

DIRECTORIAL STYLE AND STYLIZATION:  
'THE PHOTOGRAPHIC SYNTHESIS' IN FELIX OKOLO'S  
DRAMATURGY ON THE NIGERIAN THEATRE STAGE

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Abstract

The creation of theatre directors like other artistes in Nigeria and the world at large have been known to be influenced by a variety of choices. From the varying choices available, theatre practitioners strive to make the best decisions to achieve greater aesthetic value in their production. In effect, relating the script to stage by the modern day director is not without its challenges as the study of styles of directors in Nigeria has been chiefly ignored in scholarship. This study examines the styles of directing on the Nigerian stage through the works of Felix Okolo with a view to documenting the various directorial codes, directorial signals and prospects of directing in Nigeria and the director's artistic choices. This research adopts analytical, participant observation and interview methods. Productions of Felix Okolo were previewed and evaluated. Felix Okolo was purposively selected as the case study because of his professional proficiency and consistency. Structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with selected director, crew and cast to elicit relevant information. Data were content-analyzed. The style of directing is a highly individual art and no two directors can direct works in the same manner given the same cast, background or the same material. Basically, six aesthetic codes were found to make up the style of Okolo. These codes are the Total Theatre Aesthetics, the Multitasking Aesthetics, Design and Technical Compactedness, Non-Static Photographic Aesthetics, the Actor-Audience Appeal and the Line cum Demonstration Aesthetics. From the directorial codes prevalent in the works of Felix Okolo, the 'Photographic Synthesis' seems the most appropriate to name his style. With this style, Nigerian and indeed African theatre directors could easily learn the various codes that make up Okolo's 'Photographic Synthesis' and pass on to younger generations of artistes and directors such artistic nous.

Keywords: Nigerian theatre directors, Felix Okolo, Photographic Synthesis, Artistic inventiveness

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## Introduction

Directing is perceived to go beyond script interpretation to have its roots deeply embedded in the artistic inventiveness of the director. Through the director's artistic inventiveness, he strives for the proper articulation, coordination, and implementation of all the theatrical and dramatic activities into one whole for the purpose of presenting before the audience an artistically endowed performance. The style and artistic creation of the director is usually informed by influence and the imaginative drive of the individual. Artistic creations and their authors are said to exist having been influenced by a particular situation, event or thing. Regardless of the artiste, one known fact is that the artiste does not create out of a vacuum. In the same vein, artistic directors too do not create out of a vacuum. In the case of Okolo, his influence in directing grew from his revolutionary stand against what he perceives as status quo. His experience with numerous directors has made him come to the conclusion that directors were basically analyzing the works of playwrights and to him, directing only begin from such analysis.

According to Ododo (2002), Okolo served theatre apprenticeship under several big names associated with the Nigerian literary theatre – Wole Soyinka, Dapo Adelugba, Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, etc. The varied experiences acquired under these practitioners each representing different theatre idioms, may be responsible for his multi-dimensional approach to theatre performance. With this kind of background, Okolo opens a new ground of knowledge as he compares the stage to a football pitch and the director to a coach. Okolo (2012) in an interview elucidated further that:

Directing is like football; people play different wings, on the football pitch, there are eleven players, to you if you are not a coach (director) you will think the process is something serious. But if you look at the departments, you have the forward, your midfielders, the back, you have the goal keeper, etc. This explanation is same with the theatre and performance where you have people who take lines, you have people who will come as dancers, you have people who will work as musicians, and you have people back stage helping to change actors costume because of the many changes of scenes. There are people in different departments.

Given the background of a pitch, with its division into different areas and the players into different roles and positions, it will not be far-fetched if implied that the process of directing on the Nigerian stage in the 21st century involves compartmentalization, division of labour, specialization and specification of roles with a central coordination from the master artist - director. Consequently, in the play production process, the director must understand the roles of the various departments for a manipulation into his understanding of the text, with a goal of presenting a pleasing performance before the audience. This process will therefore involve not just interpretation of the text but the expansion of the text to the elastic limit of the director's creativity, using his tools that function in the different departments to achieve his noble goal. It is the operation within his elastic limit of the text by the artistic director that the style of a director is brought to the fore.

### Methodology

This study adopts analytical, participant observation and interview methods. Through the participant observation, the researcher watched the performances of Odia Ofeimun's *Nigeria the Beautiful* directed by Felix Okolo. The performance of *Nigeria the Beautiful* was staged at the Muson Centre, Onikan, Lagos on the 16th November, 2012. The performance of Odia Ofeimun's *A Feast of Return* directed by Felix Okolo was previewed on tape and content analysed. Using the interview method, the un-structured research question format was devised to gather data from Felix Okolo and Abel Utuedor. Felix Okolo is a leading theatre director in Nigeria. Through a random sampling technique, Felix Okolo was chosen as case study for this work. Interview with Felix Okolo was conducted on 16th November, 2012 at the Muson Centre, Onikan, Lagos. Abel Utuedor was the choreographer of *A Feast of Return*; his interview was held at the June 12 Cultural Centre, Kuto, Abeokuta, Ogun State on 22nd January, 2014. Structured research questions were used to elicit relevant information from Efe Mayford Orhorha. Efe Mayford Orhorha was a lead actress in *A Feast of Return*.

