



## **The Sculptural Elements in Kwagh-Hir Popular Theatre: The Interface Between the Local and the Global**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Kwagh-hir theatre is a dynamic theatre of the Tiv people of Central Nigeria. It is also a puppet theatre. It features both giant puppets (ubermeronmettes) and smaller ones which are manipulatable on mobile platforms. In addition to this, Kwagh –hir features masquerade displays of both animal and human representations, The masks is therefore an important feature of Kwagh-hir theatre and sculpturing an equally dynamic super-activity/element in Kwagh-hir theatre. Moreover, recent study has registered an increasing (influence of globalization) on aspects of Kwagh-hir sculpturing and themes. This paper attempts a scrutiny of the sculptural element in Kwagh-hir theatre as a complement to its other features, identifying and tracing its growth from its beginning to its current stage within the context of globalizing ethos.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sculpture as an art form or human creative activity has been in practice since pre-historic times. Indeed, ancient civilizations have been found to be replete with sculptured artifacts of deities and totems. In central Nigeria, the Nok culture features a civilization that imbibed sculpturing as evidenced in the 'Nok Head'. Ancient Egypt produced sculptured sphinxes, an example of which is the great sphinx of Giza. A visit to any world museum like that in Cairo would confirm just how prolific sculpturing has been part of human activity. The most famous early sculptural artifact however has been identified as the "Venus of Willendorf" which was found in Willendorf, Austria. More than one hundred such figures of fertility are said to have been found in Europe and Russia.

Thus sculpturing has (early) been identified with religious worship of some sort or other. Masks as sculptured artifacts were a significant element in

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the worship of Dionysus in Ancient Greece. Later masks became an important part of Greek Drama and theatre. Ancient Greek Masks were made from organic materials, including wood. Masks in Africa are also majorly made from wood and metal and are an important part of ceremonies, rituals, initiations etc. Thus masks have been a feature of performance both ancient and present; as well as worship. Tiv performance arts, like in other African societies, make a great deal of mask usage. Kwagh-hir Theatre is a performance art with a dominant feature of masks and puppets. These masks and puppets form the sculptural element in Kwagh-hir Theatre. The masks are used in masquerade dances while the puppets are of two types, the giant human size puppets (the uber-marrionettes) and the miniature hand – manipulated types. These are used to support the story-telling art of Kwagh-hir Theatre.

#### **KWAGH-HIR THEATRE - A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

Kwagh-hir is a total kind of theatre involving various components including dance, mime, story-telling, songs, pantomime and drama. Comprising also of masquerades, its full staging can be viewed as a veritable festival of arts. It is hallmarked by much spectacle and the sheer volume of costumes and props underscores this spectacle which often ensures grand performances.

There are two known genres of “Kwagh-hir” – the pantomimic narrative (Nyager 1989) and the much acclaimed ‘puppet’ theatre, which is the focus of our interest. For it is here that we have the sculptural element displayed; it is here that we see the effects of globalization on Kwagh-hir most manifested. It is here that we see the global interfacing the local.

So Kwagh-hir as a performance form demonstrates itself as popular lore and theatre. It is drama, it is music, it is dance, it is sculpture displayed, and it is folklore. Kwagh-hir as total theatre, has grown from the humble beginnings of ordinary folklore to an elaborate theatrical ‘movement’ and form. Its performance structure has been compared to Brechtian ‘epic’ theatre, (Hagher, 2003). The episodic structure of Kwagh-hir, the interruptions and interspersing with songs; the audience participation and the role of narrative were also techniques employed by Brecht in his effort to create a didactic theatre.

