated. These activities embody what an African sees as theatre to which everybody is a chief actor. Ogunba 5 notes that the primitive roots of this theoretical tradition are to be sought in the festivals and religious rituals which abound in the many Nigeria communities (27). To this effect, Grotowski takes a sociological overview in his descriptive etymology of ritual and observes thus:

The performer, with a capital letter, is a man of action. He is not a man who plays another. He is a dancer, a priest, a warrior: he is outside aesthetic genres. Ritual is performance, an accomplished action; an act. Degenerated ritual is a spectacle. I don't want to discover something new but something forgotten. Something, which is so old, that all distinctions between aesthetic genres are no longer of use. Essence interests me because in it nothing is sociological. It is what you did not receive from others what did not come from outside, what is not learned. One access to the creative way consists of discovering in oneself an ancient corporality to which you are bound by a strong ancestral relation. you can arrive very far back, as if your memory awoke, as if you recall performer of primal ritual. with the breakthrough - as in the return of an exile - can one touch something which is no longer linked to origins? I believe so. (Cited in Schechner 254-255)

Victor Turner further ascribes to ritual basic dramatic qualities. According to Turner,

Ritual is, in its most typical-cultural expressions, a synchronisation of many performative genres, and is often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional colouring to the interdependent communicative codes which express in manifold ways that meaning inherent in the dramatic leitmotiv. In so far as it is %dramatic+, ritual contains a distanced and generalized re-duplication of the agnostic process of the social drama. Ritual, therefore, is not %breadbare+ but %richly textured+ by virtue of its varied interweaving of the productions of mind and senses. (Turner 81, cited in Layiwola 127)

Drama has also been observed to have developed from the Greek festivals in honour of Dionysus. Layiwola traces the origin of ritual drama to the festivals of Dionysus and elsewhere opines that:

In ritual dramas, the plot and Structure development are geared towards the attainment of a certain sense of well-being. Even if the deployment of ideas and episodes do not pre-empt the denouement of a performance, the ordering is such that a particular outcome is re-assured. There is a longing towards a resolution of chaos, be it personal, communal or cosmic. (Layiwola 126)

Layiwola (244-245) likens ritual to the creation and development of dramatic conflicts, the kind of conflict that heightens and sustains tension and suspense in a dramatic piece. This is a characteristic feature of ritual drama a point where ritual meets and agrees with drama. Copious examples abound to exhibit aesthetic effects of ritual in developing and progressing dramatic plots. If Yerimah's assertion that %theatre feeds on the culture of the society+(13), is true, we will now examine some ritual-drama to explore how ritual has aesthetically made this contribution to the development of drama.

Zulu Sofola dramatically presents a ritual of death in developing the plot of *Wedlock of the gods*. Odibei considers the circumstances surrounding her son's death and thinks that Ogwoma had a hand in his death. In her bid to avenge the death turns to ritual. Zulu Sofola in Act 3 presents a theatrical aesthetic of ritual:

Odibei: My God, the worst is done! Ogwoma Walks on the path that reeks with blood. (she picks up the snail shell and blows the powder). Let me feel your power! (she puts it down, looks directly into it. She shakes the gourd at appropriate intervals). The vulture does not see the corpse and resist it, The dog does not see human dung and resist it;

The antelope does not hear its death music and refuse to dance. Ogwoma cannot hear your call and refuse to answer! Bring her here! Lead her to me;

Bring her here not knowing what she is doing!

Lead her and make her do whatever 1 bid!

Ogwoma, your soul is summoned; (Ogwoma appears in a trance and walks towards ODIBEI)

Your soul is wanted;

Come, come and not look back! Come Ogwoma, Odibei wants you!

Come, and answer your call!

Come and not look back. (Ogwoma reaches her and stops.)

Ogwoma (still in a trance; she remains so until she gets home and does what she is asked to do. Speaking slowly) I am here.

Odibei: That is good. Go to your house, open the door and enter. Behind your water-pot is another pot. Open it and say into it once, 'I have done what the land forbids'. Cup your hand thrice saying before each drink, 'I have done what the land forbids', 'Let me perish', 'Let my blood appease the disgraced spirit of my husband.' Close the pot and wait for whatever comes. Is that clear?

Ogwoma: It is clear.

Odibei: Good. Go now, and do everything.

Ogwoma: I will do everything

(Sofola 52-53).

The effect of Odibei's ritual brought about multiple deaths, what can be considered as adversity of ritual. Perhaps, this may explain why most people abhor ritual and detest going to their villages. But here, I am considering how ritual aesthetically advances drama plots. Ola Rotimi in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* explores ritual in advancing his dramatic conflict and suspense. The message of the Ifa priest resounds:

Ifa Priestō ..