### Directorial Codes and Signal in Okolo's Dramaturgy

In approach and delivery in the theatre, Felix Okolo is often referred to as an iconoclast. Okolo's works basically are experimental in nature. They are often created from the artistic virtuosity and ingenious creation of the author who constantly demand change in the theatre. The 'renegade' artiste has directed several works which include but not limited to: *Itoya (A Dance for Africa)*, *A Feast of Return*,

Madam Kofo's Kitchen, The Hawker and Godfather, Under the Africa Skies, Nigeria the Beautiful, The Walking Stick, Mekunu-Melody, Edika-Ikong, among others. The several works directed by Okolo with the success accrued to them have earned him a frontal role among contemporary theatre directors in Nigeria. His penchant for spectacle and an admirable control of large cast in production has built for him a forte; it is not then surprising that he was awarded the Hubert Ogunde Foundation Prize as Best Director/Producer. Influenced by the current trend of directing, Okolo thinks of making a difference by "re-energizing the Nigeria stage" by means of "taking the text beyond mere interpretation, with a fine blend of music, dance and drama" (Anikulapo, 2012; Okolo, 2012). Okolo explained further, in an interview with the researcher, that there is no law depriving a director from combining music, dance and drama in any theatre production and if one thinks there is, he should 'bring a handuff' (2012).

Over time, on the Nigerian stage, Okolo has injected a radical approach to his stage realization through the mix of several genres and styles to make a whole. His radical approach to stage realization has pitched for him a tent amongst the experimentalists and avant-gardists on the Nigerian theatre stage. For this reason, Okolo has earned for himself diverse acclaims. Ofeimun (2011) while affirming this and describing him as a stage zealot states that "no one could have pressed the point (stage production) home better other than Felix Okolo, the quintessential stage zealot, whose penchant of spectacle demanded change that was not possible with the limits of a feast. While Ododo (2002) aptly describes Okolo's theatre as a hotchpotch theatre - a theatre of all sorts, Onifade avers that through the theatre practice of Okolo, Okolo has proved that he is capable of squeezing water out of a stone (2011).

The above descriptions of Okolo create in the mind a curiosity that generates several questions. However, answers to the questions raised are usually not far-fetched. An attempt to watch some performances of Okolo will quickly assert in the mind the kind of theatre he runs since his repertory of directed works speak for themselves. Examples of these were found in the productions of Nigeria the Beautiful and A Feast of Return, both dance-dramas written by Odia Ofeimun. These selected productions will be used to draw out the peculiarities in the works of the director and hopefully they will help us to draw certain conclusions on what we have perceived to be the style of the director. What Okolo did directorially in the aforementioned productions is exemplary and it creates a niche for the director and distinguishes him from other modern theatre directors in Nigeria, especially in the 21st century.

Style is central to all artistic and theatrical production and experience. Apparently, aesthetic codes, stylistic traits and stylistic signals are essential attributes of human behaviour. Invariably, these also differentiate works of directors. Therefore, to understand the style of Okolo, there is need to understand his psychology, ideology, motivation and thrust, knowing that all these form a huge base for which his artistic creations have revolved over time. According to Okolo, his prime motivation for majoring in theatre directing was his dissatisfaction with the status quo which mainly attempt to "explain and analyze" works of playwrights by directors. This 'rebel' spirit of Okolo to directing therefore built in him an experimental outlook for which he approached his works. Thus Okolo (2012) in an interview disclosed that:

I was not really fulfilled, knowing quite well that most of the people (directors) I was working for were busy trying to explain the text and I do not think it was enough. I was not convinced. I was not satisfied in trying to analyze what is written. Hence, I thought to animate the text to add some other influence that will create distinction.

By the above statement, the ideology of Okolo about directing is summed up. Therefore, it is not surprising that he is a non-conformist and an eclectic director who animates text with a blend of various conventions, approaches and styles to create a new art form. Okolo (2012) in an interview illuminated that "directing is a journey you take from the text. It is not trying to reproduce the text, it is the journey that you take after the text had been read and interpreted. It is a journey of bringing this text to the stage. It is not enough to interpret what the text is saying, but trying to add a journey to further emphasize what you think the writer is saying." Indeed, Okolo animates his performances through scintillating music, perfectly choreographed dances, well rendered lines, swift change of roles by actors, elegant and flamboyant costumes, appropriate properties, masterly effect of lighting, well designed and constructed set, use of imagery, make-up, mask, multi-tasking of actors, among others.

*Nigeria the Beautiful* chronicles the history of Nigeria from Lord Frederick Lugard, the first Colonial Governor General to the times of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. A dance-drama whose title paradoxically represents Nigeria to be beautiful, hopes for better governance and good living standard for the populace. The dance-drama relates the rich culture of the Nigerian people with diversity of

its ethnic groups, the nationalistic struggle for independence, the growth of industrialization, the several military interregnums and the peoples' disposition, fear and anxiety and the democratic or semi democratic moments which climaxed into into the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan.

With a fine blend of dance, drama and music, Okolo tells the Nigerian story beautifully. With a fusion of dance, music and drama which interlocks one another, it becomes difficult to expunge one art form from the other without losing the relevance and existence of the others. The difficulty in breaking any of the incorporated arts and its inseparable nature as presented and observed in the play trumpets the professionalism of the director. Hence, Okolo's directing career may be said to be similar to that of the experimentalist, Reinhardt Max whose style is eclectic in nature. As well, Okolo could be said to have moved a step further in his stage realization giving each character and action in his theatre a meaningful metaphor. His presentation could thus be said to contain a mixture of elements from different periods and styles.