#### **CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF KWAGH-HIR THEATRE**

Kwagh-hir theatre has its origin from the story-telling (Narrative) tradition of the Tiv People. Tiv story-telling sessions were usually occasions for dramatization. Music and dance were also important aspects of these performances since most Tiv folk-tales contain songs. It must be partly for this reason that Leo Frobenius is reported by Keil, (1979) as having considered the Tiv the best story-tellers that he had encountered anywhere in Africa! According to Keil, Qualitatively, all visitors to the Tiv land agree that

story telling can be a very impressive dramatic event and that it is a focal point of Tiv culture. Frobenius seems to have been overwhelmed during his visit in 1912 and prefaced his opinion that the Tiv are the best story-tellers he had encountered in Africa (Keil 1979:57). Bohannan in her anthropological novel under the pen name of Elenore Smith Bowen, gives a vivid description of a story-telling session in Tiv land thus:

... We sat under the cold moon of the harmattan in a circle at Kako's homestead yard... Gradually the people gathered from the neighbouring homesteads. They brought wood for fires and stools to sit on. The homestead was full of preparatory bustle as people borrowed coals to start their fires and jostled each other for a place close to the front. Then, places stacked out with fire and stool, people circulated to greet each other, as people do in a theatre lobby. The air was filled with the happy hum of an audience sure of a good entertainment. (Bowen, 1964:285).

Story-telling performances among the Tiv as seen above were dramatic occasions meant for entertainment. The dramatic or theatrical elements included the use of gestures, punctuation with songs, and (an implied chorus), some rudimentary masks and props, the use of mime/pantomime and the use of improvisational techniques. These performances were communal affairs involving audience participation, as songs and interjectory praises and /or reprimands were part of the performance. It was a dynamic and communal theatre which aimed at moral and ethical education. In this regard, it is reminiscent of Boal's 'theatre of the oppressed' (Boal 1979) which he initiated for the peasant people of Latin America. According to Boal, 'Theatre' was the people singing freely in the open air; the theatrical performance was created by and for the people,... It was a celebration in which all could participate freely (Boal 1979:ix-x). This is a good description of the Kwagh-hir story-telling performances of the Tiv which must be considered one of the earliest performance forms practised by the Tiv. This form is what evolved into the Kwagh-hir masquerade and puppet theatre.

### **The Kwagh-hir Puppet Theatre**

Puppet theatre comprises of the performances that make use of puppets for dramatic enactments rather than or in the place of human characters. The puppets are manipulated manually and/ or otherwise to dramatize events and evolve plot. In the puppet theatre of the Tiv, the miniature puppets are mounted upon a platform known as dagbera which is usually draped with cloth and under which the manipulators of the puppets hide during performance. The human-sized puppets however, make their entries 'on their feet' through the performance space. These puppet performances are only a unit part of the various arts that come together to make up the Kwagh-hir theatre. It is the story-telling art of the Tiv, known by the same name

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(Kwagh-hir) that later evolved into the theatrical form that began to include puppet shows as part of its performances. So, although similarities exist between the Kwagh-hir puppet theatre and the Kwagh-hir story-telling performances, there are distinctive differences between these two forms. They are both indigenous theatres of the Tiv, and they both have communal basis. The format of their performance is also similar. The single actor in the story-telling performance has become a narrator in the puppet theatre form which still has a chorus. The story-telling technique is thus retained but the animals in the stories now take on more physically defined shapes, wearing refined masks and being dressed in animal-like costumes made of raffia. The 'animals' also make their entries and exists on stage in a more controlled fashion. Thus the puppet theatre (which features both puppets and masquerades) can be seen as an improvement on the story-telling performances.

#### **Contemporary Kwagh-hir Theatre**

This is an extremely elaborate and spectacular performance. The core-structure as existed in the story-telling form and carried over into the puppet/masquerade theatre is still present here. The folk-loric origins are thus still present but have acquired traits of modernity and globalization. The puppets have 'grown' into human-size and present contemporary human characterization, also underscoring contemporary and topical issues like HIV/AIDS etc. A 'recent' (2008) Kwagh-hir event watched by this writer is described below. Thus, growth and innovation have been intrinsic part of Kwagh-hir theatre.

