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Dramaturgical Importance of Music in Modern Nigerian Drama

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Abstract

What constitutes modern drama in Nigeria today is a synthesis of several art forms – such as music, dance, acting, make-up, costume and other forms of spectacle. Consequently, the process of staging a play presents both formal and thematic challenges in terms of what goes into a production. While it is best to examine the range of modes and media of representation interacting in a single drama performance, this paper focuses on the role and use of music in its various ramifications in Nigerian dramaturgy. The methodological implication involves, among others, redefining the boundaries between speech and music within the African context while examining contemporary applications vis-à-vis the desired goals. It is clear from this study that while some Nigerian playwrights merely suggest music, others provide song texts, while only a negligible few provide music scores. The essay also shows where Femi Osofisan stands in all of this and concludes by arguing that the documentation of music as part of the play script makes for a more effective dramaturgy.

Introduction: Modern African Drama

Although the medium of modern African drama whose techniques are believed to be borrowed from the Western stage still predominantly remains the language of the former colonizing powers, modern African practitioners now seek to express themselves in recognizable African terms using African forms and media. While the language may be English or French or Portuguese, modern African Drama is inclined to be African in various other interacting modes and media such as costume, make-up, scenery, dance, and of more significance to this paper, music.

Thus, contemporary African Drama seeks to differentiate itself from the old fashioned Western forms by incorporating holistic, polyvalent extractions of African heritage that include music, indicating the awareness that, by our very nature, Africans do not have events without

music. Numerous examples from different African societies include the birth of a child, marriage and funeral ceremonies in Igbo and Edo cultures of Southern Nigeria, *Homowo* festival, when a child grows its first tooth and nubile (circumcision) rites in Ghana, among many others.

Drama, in conjunction with music, actually assumes a substantial part of the normal African cultural life from birth to death. The modern dramatist therefore wisely draws from this traditional orientation. Given that training in Western drama is not an adequate preparation for the inclusion and manipulation of indigenous materials as expected by the African audience, the crucial challenge is how to integrate the Western background knowledge of drama with the extracted culturally learned indigenous African performance idioms and materials. A writer is therefore expected to write or direct to suit the audience with which s/he is culturally familiar and who have cultural expectations, by carefully manipulating the various modes and media intermingling in a drama performance

Modes and Media in Drama Performance

Plot, character and thought, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, are the basic ingredients of drama (tragedy in particular). But in order to convey these to an audience, the playwright has only two means of communication at his/her disposal, namely, spectacle and sound. It is however understandable that it is the message the play intends to convey that determines the particular modes and media through which communication is achieved between the author and the audience.

Spectacle comprises all aspects of theatrical experience recognizable and accessible to the eyes, including all visual elements of a production such as physical movement, dance, costumes, scenery, properties and light. On the other hand, sound includes language, music and other sound effects aurally produced and accessed. The success or failure of a production depends mainly on how each of these devices is established in relation to others and also according to the relevance and intention of the author. Jeyifo (1981) argues that:

> The question of the relevance and accessibility of our best literary dramas will leave the closet of "obscurity" only to the extent that these dramas become more than mere *formalistic*, if often brilliant, experiments in the fusion of conventionally disparate theatrical traditions. So far indeterminacy, contortions of form and convolutions of masks and dramatic poetry mark the union of the non-verbal, extra-literary

> techniques with the verbal, dramaturgical modes, in many of our finest literary dramas. Often it is indeed at the very point of dramatic climax and thematic significance that intelligible communication breaks down and the dramatic poet lapses into obscurity and indirection, even if these scenes are metaphorically, visually and theatrically stunning. The most famous, or notorious examples of this pattern is the central, emblematic scene in the heart of the forest in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. The same is true of the shattering climaxes of *The Road* and *Madmen and Specialists* as it is of some crucial scenes in *Ozidi* and Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song* and *Once Upon Four Robbers.* (Jeyifo, 1981:417-418)

Although raising other issues beyond the scope of this discourse, the import of the above reference is the acknowledgement of "experiments in the fusion of conventionally disparate theatrical traditions" including the use of traditional devices that intermingle in modern Nigerian dramaturgy as exemplified by the likes of Osofisan whose main strategic device is music, as would be shortly elucidated.