A Feast of Return written by Odia Ofeimun and directed by Felix Okolo explains the South African history. The story charts the course of the existence and co-existence of the people, the changing fortunes of the king and the commoner, the class boundary between the rich and the poor, the travails of the commoners, the warring lords and the pacifists. The story revolves around the several leadership styles and struggles of the people during the reign of Dingiswayo to Shaka Zulu, to the times of Moshweshwe, Mzilikazi and even up to the times of the anti-apartheid struggles leading into what is now known today as the rainbow nation. Consequently, for an in-depth understanding of style in Okolo's dramaturgy, it is important to first understand the codes and aesthetics in the visual and verbal make up of his productions. With specific focus on the production of Nigeria the Beautiful and A Feast of Return, certain aesthetic codes have been identified to cut across Okolo's productions. Hence, through observation and an analytical study of Okolo's performance, the following directorial and aesthetic codes have been found to make up Okolo's style:

- The Total Theatre Aesthetics
- The Multi-tasking Aesthetics
- Design and Technical Compactedness
- Non-Static Photographic Aesthetics
- The Actor Audience Appeal
- Line cum Demonstration Aesthetics

## The Total Theatre Aesthetics

The treatment of all elements of theatre on an equal premise is not a new art on the Nigerian theatre stage. Relatively, what may be perceived to be new and can be different is the extent to which the various directors incorporate these elements. Put together; dance, music, drama, mime, gestures, movements, etc., have all come to take their place in theatre performance in Nigeria. The traditional performance space in the African society is such that readily encourage the blend of these arts as the people's way of life is closely incorporated into their performances. If this is true, then presumably, the creation of the artistic director must have a firm root in the tradition and ways of life of the people. Gwon and Ako (2010) explain that theatre is rooted in the cosmology of a people within a geo-political entity, thus the nature of theatrical performances of such people reflects their total life and well-being.

Africans and more specifically Nigerians are joyous people; their life is a hybrid of the existential, esoteric and the sub-conscious world. This hybrid of existence is reflected in the physical and the meta-physical representation/presentation in the performance space in Africa. Africans live a communal life with a performative tradition that incorporates storytelling, mask, dance, mimes, song/music, etc., in their ways of delivery. Performance in Africa reflects a mixture of conventions and a language of purpose that has developed from the people's tradition. Adelugba, Obafemi and Adeyemi aptly clarify that:

In many of the Nigerian ethnic theatres, dialogue or dramatic narrative has evolved. Studies of Ikaki of the Kalabari, Alarinjo and Egun Okura of the Okun-Yoruba, Kwagh-hir of the Tiv and, especially strikingly, the Ekong of the Ibibio, reveal that from the preparatory stage of mask-sculpting, through rigorous and painstaking rehearsals to staging, an aesthetic of robust, fully-fledged theatre evolved from the people's tradition, and this has been recreated, transposed and crystallized on the contemporary Nigerian stage (2004).

Okolo's creation admits diverse experimentations. These experimentations are usually in the form of restructuring or perhaps self-reinventing of the traditional performance modes of Africans. His self-reinventing technique represents an active ingredient of his own professional and practical development. This aims to transpose and

bring change to the Nigerian theatre stage especially in the 21st century where we have massive switch to the digital screen and cinematic art. In an interview with the researcher, Okolo admitted that,

People are getting tired of so many dialogues. With the modern day advancement in technology, people walk on the street now and listen to music, so there is no excuse in keeping them (audience) for an hour (in the theatre) to just listen to dialogue when I can afford to keep their interest, especially through a blend of dance-drama and music. So my audience who love music will see my performance as a musical show, those who like dance and drama will equally see that too (2012).

With a study of Okolo's artistic creation, his directorial approach for the Nigerian stage fits into the three main theatrical traditions of the Nigerian stage which Akinwale (1993) has identified to be the festival and ritual theatre, the masque dramaturgy and the storytelling theatre. In the theatrical productions under investigation, Okolo uses mask to change the role of his actors swiftly without a conscious recognition of actors by the audience. His directorial impulse was to 'socialize' the mask using it to entertain his audience and to create aesthetics. The African arena theatre is therefore a theatre that houses and represents the various categories of existence in a spatial environment. The theatre is a centre where the metaphysical action of spirits can be represented through masking (Okafor, 1991). In this regard, it is no false that Okolo understands that mask in the African cosmology function as facilitators of socialization and instrument for the maintenance of social equilibrium (Jejede in Gumucio-Dagron, 1994). Moreover, Corrigan in Obuh (2003: 121) states that "we all know how strange it is to wear mask, there is something exciting about it and it's something eerie too. In a sense, we hide our identity behind the mask, but in doing so we liberate aspects of our secret selves.

Paradoxically, Okolo's use of mask was to enhance the interpretation of his performance. The interplay of mask in a rarefied manner in Nigeria the Beautiful blends with the idea of the playwright who after several unrest, colonization, hardship, political instability and military interruptions still dares to describe Nigeria as beautiful in the dance-drama. The use of mask in several scenes helps to hide the true identity of the characters. In Nigeria too, the true identity of the people may also be said to be covered by a mask. In this regard,

the Nigerian nation is such that despite the challenges and the poverty level in the country, the people still go around as though they are content with their situation. This is like the 'suffering' and 'smiling' syndrome which Fela Anikulapo Kuti explained in his song, which is indicative of the mask of pretence Nigerians wear while suffering yet smiling.

The use of mask in Nigeria the Beautiful also indicates the rebellious attitude of Nigerians against colonial rule. If mask hide identity, then the people have been forced by the colonial rule to put off their old selves and wear a new look that helps them to fight for what is rightfully theirs; thus opposing colonization. A vivid example of this is seen as Funnilayo Ransome-Kuti brings the people together in one voice to fight for their freedom. Aware of the role of music in his theatre, Okolo builds his band of musicians into the entire scenic design of his artistic creation. Okolo's incorporated musical band takes a firm position on the stage and operates at the heart of the entire artistic creation as an indivisible composition tied resolutely to the totality of the theatrical performance. Okolo, in an interview with the researcher in 2012, explained that:

Most other directors will not use music except the script is requesting for it. Most will not put in dance except if it is actually demanded by the writer. But I see that most of these things can still work, whether the writer ask for them or not. For me, I can still move the scenes and animate the text in many other ways, so that we can at least, move with the times.

Orhorha, a lead actress in the performance of *A Feast of Return* affirming the position of the director, maintained in an interview that "Okolo's chosen style is the complete theatre; drama, dance and music. Okolo is unique, he does not really do a straight drama like that which does not infuse music and dance into his dialogue in his productions. His music and dance are usually a mix of both the contemporary and traditional. You see contemporary musicians playing the same thing traditional musicians are playing" (2014).