#### **A KWAGH-HIR PERFORMANCE EVENT**

This took place in an evening in December 2008. The evening opened with heralding music which seemed to be an important part of the event. As this music was sounded, the whole village it seemed was being sent an alert that there would be a performance event that night. There was a stand-by orchestra which played hard; the musicians taking turns at the drums until a crowd began to form. The crowd came in the following order; children, youth, women, and the elderly. When this crowd had gathered, the performance opened with a line-up parade of artists led by the leader of the Kwagh-hir group in traditional regalia. This line of artists danced through the arena 'stage' which was the compound grounds of their leader. This 'curtain' raiser served as some kind of introduction of artists who after dancing from one end of the arena to the other, still following their leader, danced out of the arena to 'back stage' behind the line of concentrically arranged huts that formed the homestead. It was time for the narrator to take the stage.

### **The narrator**

The narrator is called, shuwa which translates as 'weaver-bird'. This is significant of his role as a sort of 'MC' or coordinator of all the entries. His role means he is always on the move and always talking. He introduces to the audience every entry; every 'event' in the 'performance'. As Kwagh-hir is devoid of dialogue the shuwa's role is to throw as much light as possible on the stage activity, action and character of the various entries and dramatis personnel. He is the link between the various entries and must engage the audience in 'dialogue' through-out the performance. He offers a running commentary on the stage action but also often addresses the audience directly seeking both confirmation and affirmation from the audience. Since the shuwa's role is important in 'selling' the performance to the audience, the audience also must affirm him for him to continue in this role. When the performance is going badly, the audience freely shout out their disapproval. It is therefore a synergic relationship that operates between the audience and narrator and this synergy is important in moving forward the plot(s).

### **The Audience**

The important role of the audience to any performance is recognised universally but the role of the audience to Kwagh-hir is peculiar. Hagher (2003) rightly refers to it as a 'matrix' from which the performance evolves. The strong level of audience involvement in Kwagh-hir is what builds up the performance tempo and guarantees mood. Like the Greek audience of classical drama, Kwagh-hir audiences are familiar with Kwagh-hir stories, Kwagh-hir characters and Kwagh-hir songs. The task of every performance therefore is to weave together the familiar with the spectacular to create 'magic'. Everyone present is involved and the line between stage and 'auditorium' grows thinner as the performance progresses. This echoes in part, Artaudian theatre of cruelty in which "the traditional separation of actor and audience" was to be abolished, "enabling both to join in working out what Artaud called 'The show'" (Cooper and Mackey 1995:261). Thus, The invading of the audience by the actor was one of the most crucial practical developments from Artaud's theory and led to a creation of theatres where such boundaries were re-examined and in some cases abolished (Coopers and Mackey 1995:261). In Kwagh-hir theatre, this invasion is reciprocal between audience and actor but the goal is the same as in Artaud's 'show'; 'total sensory identification with the show' (Cooper and Mackey 1995:261).

### **The continuing performance**

Once started, the performance can go on for a whole night, non-stop. Because the 'play' entries vary in type and genre, a well thought out order is necessary

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for continuity and entertainment purposes. The following order occurred at this Kwagh-hir performance event under description. The show opened with (animal) masquerades (three in number); then a human-size puppet entry; then a 'transformation' act when objects 'turn into' other objects at the shot of a gun. This order is repeated throughout the night but with different masquerades, puppets and objects. Music and dance are incorporated into the performance at every stage as there is a standing accompanying orchestra with a chorus of dancers and singers. Thus the music (component) goes on non-stop till the performance is over.

Kwagh-hir theatre is a captivating experience and any attempt at description is only a scratch at the surface of the world of Kwagh-hir. Only an experience of Kwagh-hir is capable of 'telling' the whole story of its scope and dimensions. We therefore conclude our discussion here with a photographic attachment of some aspects of the sculptural element in Kwagh-hir.