Osofisan and the Use of Music

It is common knowledge that Femi Osofisan, as widely acknowledged and documented (Awodiya, 2010; Njoku, 2006; and Jeyifo, 1981 amongst others), is one of the most popularly acknowledged leading Nigerian playwrights of the second generation dramatists. As Awodiya (1995) particularly claims, he ranks first, both in originality and expression, especially because he has devoted his literary genius to the preservation of African tradition and culture. In order to achieve this in his writing, he adopts a suitable style with ample flexibility that allows for the incorporation of a wide range of traditional modes and media, particularly including music. Awodiya appositely notes that Osofisan is,

> … prolific and theatrically fertile in creating flexible dramatic forms that have great stage adaptability. Embedded in this is his aesthetics, which lives and captivates the audience because of its use of traditional African elements of music, dance, song, mime and improvisation. (2010: 26)

His improvisatory tactics often derive from African theatre traditions from which he generates and infuses his creative imagination and adaptations, hence Awodiya concludes that the real significance of Osofisan's dramaturgy is his experiment with the African theatre form in which he uses dramatic conventions to transform African experiences into drama. Thus he creates his new pieces by mingling conventions of

the profession with those of tradition in daring experiments (26). Awodiya further states that

> For example, not satisfied with regular comedy, … Osofisan mingles humour with other traditional forms like folktale, music, song and dance to create a comic opera in for example *Midnight Hotel* which appeals to the African audience.(26)

Apart from his creative use of onomatopoeic musical lexicon and connotations to couch his titles such as in *The Chattering and the Song*, *The Oriki of a Grasshopper*, *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels, Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest, Twingle –Twangle*: *A Twynning Tayle*, there is hardly a play of Osofisan's that I have watched or participated in without ample use of music from the beginning to the end. In addition to those enumerated earlier in this paragraph, other plays of his in which I assisted in achieving the musical component of the productions include *Midnight Hotel* and *Once Upon Four Robbers*. As Awodiya (1995), whose additional authority derives from having directed all the above mentioned plays, further confirms, there is hardly any play of Osofisan's that does not employ traditional Yoruba music, either as song, instrumentation or dance. These occur as opening and closing glees, bridges or, more significantly, as alternative forms of expression and as non-verbal communication of intention and theme.

For example, *The Chattering and the Song* displays a wealth of Osofisan's technical skill with specific reference to his use of music, proverbs, role-playing, poetry and dance to transform its productions into an acceptable artistic creation with authentic African characteristics. The play shows Osofisan's ability to use the still vital theatrical vocabulary of his own culture in his contemporary works. Hence, apart from using music as opening glee and exit with The Farmer's Anthem on the last two pages, Osofisan's creativity adapts music and songs for his artistic purpose in such a way that provokes imagination and interest in his skill and background (also see pages 6, 8-9, 10, 14-15, 20, 22, 25, 34, 43-44 of the same play).

A peek into the life of the playwright reveals much about his creative beginnings and inspiration for his experimental style. The secret of how he acquired the creative muse is hidden in his humble upbringing. As we are later to learn, it can be aptly said that Osofisan was born into a musical family and little wonder therefore that music plays such a critical and prominent role in his life and his drama. In his critical study of the drama of Osofisan, Awodiya informs that:

> Babafemi Adeyemi Osofisan was born … at *Erunwon*, a village near Ijebu-Ode. His father trained at the old St. Andrews College, Oyo, as a teacher and an accomplished musician. He was a multi-instrumentalist who could play the organ, guitar, and piano. He also composed songs. One may thus trace the roots of the frequent use of music and songs in Osofisan's plays to his father. Music and songs are crucial to nearly all Osofisan's plays. (2010:31)

These were confirmed in a personal interview with the writer himself. Although Osofisan may not be as musically accomplished as his father, in that he is not known to play any Western musical instrument, probably due to the early demise of his father who would have mentored and initiated him appropriately, music undoubtedly exists in his genes. Although the father did not directly transfer all his skills of instrumentation, musicianship and formal compositional techniques for the same reason early adduced, he had imbibed sufficient awareness and love for music while growing up to play African percussion instruments such as the *omele* of the Yoruba *Bata* drum set. As the only music personnel at the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Benin, which he headed in its embryonic stage, it begins now to make better sense why he was so favourably disposed to us in music and why I was lucky to have his approval for all the musical equipment I requested for. It was he who approved the purchase of the first and only Upright Standard Piano in the Department till date. He also approved the purchase of traditional musical instruments, including a complete *Bata* ensemble complete with the *omele*.

In his secondary school at Government College Ibadan (1959-1963), from where he obtained his West African School Certificate and won the 1st T. M. Aluko Prize for Literature, there is no doubt that the availability and accessibility to an upright standard piano for use and practice by interested students may also have sharpened his musical talent.

From these sources he acquired various elements of music sufficient to enable him to associate and practice music theatre. It is to these aspects of music, such as singing, composition, arrangement, directing and traditional musical instrumentation and production that Osofisan resorts and skilfully executes as evident in his play presentations.