Influenced by the cinematic/media art where theme music as well as bridge music collaboratively heighten mood and interpret scenes, Okolo too uses music in his performances like sound tracks to achieve the same purpose. Thus, creating and heightening mood of his performances with a rhythmic pattern that has been carefully organized and sequenced into dialogue and dances. Okolo perceives his music

as soundtracks and revealed in an interview that "he adds a soundtrack to his production from the beginning to the end of the play without saying this is where music ends. This music lightens up the dialogue and dances where applicable without dragging the tempo. If for anything, it enhances the speed of the performance" (Okolo, 2012).

Music in *A Feast of Return* and *Nigeria the Beautiful* was a blend of the western and traditional music. This is evident in the ensemble of Okolo which is usually made up of local and western musical instruments. In *Nigeria the Beautiful*, perhaps, the reason for this may have been suggested because Nigeria was a colony of the British Empire and colonization was among the issues which the dance-drama discussed. It is of interest to note that the Nigerian national anthem was used as bridge music to link some scenes while some classical notes were played at the background upon which lines were rendered. However, effort was not made by actors especially those who represented the British to speak in foreign accent. The classical notes that were played at the background upon which lines were rendered simply suggested the era of colonization in the dance-drama. The case is not different with *A Feast of Return*, which starts with music as actors file across the stage in 'desert crossing' wearing tattered clothes and ailing as a result of diverse diseases. This act was followed by a rigorous playing of Bata drums by three artistes at the down stage centre to set the performance on a high tempo and suggest the vigour to be put in by actors during the performance.

Also, music was played in *A Feast of Return* and upon it lines were rendered. Music was used too at the start of the performance to announce the arrival of three among the four main actors in the performance. As the music changes, the characters arrive the stage one after the other. Importantly too, the music was accompanied by heavy dance steps. Ododo (2002) opines that:

Music becomes the canvass upon which Okolo's theatre is painted in exciting strokes of colours. After watching his plays, one gets the impression that is, before anything is done in his theatre, music must be ready. It is on this that all other artistic images are built.

Okolo intermingle dances of the multi-cultural ethnicities of the Nigerian people into an abstraction with the intention to inform, educate and entertain his audience. Indeed, some of his dances depict the cultures of the Nigerian people. In an interview with Abel Utuedor, the choreographer for *A Feast of Return*, he affirmed that "as a

choreographer I have worked with many directors home and abroad. We oftentimes pick aesthetics from outside our own cultures but, Okolo will not do that. Okolo wants to take from the culture of the people. He creates from the people's culture and he is good at it (2014).

It is important to note that these cultures stand distinct from one another. However, other dances that were used are abstract in nature and were used to interpret and shed light on some of the renditions of the actors. Utuedor in an interview stated that "most of the dances in *A Feast of Return*, you may call them abstract. But, they are images that exists either in the spirit realm, in water or in the air. But they all exist from the creation of God and they are usually things you can see with your eyes" (2014). In *A Feast of Return*, dance was used to suggest the embrace of the Whiteman's religion as indicated by the lines of the Priestess of Memory. The Difaquane was a period of widespread chaos and warfare in the reign of Shaka and Mzilikazi. This was presented through dance with suggestive steps that first showed the peaceful co-existence of the people and suddenly in a rampage we see dance pattern showing the breaking of pots, beating of the people, crying and shouting to indicate time of war. This war time stories was further corroborated with the Ogun/hunters' dance. Amongst other dances is the Eyo dance which helped to suggest the peaceful reign desired by Moshweshwe, one of the rulers of South Africa. We also had the resistance/solidarity dance which showed the fight against the apartheid regime.

In Nigeria the Beautiful, the use of dance is quite similar. Dance was used to introduce on stage the main characters who represent the regions of Nigeria. These dances equally represented the culture of the different regions as well as their occupations. As the plot of the dance-drama progressed, the dance medium was used to express resistance and show confrontation of the Nigerian people fighting in a collective struggle against colonization and its many disadvantages that trampled upon the rights of the native. The use of the ballroom dance infused with contemporary 'moves' in the performance indicated the complete takeover of the machinery of government by the officials of the British Council. Amalgamation which took place in 1914 was better explained in dance as the three main ethnic groups -Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo peoples were costumed in their peculiar attires and had a dance of unison. Other uses of dance in the performance were to entertain and bridge long dialogues especially as found in the narratives of the Sultan, the Great Zik, Fummilayo Ransome-Kuti, Obafemi Awolowo and the Bane of Musical Chairs. In addition to this Utuedor in an interview claimed that:

Dance is one of the basic elements that were used in *A Feast of Return*. Dance was extensively used because most times in the works of Okolo, he wants the deaf and dumb to understand what he is doing irrespective of the understanding of the lines, the dances too communicate some in-depth messages. When you go back to American films or Nigerian films, there is always bridge. Sometimes the director uses this (dance) to allow the audience to get their breath (2014).

However, it is worthy of note that these dances are inseparable from the total aesthetics of the performance. It suffices then to say that without the dances, the entire artistic composition of the director is incomplete. It is, therefore, upon these dances that the complete explanations of some of the roles and characters of the actors are tied. Odoob further clarifies that the dynamism of his (Okolo's) theatre is further projected by the use of highly creative and astonishing dance concepts that are uniquely married with the ever-thumping esoteric African rhythm (2002). Perhaps, dance as a communicative medium in the works of Okolo was to enlarge and complete for the audience the expressions that the words of the playwright could not bring to bear in his/her writing. With the dance medium, Okolo was able to express his innermost feelings and interpretations of the work of the playwright. Thus, he does not analyze the text, but animate them into broader understanding for the audience.