#### **The Sculptural Element in Kwagh-Hir**

The sculptural element in kwagh-hir manifests itself in wood carvings of three dimensional figures that represent animals, humans and mystical beings and objects. These also represent the 'dramatis personnel' in Kwagh-hir performance. In the performance 'structure' described above, we saw the inter-cutting of masquerade dances with puppet entries. Kwagh-hir masquerade dances represent animals and do not carry the spiritual connotation that exists with other African communities. This is because of their evolution from the story-telling genre of Tiv oral narrative traditions. They are comprised of a carved three dimensional head-mask of an animal (mostly mythical) placed over a raffia covered frame representing the body of the animal. These masks are numerous and represent the different animals that populate Tiv folk-lore. Besides the masks, we also have the puppets as part of sculptural element in Kwagh-hir.

These puppets are representation of the human form and are of two types; the giant 'uber-merrionnettes' and the miniature puppets. The giant puppets are almost human size and are known as 'adzov', that means 'spirits'. The 'adzov' are seen in Tiv cosmogony as dominating Tiv art and creativity as they are conceived as the source of inspiration for both artistic and other expressions of excellence. The miniature puppet, though 'less' significant now were the earliest Kwagh-hir puppets. They are however now overshadowed by the giant puppets which are more spectacular in performance, carry more 'modern' themes and reflect contemporary trends, including global trends. Thus growth and innovation in Kwagh-hir came mostly in the artistic sculpture of 'Kwagh-hir' masks and puppets to the extent that the realistic depictions in wood of human-size, puppets (uber-merionnate) now ensure exciting performance that reflect modern trends and issues. The sculptural element in Kwagh-hir is thus robust and dynamic, showing growth and innovativeness.

**SOME KWAGH-HIR SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATIONS**



**MADAM 2000: FRONT VIEW**



**MADAM 2000: BACK VIEW**



**"ANKWEREGH IDU"**

**FRONTAL VIEW: DISPLAYING GLOBAL INFLUENCES. HER BELT BUCKLE CARRIES AN EMBORSEMENT READING "50 CENT" AND OTHER SYMBOL OF GLOBAL INFLUENCE**



**"ANKWEREGH IDU"**

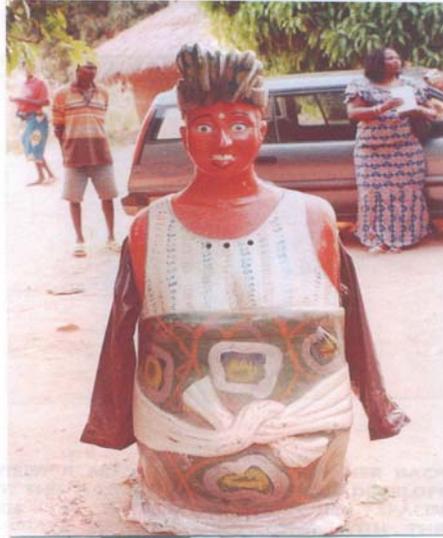
**FRONTAL VIEW: SHOWING MYSTICAL CARVINGS ON HER HEAD; SYMBOLIZING THE MIXTURE OF THE MYSTICAL AND THE REAL**



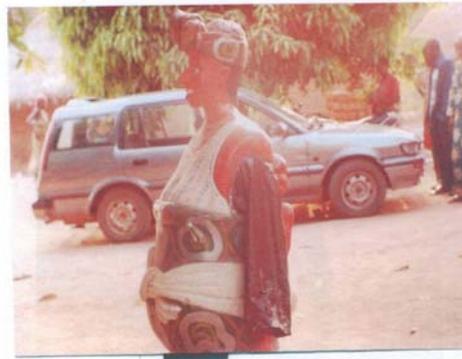
**GLOBAL INFLUENCE ON KWAGH-HIR SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATION**