[Stops abruptly, casts the 'opele' beads]

I W- O S A!

[Picks beads up, humming the song, casts again.]

I W- O S A! Hm!

[Bending over to study the beaded formation] who has ever seen blood in a locust!

[stares at Ovonramwen and glumly shakes his head]

Ovonramwen: What does it say?õ

Ifa Priest: [With a shrug of the shoulders]. It is well thenõ

[Re-arranges the 'Opele' beads in the original formation].

Oba Alaiyeluwa, Lord of Beninõ the shadows I see over your empire are heavy. Too heavy. Heavy andõ . And dark.

Uzazakpo: What does that mean?

Ifa priest: His reign is full of danger

Evbakhaubokun: Is it death?

Ifa Priest: It isõ Death.

Ovonramwen: [Visibly shaken, rises and moves away a couple of paces]. I shall be the next victim of vile plotting  
Then -my dead body following that of Uwangue Egiebo.

Ifa Priest: Your Highnessõ the death I see here is not the death of one man. Bodies of menõ fireõ and blood  
bodies floating -

Uzazakpo: An epidemic.

Ifa Priest: Fire, and an ocean of blood bodies floating in it!

(13-15)

Emeka Nwabueze in *Guardian of the Cosmos*<sup>7</sup> also employs ritual effect to settle and advance his drama when crisis arises over the leadership of Anoka. He emphasizes man's total dependence on the judgement of the gods over his affairs especially in conflict situations. Speaking through his characters, Nwabueze observes:

Akukalia: The matter doesn't rest in your hands now, elders of

Anoka. The matter rests in the hands of our ancestors.

Okoye: Our ancestors! I embrace that. The ancestors of Anoka

have the last say in matters of this nature. The priest of

Agbala should be asked to guide our action. Let's ask the deity.  
The words of the dead should guide the living. Let's ask the  
deity.

(Nwabueze 22).

Again, Ola Rotimi in *The gods are not to blame* reiterates man's confidence on the gods in solving his problems. Rotimi emphasizes the ritual life of the Yoruba people anchoring the development and resolution of the plot of the tragic ritual-drama on the Wisdom, knowledge and judgement of the gods. The ritual solution sought for the cause of the people's problem led to the consultation of the oracle:

Odewale: (TO OGUN PRIEST). Elder one, you tell them.

Priest: We have sent Aderope to Ile-Ife, the land of Orunmila,  
to ask the all-seeing god why we are in pain.

Odewale: [TO TOWNSPEOPLE]. Now you know.

Those of you who thought that we, my chiefs and I, slept  
while you suffered, what have you now to say?

Towns People: We thank our king for  
Rotimi 12)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen from the foregoing that drama is an offshoot of ritual. African dramatists have leaned greatly on ritual in advancing and resolving pertinent issues of dramatic essence because it is only when dramas are separated from rituals and assume an independent existence that they become mechanical and lifeless.

## Notes

- 1 Performance ritual and rites of passage. Retrieved from <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1412/Rites-Passage-Ritual-Performance-Rites-Passage.html>. on 31st Jan. 2008.
- 2 Rain making is a ritual-science of influencing/controlling rain causing it to fall (rain) or cease to fall within a controlled time.

- 3 Nwanjobi is a spring water (stream) that rushes from under a big tree. It serves as a major source of drinking water throughout the year although the rush reduces tremendously in the dry season. It is located in Umudimezeji of Umunohu Nsu, in Ehime Mbano L.G.A. of Imo State, Nigeria. Nwanjobi incidentally bears an etymology to my surname, Nwanajuobi which means child gives succour.
- 4 Hocert, A.M. 1973. The life-giving myths and other essays. 52
- 5 Ogunsuyi, S.A. 2001. The aesthetics of traditional African theatre: a gestalt for television drama production Ph.D Thesis. University of Ibadan.27.
- 6 Rotimi, O. 1974. Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. A benin king, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi who rules his empire with intimidation finally meets his downfall in the hands of the Whiteman who invaded Benin.
- 7 Nwabueze, Emeka. 1990. Guardian of the Cosmos. Through the instrumentality of the oracle, Emeka settles the conflict of the play between Ezeudo and Akukalia. The oracle declares that Ezeudo is no stranger in the land of his father's mother+ (25).
- 8 Rituals of religion, like the husk of a seed preserve its life and make it germinate. Retrieved from <http://www.hinduism.co.za/rituals.htm> on 31st Jan. 2008.

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