### The Multi-tasking Aesthetics

Actor management has been one of the most difficult aspects of theatre practice. This is because human beings could be unreliable, unpredictable and sometimes unstable. However, performance excellence can still be achieved if expertise of the director mixes with those of the actors in an environment where discipline and professionalism is of top priority. Actors serve as intermediary between the director, script and the audience and the extent to which the actor is used could determine the extent of the professionalism of the director.

Design, lighting, painted scenery, props, elaborate costume and some other elements of the theatre can be expunged from a theatrical performance but without the actor, the performance process is yet incomplete. Therefore, the appropriateness and skill of the actor becomes an essential part in the make-up of the play production

process. No doubt, the director helps in shaping this skill. In the productions of *Nigeria the Beautiful* and *A Feast of Return*, the actor/cast management gives a lasting impression of the proficiency of the director in his art. Okolo uses large cast in a composition that presents very fascinating pictures before the audience. He uses large cast to achieve spectacle and communication in his artistic presentations. Okolo brings together a team of actors that gracefully switches role amongst the various arts of the theatre especially dance, drama and music. Having watched the performances under review, it is not out of place to conclude with an impression that to be a cast of Okolo, you must be knowledgeable in the three main aspects of the performing arts which are music, dance and drama.

Okolo multi-task his actors, making them change from one role to another swiftly with ease and without the conscious awareness of the audience. He sometimes converts his actors to properties on stage using this as an imagery that builds mental pictures in the minds of the audience as well as communicate vital points. In *Nigeria the Beautiful*, Okolo brings on stage four wheelbarrows carrying actors. In turn, these actors were carefully positioned on stage to create an impression of a mountain. Interpretatively, this human created mountain serves as a metaphor calling on the Easterners by the Great Zik to join hands together to build their weaknesses into strengths and their little into plenty. The mountain also portrayed the wake of industrialization and created a room where the people could team up in terms of labour to achieve a greater result of communal oneness. However, Okolo's adeptness goes beyond multi-tasking of his actors because his strength is built in his understanding of the psychology of the actors. Ododo admits that:

The vibrancy of this theatre is seen in the ease with which Okolo often draws from various cultural sensibilities and socio-economic interfaces of the Nigerian setting. So, one often finds about six actors or so playing the role of over 20 characters with ease in dance, movement, mime, songs and gestural conduits. That transformation process is often assisted with series of suggestive costumes and make up usually in the form of masks. That is, characters are delineated with masks and as such actors find it convenient to switch from one role to another. The itinerant programme of this theatre outfit also further informs this

compactness. In this theatre, anything goes and creatively so. This is why we see it as a potpourri (a hotchpotch) theatre: A theatre of all sorts (2002).

To make his play an audience-actor filled experience, Okolo goes outside the box to bring his play to a closer understanding of his audience. By this, he uses his actors as a league of narrators and multi-narrators in one single aesthetically and artistically packed performance. Okolo's actors are his dancers as well as his musicians. For instance, in *Nigeria the Beautiful* Okolo uses three actors as his narrators and in *A Feast of Return*, he used four. These aforementioned basically took the speaking roles in the productions. Okolo does this multi-tasking aesthetics beautifully with a contrast through his use of male and female artistes. With the interaction of the actor-narrator, with the conflicts and resolutions of their acting, the dance-drama becomes even closer to the audience in meaning than it would have been without such an experimental work of the director. In an interview, Orhorha, a leading female actress in Nigerian the *Beautiful* and *A Feast of Return* disclosed that:

In Nigerian the *Beautiful*, my role there was very challenging, I played about seven roles. I was the only female actress in the production. In *A Feast of Return*, I played the Priestess of Memory, I acted like three (3) characters, Moshweshwe, I played the local woman who was pregnant and was able to manoeuvre in all the three roles. If you remember vividly, the Priestess of Memory keeps coming back as she was at the centre of the play and she represents everyone's memory. I think the many rehearsals and training I had made it possible for me to easily change roles (2014).

With the aid of costumes and mask it was easy for actors to break away from a particular role and get into another as many times as desired. Consequently, the audience does not have a fixed mental picture of a particular character and thus cannot be emotionally attached. Orhorha in an interview added that "there are times when we perform, people do not know that it is the same set of people that comes out to take the different roles. When I played Priestess of Memory and Moshweshwe, I already had my Moshweshwe shorts under

my Priestess of Memory costume, to allow me quickly change from one role to the other (2014).

Since the audience do not have a fixed memory of the actors and are not emotionally tied to them, they are left with an only option of concentrating on the message as being relayed through the actor. In Nigeria the Beautiful, for instance, actors were costumed on stage in a particular scene. Hence, by changing into different costumes cum acting, different interpretation was drawn from their expression. The rendition of Great Zik, one of the main characters in the dance-drama was better understood by the constant change of the costumes and actions of the actors. At first, the people started with a celebration of their collective union in a bid to defend the people's integrity by borrowing a leave from their great heroes. Changing into another costume which was mainly rags and tattered clothes, we saw the resistance of the people against the imperialists whom they termed "dehumanizers" (Nigeria the Beautiful, 2011). It is worthy of mention that all these actions were accompanied by suggestive dance steps.

Theatre is not a playhouse of magic. It is a playhouse for re-enactment of human being's daily life before the audience. This was the understanding of Okolo and it could be said that he shares the same sentiment with Bertolt Brecht who propagated the 'alienation theory'. By this theory Brecht dissuaded his audience from such emotional empathy for the actor and refocuses his audience to the central message as presented by the actor. Hermand and Silberman (1998) describe this Brecht's theatre as:

An intellectually ambitious theatre that aim at undermining the relationship between a complacent audience and a dramatic tradition based on entertainment attributed to a technique of distanciation, the rupturing of realist illusions, and the notion of 'gestus' based on the constructedness of performer, spectator and author.