**ANKWEREGH IDU: BACK VIEW**





**FRONTAL VIEW: A PREGNANT WOMAN**



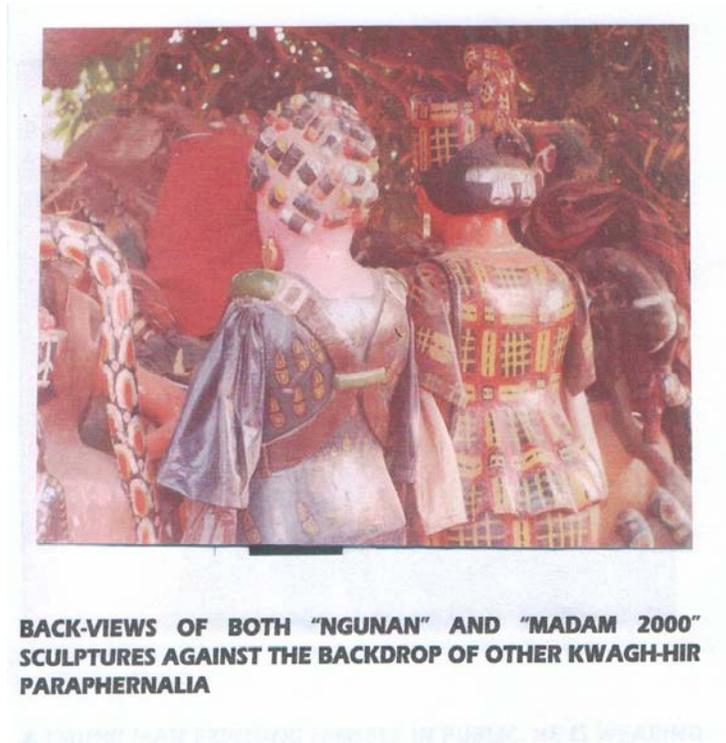
**SIDE VIEW: A PREGNANT WOMAN. ON HER BACK IS AN INFANT. THIS MASQUARADE CARRIES THE DEVELOPMENTAL MESSAGE OF THE NEED FOR CHILD SPACING. AN APPROPRIATE ACCOMPANYING SONG WITH THE SAME MESSAGE GOES A LONG WAY IN RE-ENFORING THE INTENT**



**BACK-VIEW OF A PREGNANT WOMAN**



**NGUNAN: THE SOPHISTICATED "MODERN" WOMAN**



### **KWAGH-HIR AND GLOBALIZATION**

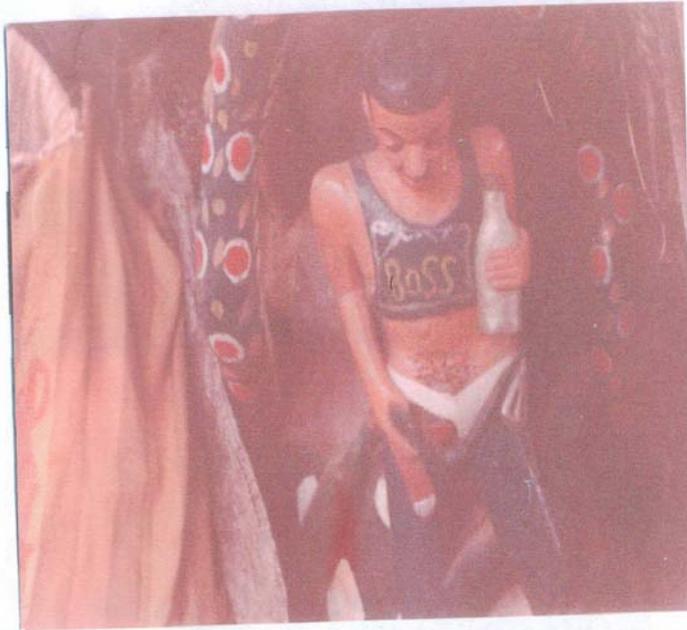
Globalisation, like Kwagh-hir is a multi-dimensional expression covering all areas and aspects of life. Again like Kwagh-hir, it has come to be regarded as a continuous process, i.e. it is dynamic. Possessing both positive and negative qualities, it is however perceived with skepticism by countries of the South. Thus;

[H]istorically, globalization has been an expression of domination and exploitation. The African State is a fringe-player in a global economy...the phenomena of globalization emerged as the newest phase of capitalist/imperialism. (Akhaine 2000:52,16 & 25).