Tapping into this experimental outlook, Okolo costumed some of his actors on stage while reminding his audience that they were merely in the auditorium where artistic experience is shared. Osofisan in Ododo (2002) emphasizes this when he states that some of you come into the theatre, expecting to see a marvellous world of dreams. We are all in a theatre as you well know, and we see no need to hide it. Therefore, Okolo's directorial principle may be summed to be audience-oriented, non-illusionistic, with a radical objectivity meant to

de-emphasize emotion for his actors and emphasize the central message as presented by them.

### Design and Technical Compactedness

Design is an integral part of any theatrical performance. Put together, design is an all-encompassing aspect of play production and it includes, among others, set, lighting, sound, costume and make-up. Design generally in the theatre is used to enhance communication, create impression, set the tone and style of a production, determine period of production and enhance character role. However, one very important factor is that the designer's concept must align with the director's for an aesthetically pleasing performance to take place. In the productions of *Nigeria the Beautiful* and *A Feast of Return*, design concept could simply be interpreted to be flamboyant, glitzy, compact and non-conventional.

In these productions, costume types were basically day-to-day, special and abstract. With these costumes, Okolo represented the different cultures peculiar to the African people as well as enhance communication in his productions. The opening of *Nigeria the Beautiful* leaves a fascinating memory with the elegantly built costumes, choice of colours as well as associated accessories the dancers are adorned with to depict the rich and unique culture of the people of South-south Nigeria. Many special costumes, including those of the Agemo Eleni, Egungun, and the Igunnuko masquerades are found in *Nigeria the Beautiful*. In *A Feast of Return*, we have the Eyo and Igunnuko masquerades and the different specially built costumes for both actors and dancers to represent different expressions and communicate purpose. In both productions, accompanying the abstract dances were abstract costumes that were used to assist actors to break away from one role to another. In *A Feast of Return*, acolytes were costumed in black during invocation by the Priestess of Memory. In several other scenes, we have actors costumed in either white or black with abstract demonstrations that helped to enhance the interpretation of actors' lines. In *Nigeria the Beautiful*, actors were costumed to create the impression of a mountain. Also, other interpretative roles had the use of abstract costumes but the essence of it all was to communicate.

Property used in the productions of Okolo ranges from hand to set properties and were quite effective in the communication of their purpose. Amongst the various properties used in both productions are; staff, hand fan, handkerchief, wheelbarrow, shovel, head pan, drum, calabash, praying mat, shield, club, mortar, bicycle, earthen pots, etc. Worthy of emphasis is the use of the four wheelbarrows in the production of *Nigeria the Beautiful*. The wheelbarrows were used

to convey human properties to the stage and this suggested the wake of industrialization. In *A Feast of Return*, two people struggled to get their balance on a bicycle, while the man rode the bicycle, the woman struggled with the heavy load she was carrying on her head. These acts created an impression of strife, hardship, war, struggle, dictatorship and poverty. Collectively, the acts give a better interpretation to the lines of Priestess of Memory as she explains the reign of Shaka. In another scene, the Whiteman was wheeled in by a Blackman on a wheelbarrow indicating the times of apartheid that was experienced in South Africa. This reign was better explained in the lines of a figurative Apartheid Mother and Child stating the welcome of the reign of apartheid and its resultant effects and experiences.

Lighting is another aspect of Okolo's production that deserves attention. The use of lights in the productions under investigation can be said to be apt with the different illuminations telling their own stories in accordance to the director's concept. Diverse lighting equipment and types make up the productions of Okolo. All these have a carefully chosen colour mix and are best said to unify all the other aspects of production. With the interface of the different kinds of light such as fresnel, strobe, profile spot and an assortment of gels that ranges from red, blue, green and amber which were reflected and lit upon the painted scenery, costumes and properties, different impressions and mood were created. These moods range from happiness to sorrow, grief, festivities, war, etc. Lighting and the careful selection of its colour scheme in the productions of Nigeria the Beautiful and *A Feast of Return* brought great illumination to the different roles of actors as well as enhanced the visual aesthetics of Okolo's production. In the productions under review it appears lighting had its own plot or story closely knitted into the overall aesthetic sensibility of Okolo's artistic constructions.

Set and its design in Okolo's performances serve as an insight into the overall meaning of the essence of his production. It is more like a predictor of situations and events. For him, his set is a story telling platform providing a visual passage for the actors. And, for the audience, it provides a platform to grasp the intended message in his work. Set is a communicator of purpose. Interestingly, this may be a new inclusion, but incorporated into the set design of Okolo is the title of his productions which are often boldly written at the top of his set. This constantly reminds the audience the title of the production they are watching and it creates a lingering memory of the situations and events in the production. It has also been observed that the production of Okolo has one locale. This single locale provides the setting for which all actions take place and provides for them a wider area of

acting. This breaks restrictions in acting and allows for a continuous flow of action from the first moment to the last. The continuum of these actions is further corroborated without blackouts from the first scene of his production to the last. Besides, Okolo's actors communicate with the set in ease and their action on the scenic environment simply shows a mastery of all stage areas by the actors. With a quest into this know-how, Orhorha declared, in an interview with the researcher in 2014, that:

Mr. Okolo already knows what he wants, he has already mapped out his stage design as well as his costume. He does everything theatre and that is what he has imparted into people like me. We go as far as constructing our stage by ourselves. It is not that he cannot employ carpenters to do his stage constructions, but he wants to watch artistes do what they have learnt in school. By this act, Okolo gives everybody the opportunity of having to do things, so that you can stand out in your dealings.

Fascinatingly, in the production of *Nigeria the Beautiful*, the colour mix for the set projected an insight into the play. We have the colour making up the Union Jack as well as the Nigerian flag. Up stage centre we have the Nigerian map boldly designed into the set. This however suggested that the story was a Nigeria versus the British kind of story. In *A Feast of Return*, the painted scenery had a representation like that on the cover page of the published dance-drama. This impression suggested abundance and at the same time struggle. The struggle was between two people who had to ride on a bicycle with the female carrying a heavy load on her head. However, this same part was later represented in the plot sequence of the dance-drama to mean the challenge the people went through during the apartheid regime in South Africa. Another aspect of the scenery was the picturesque impression of the previous production of the play. In fact, the set is best described as a poster of the play with impression summarizing the concept of the play itself. Okolo tries to make you understand his production from his stage. From his stage you can tell what the story is all about. He does not just construct his stage for people to clap for him; he does it because it has a role to play in his production Orhorha argued in an interview (2014).

Set and its design are expected to aid actors' movements and acting. Okolo in his theatre considers this as a paramount issue that

will allow for actors' manoeuvre on the stage. Hence, set in Okolo's theatre is built in layers. Cases of this kind of set were found in the productions of *Nigeria the Beautiful* as well as *A Feast of Return*. The platform provides different plains to aid the delivery of actors. Perhaps, the secret of his composition of large cast rests here. With the different layers, Okolo brings on stage a large number of cast without any of them been masked by the other. Also this aspect of his theatre helps to show the prominence of a particular character over another in course of their delivery especially through their presentation which usually takes place on different plains and levels.

Technically, design for Okolo has a percussion and persuasive rhythm that tends to link together all the entire artistic and aesthetic sensibility in his works. His visual expressions can therefore be best described to be elaborate, complex, consistent and conspicuous. Hence, sharing from the same pinnacle as other designers, Okolo helps to "show us new ways to see familiar things, and how to interpret new situations and events through various kinds of visual expression" (Agoba, 2010).

### Non-Static Photographic Aesthetics

Within a moment of time, so much takes place in the theatre of Okolo. Every moment communicates its purpose and every moment carries different images and composition and thus presents pictures of non-still, non-static arrangement of actors. Okolo's performance is like a chain of reaction. This chain is broken down into movement and the movement is propelled by the energy exerted by the actors. There seems to be an energy that has been carefully built into the artistes which propels them to act in the manner they do. Hence, a high sense of physicality is brought to bear by the display of Okolo's actors. Expatiating on this claim, Orhorha opined, in an interview with the researcher in 2014, that:

To be in Okolo's production you have to be at alert, even when you are dressed early, you must be on a standby for your scene. So, it is tip-tap back stage and on stage as well. Well, I believe that all these put together is what really brings the cinematic notion in his production.

While looking through the productions of Okolo, a photographer is not likely to capture the same shot within a defined time frame. What this means is that actors in Okolo's theatre exudes this vigour that translates into quick and snappy movement built into a rhythmic pattern orchestrated by the ingenious creation of the director within

time and space. However, while drawing this conclusion especially with reference to the productions of *A Feast of Return* and *Nigeria the Beautiful*, critical attention is further placed on the actor who brings these patterned movements before the audience in a distinguished manner. For the actor to exude such vigour, no doubt, he or she must let the aspect of self be overridden by the overall aesthetics chosen by the director. What obtains here is a process of transmutation where actors strip themselves to wear a new garb fitting into the entire concept of the director. At this point, it is easy for us to observe that Okolo's actors could translate this exerted energy into different moods of disdain, celebration, freedom, worship, anguish, pain, war, etc. In an interview with Okolo, he stated that "I am trying to see if I can move drama to appear before the audience like video." (2012). If video records moving visual image, then Okolo's theatrical piece strives for such a moment in his theatre by the speed and precision he put forth in his work.

### The Actor-Audience Appeal

Apparently, Okolo attempts to achieve a desired unity within his performance space. This performance space is an integration of the actor, the audience, the script and the stage. Okolo strives to unify all these together in his artistic creation. First, he unifies the stage with his actor and then the stage with his audience using his actors and his other design elements as his communication tools. In doing this, he is left within space and time for which all creation must fit. In the void space between the auditorium and the stage, he creates his work to flow into a rhythm. This rhythm has precision, speed, tempo, tone as well as mood.

Within this rhythm, certain notion that actors are not to give audience a full back in the proscenium stage is completely not adhered to. In his artistic creation, Okolo does not believe in such restriction (i.e, actors are not to give audience a full back) as his experiment reveals complete full-back of his actors in several scenes in both *A Feast of Return* and *Nigeria the Beautiful*. The backing of the stage by some actors could be interpreted to be that the actors share a similar experience with the audience in a typical proscenium theatre setting. Okolo's intention here is to enhance actor to actor relationship giving a double-impact to the messages in the script as he perceives them. Also, he breaks away from the unreal acting where because audience exists in the auditorium, actors cannot relate among themselves freely for fear of giving audience a fullback. Okolo through his art drives home the message that the audience is only watching a

performance divorced of the stereotyped rules as may be found in the typical proscenium theatre.

In enhancing the actor-audience relationship, Okolo severally puts his actors in bunch and cluster to bring closer to the audience the meaning of his essence in the theatre. Since audience plays a vital role in the play production process and without them a theatrical production is incomplete. It is, therefore, quite important to bring the audience into focus while patterning the director's artistry.

### Line cum Demonstration Aesthetics

Cutting across the productions of Okolo is the line and demonstration aesthetics. Simply put, this is a given situation with an aesthetics whereby Okolo's composition basically does two things to achieve one purpose. The purpose is to communicate. But, what he does here is for an actor to render his lines with movement while other actors demonstrate at the background or foreground to give vivid explanation of the actors' lines or at times just mainly enhancing it by interaction of actors. This demonstration might also be in form of reaction which comes as gestures, body movement, dance, music, shout, nod, sigh, etc., with the aforementioned; audience gets a better explanation of the narrative of the actor. In *A Feast of Return*, Ofeimun (2010) in *Libation I* states that:

We who have crossed gulfs  
And seas of sand and evil forests,  
And death-deep valleys and escarpments  
And have returned as zealots  
To the grotto of bitter memories;  
We, we'll criss-cross muck and pain  
In order to be reborn.