Again, according to Mac Bride et al (1980) similar opinions are expressed thus,

[C]ultural globalisation in theory does pose a threat to the survival of isolated and indigenous cultures of the South. This threat comes in two strains: the quality and values of indigenous cultures may be reduced and the indiscriminate opening of doors

to new experiences and impressions by the global media could alienate indigenous communities of the south from their own culture. MacBride et al 1980:159.



**A DRUNK MAN EXPOSING HIMSELF IN PUBLIC. HE IS WEARING A T-SHIRT WITH THE INSCRIPTION "BOSS" ON IT. THIS SCULPTURE IS PART OF THE HEAD "LOAD" OF ANOTHER SCULPTURE; NOT VISIBLE HERE**

Nevertheless, globalization does reflect our relatedness and inter-relatedness politically, economically, socially and environmentally (Coetzee & Roux). Globalization is proving that no culture is a closed system since it brings with it a growing tendency towards the universal homogenization of ideas, cultures, values and even life-styles. This has the capacity of swallowing up ethnic/cultural identities. The challenge therefore is for cultural globalization to work towards the sharing of ideas to underscore oneness of cultural expression. For according to Gordimer (1998). Globalization is a circular not a linear concept; the very root of the word implies this shape of wholeness; at once a setting forth and receiving in one continuous movement (Ohiorhenuan 1998:20).

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Tiv Kwagh-hir theatre can be seen as a metaphor for Macluhan's global village concept, not only because it has embraced elements of globalization in its form, but also because it has something to offer the global community. To support this view we again refer to Gordimer who opines that:

[If] culture is globalizing, the aim should be to value creativity and differences across all aesthetic frontiers, with no hierarchy of so-called "world languages" directing it. And special effort is needed to tap the world of south-south opportunities and affirmatives that the colonial era denied and ignored. (Ohiorhenuan 1998:16)

As also opined by Schechner and Appel

...A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies. (Schechner & Appel 2002:1)  
Again,

... Turner put forward... His utopian vision of world community based on mutual respect and enjoyment of cultural differences, exchanges of feelings as well as of ideas, and increasing ability of people to experience and re-experience each other's cultural identities. (Schechner & Appel 2002:1)

Describing the goals and expectations of the planning committee on a series of an inter-cultural conferences in the early eighties, Schechner expresses the committees ambition thus:

At first, we felt that we could pack everything into one big conference. Our ambition was truly global – to bring together performers, scholars, directors, and choreographers from a wide cross –section of the world's cultures. We wanted these people to interact not just 'academically' on the basis of prepared papers and formal responses, but through "lived experiences" we intended not only to see finished performances, and fragments thereof, but methods of training, and to explore the various ways performances were received in different cultures and contexts. We wanted to consider not only "pure" performances – or idealised versions of traditional genres – but also tourist shows, hybrids, and genres in the midst of profound disturbances and/or transformation. We wanted contemporary Euro-American performances represented as well as genres from Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. We attempted to include various kinds of performance – from sacred ritual to experimental theatre. And we wanted divergent scholarly approaches represented (Schechner & Appel 2002:2)

Now this is level playing ground in performance opportunity. They concluded thus, "...We wanted to encourage interaction among performers from diverse cultures and genres". It is in view of this that we must recall our earlier mention of the similarity between Kwagh-hir theatre and Brechtian theatre. It does seem that what Western Theatre has been struggling to re-invent in the theories of such western practitioners as Brecht, Brook, Artaud and Craig were being practised in abundance in traditional African theatres like the Tiv Kwagh-hir. Brecht through his 'epic' theatre approximated Kwagh-hir both structurally and aesthetically. Artaud's strivings for metaphysics and a theatre of totality were already being practiced in abundance in the traditional theatres of Africa. The Kwagh-hir Theatre had already introduced on the African stage, the uber-marrionette that Gordon Craig was anticipating for western theatre. Nyager (2008).