While these libation lines were rendered, background acting takes place. We see two actors putting hands across each other's shoulders and struggling to make a leap, another carrying a very heavy load on her head and struggling to move, while another was seen on the ground (like in a mud) and the other exerting all energy to pull the actor through. By interpretation, this shows the travail as well as the many challenges the South African people had gone through over time. In the same way, *A Commoner's Chant* in *A Feast of Return* narrated the hardship, dictatorial rule, war, and the long suffering of the common man during the reign of Shaka. In explaining this *Commoner's Chant* while lines were rendered, Okolo had background demonstration with a long line of actors filing in and wearing tattered clothes, carrying heavy load, all having different ailments and

disabilities. Similar background acting was seen accompanying the lines of Dingiswayo and Shaka in the same production. Orhorha, in an interview with the researcher in 2014, averred that Okolo insists that:

Whatever actions the dancers are doing on stage must tally with what your dialogue is on stage. So, he does not just do spectacle because he wants to do spectacle. Every spectacle you see has one thing or the other to do with the play.

The same instance was found in Nigeria the Beautiful, but with a little difference. The demonstration that we have here allows for an actor's participation and reaction to the lines delivered by another actor. By the actor's reaction and demonstration to the other actor's lines, the participating actor shares a platform similar to those of the audience in terms of reaction. In the rendition of *The Great Zik*, we had actors' reaction show agreement with Zik on the many struggles and how the people have crossed the rubicon on the shoulders of their heroes who were the sources of their encouragement. Within the same rendition too, actor reaction and demonstration shows how the people fought against the imperial yoke that dehumanized them and how they sparked up resistance. Still, in Nigeria the Beautiful, *A Woman of Means* figuratively represents the northerners and narrates their experiences on how the talakawa (poor) were deprived of going to school. With tact, those who manoeuvre their ways to school had it tough and rough. Through actors' reactions and demonstrations, we hear shouts, cries and complaints as a result of the ill-treatment from the Dandokas (local police). We see the actor demonstrate the Dandokas riding on the horse in their haughty manner whipping the people, raiding for women and the farmlands. From all of these, we see reactions of fear, commotion and pain amongst the people.

Further to this, is the reaction of actors to Obafemi Awolowo's line which depicts agreement the people owes their motherland in enhancing her in the eyes of the world. Obafemi Awolowo's lines thus read:

We must choose and learn  
not to waver. Not to cower.  
because it is not life that matters  
but the courage we bring to it.  
because it is a duty that we owe  
to our own dear motherland  
to enhance her and to boost her  
in the eyes of all the world (Ofeimun, 2010).

As a foreground reaction and demonstration from actors to A Bane of Musical Chairs that narrates the uncanny situation in Nigeria where the people maltreat themselves with an ill constitution and president, we see sick people filing across the stage. To explain the depth of the illness of the nation and its constitution, the sick were left abandoned only to be conveyed by wheelbarrows from point to point and all these happen in a country with abundance of natural resources especially the crude oil.

### Naming a Style for Felix Okolo: The Photographic Synthesis

Felix Okolo disclosed, in an interview, that he derives motivation for his creation from the cinematic art. Okolo puts into consideration his audience and tries to present his works on stage before them in the same manner they would feel when in the cinema. The theatre director further claimed that "I am trying to see if I can move drama to appear before the audience like video, it's like what I call when I was young, cinematography on stage" (2012). Okolo's idea of 'cinematography on stage' is evident in his entire artistic creation and it serves as pointers to the different aesthetic codes as were found in the productions of Okolo. If cinematography according to Brown (2012) is the process of taking ideas, words, actions, emotional subtext, tone, and all other forms of non-verbal communication and rendering them in visual terms, then by extension the works of Okolo will be a play with images, words, character and interplay with space. Consequently, with this idea in mind, it is not bogus that some characteristics of cinematography such as the use of theme and bridge music in the form of soundtracks were extensively used in his performances. Similarly, speed and precision were other characteristics that were found in his work and this is prevalent in the quick transformation of roles and actions on stage that gives an idea of a non-static photographic image of actors and their action. We have called this the Non-Static Photographic Aesthetics. Truly, this gives an idea of a moving picture.

From the above, the directorial style of Okolo has been perceived to be 'The Photographic Synthesis.' The 'photographic' idea stems from the pictorial composition of the director which seems to come with a swift role changing like a photo from a snapshot loaded with various messages. Therefore, the communication strength of the director is built in such a way that even with a photograph of any of his composition, the director still communicates an essence for his presentation. Moreover, with a 'slice' or an abrupt stoppage of this presentation, so much is said from his pictorial composition. The word 'synthesis' according to Hornby, is "the act of combining separate ideas,

beliefs, styles, etc." (2000). If this word is adopted into the performance circle, especially with reference to the works of Okolo, it would mean that the director puts together various idioms, ideas and aesthetic sensibilities of performance art to invent his own aesthetics that stands distinct from works of others. This too would mean that his works will have such experimental outlook that allows for restructuring and remodelling of known concepts, practices and theories for staging.

## Conclusion

Style delineates the works of theatre directors and reveals the intuitive vision of its author. It identifies as well as distinguishes the works of theatre practitioners. With the growing wave of modernity and globalization, theatre directors are challenged to be more thorough in their artistic choices as the audience tend to expect more from directors in terms of delivery. By and large, the total theatre idiom which incorporates music, dance, pantomime, dialogue, chants, storytelling, etc., has been a linking aesthetics to the African experience where performance usually takes place in the village square. Felix Okolo has paid his dues through professional tutelage from great theatre scholars and this has paid off in the several directorial idioms prevalent in his works. Okolo's accomplishment challenges upcoming directors to take seriously professional excellence and academic prowess.

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