Thus although the interface between the global and the local is not level playing ground, the possibility for inroads in fair-sharing of the global space through inter-cultural studies and exchange can be made. Through inter-cultural studies, the Kwagh-hir performance space could be seen as a metaphor for globalization or the global village. Here we meet the local indigenous artists; the local musician, sculptor, dancer and story-teller. We also equally meet Brecht, Brook Craig, Artaud etc. Again in addition, we meet Kwagh-hir stage characters "madam 2000", "Ankewere Idu" and the "Modern Cosmopolitan Woman", who are the carriers of globalization's influences on Kwagh-hir theatre.

Basically, therefore Tiv arts forms including Kwagh-hir theatre function as powerful media (folk-media) which express the socio-cosmological relations of the people. Tiv art forms are inseparable from Tiv world-view since they present metaphors that explain the world. The Kwagh-hir transcends human limitations and interfaces the world of spirits, animals and man Nyager (2008). In the same way Kwagh-hir can be seen as transcending Tiv society to interface the global as illustrated in Kwagh-hir sculptural arts. Kwagh-hir is a popular theatre of the Tiv ethnic group in central, Nigeria. Although it is indigenous to this group, its popularity has gone beyond the boundaries of Tivland and Nigeria. To date, the Benue State Arts Council in Nigeria, the primary sponsor and 'patron' of Kwagh-hir theatre receives invitations from overseas for Kwagh-hir performances. Therefore, Kwagh-hir is not only receiving from the global; Kwagh-hir is demonstrating that it has something to offer the world. Thus Kwagh-hir is metaphor for cultural globalization.

### **KWAGH-HIR AS METAPHOR FOR CULTURAL GLOBAZATION**

We begin here by posing the following question: are there any opportunities for harnessing the 'foreign and the global with the indigenous and local' in our study of Kwagh-hir theatre? We have found justification and significance

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in Kwagh-hir as platform for inter-cultural studies. We have found similarities between aspects Kwagh-hir theatre and the works of some practitioners of western theatre, namely: Brecht, Brook, Craig and Artaud. Kwagh-hir theatre has been compared to Brecht's 'epic' theatre practices Nyager (2008). Brook, in a categorization of theatre (s) came up with categories he described as 'Deadly', 'Holy', 'Rough' and 'Immediate' Brook (1968). In our study of Kwagh-hir we found the 'Holy' and 'Rough' co-existing in a manner that ensures Kwagh-hir's dynamism.

Therefore, Brook would have fertile ground in Kwagh-hir theatre for his theories. Gordon Craig would find the 'Uber-merionette' that he was anticipating for Western theatre in Kwagh-hir giant puppets. And Artaud would find a 'total' theatre of heightened emotions and sur-real invocation in Kwagh-hir theatre.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion therefore, having looked Kwagh-hir theatre, an indigenous theatre with globalizing tendencies, we opine that, cultural globalization can enhance level-playing ground through a greater promotion of inter-cultural studies. For, although Western culture which is at the heart of cultural globalization has had "a number of immoral achievements, namely colonialism and the global suppression of cultures of other nations (Coetzee & Roux 2002:59), cultural studies could offer the ...intellectual and academic freedom, and platform for people of ideas and must serve the necessity for a genuine and complete cultural development anywhere in the world. Coetzee & Roux (2002:58)

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