Going by the Nigerian traditional expectations and research results in this regard, it is the mother's role to have taught him the first songs, first dance steps and first musical accompaniments of his life. It therefore follows that she also must have taught him the first lessons in history and

traditional literary art as he learnt to speak his first language which prepared him for more formal situations of learning, including traditional events and social occurrences around him as he grew up in a typical African traditional society. Such opportunities in Southern Nigeria where he was raised include moonlight games with peers, folk tale situations with peers and an adult storyteller, and festivals involving whole communities from his immediate environment.

For example, festivals are very much a part of the socio-cultural existence of the Ijebu people and having been part of such situations he is expected to have acquired the ability to judge what is suitable for the sensibility of the audience, in his inclusive dramaturgical strategy:

> As a *Yoruba* from Ijebu, he was exposed to the yearly *Agemo* festival at Ijebu-ode. During the 7-day festival, the drums are sounded and people express their joy in feasts, music, dances, proverbial chants and prayers… After the esoteric, the exoteric aspect of the festival begins with dancing to the traditional *Apepe* music for several hours at the closing ceremony, the people dance… (Awodiya, 35)

Having imbibed and assimilated such experiences from youth, his plays are thus structured to accommodate varying cultural images, metaphors, songs and allusions with which his audiences are already familiar. Awodiya (2010) corroborates a common observation that a reading through Osofisan's works readily shows that he has his roots well grounded in Yoruba culture as is evident in his utilization of Yoruba concepts and materials. In fact, the Yoruba world-view as reflected in various Yoruba myths, underlie the structure of Osofisan's plays and also animate his characters. These art forms as manifested in his plays are usually performed with audience participation and as such when the performers play and sing the audience choruses and dances along; hence Osofisan's style also possesses participatory qualities, which is why they evoke responses from the audience. In other words, the performance of his plays serve as a means through which the audience actually partakes of the action on the stage as in popular traditional culture. Theoretically, his conscious intention is to create a popular theatre form with which the masses can easily identify. This intention is realized through the performance of his plays; and music and songs contribute significantly in achieving this objective.

Nigerian Dramaturgy and Musical Expectation

While it is possible to write a play made up of dialogue only, there is however an indigenous Nigerian way of communicating messages in a manner that would be understood by the audience members who are considered very important in the theatre, both in the Nigerian and in the larger African context. Any production that seeks to identify and appeal to the African consciousness and identity has to consider the importance of music in the African society which the dramatist or director writes or produces for. For our immediate Nigerian society which Osofisan writes for, music is paramount and relevant in almost all spheres of life, from birth through teething, standing, playing, initiation, marriage and death. Music in its various forms and styles exists to dramatise and mirror life; as poetic expression in melody, as historical documentation from folkloric sources, as commentary and as sarcasm. Music is most valuable as criticism, as reflection of mood, as prelude, as accompaniment, as bridge or as finale. Alternatively, music could simply be used as substitute for or transmitter of messages that would otherwise be difficult or uncomfortable to utter. This is acceptable to the extent that Meki Nzewi in his study and characteristic style of expression asserts that:

> … drama unincorporated with music and dance is alien to the theatrical sensibilities of the un-alienated Nigerian of any ethnic background … the truth remains that stage presentations not structured to, sequenced by, *vected* through , or tippled with music and dance or stylized movement is alien to the inherent Nigerian theatre sensibilities. (1996:433)

In addition to literary reviews, observations and interviews, this researcher has also been involved in performances and productions of Nigerian contemporary drama that are usually rich in their musical complements.

During my MA programme in Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan I facilitated the music in a class production of Dapo Adelugba's *That Scoundrel Suberu* (an adaptation of Moliere's *Scaping*). At Legon, I was consulted to help teach Nigerian songs or source for appropriate incidental music in the productions of Nigerian plays such as *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola. Back at the University of Benin, I have been part of almost all productions of Osofisan's plays directed by the author or by

his apprentice, Muyiwa Awodiya. My duty in all of these situations had involved the following:

1. Rehearsing prescribed or adapted melodies to suit song texts in specific locations in the play texts with the cast.
2. Incorporating the emerging songs within the play production.
3. Rehearsing incidental musical sound with instrumental / dance accompaniment as contextually required.
4. Ensuring appropriate execution of music during final production.

Suffice it to say here that the documentation of the process of incorporation is a useful tool for further research in Nigerian music theatre practice.

These on-the-spot experiences of the musicality of contemporary Nigerian drama corroborate the available documentary evidence. Hence one can confidently affirm that current theatre practice in Nigeria has imbibed the new culture and tradition of musically enhanced dramatic art as far as stage presentations are concerned. The concern of this paper, however, is with the finding that whereas a lot of music is used on stage, a scrutiny of play texts reveal that beyond verbal dialogue not much music is specifically prescribed by playwrights.

The general picture therefore is that the disposition of writers to music can be categorized into four: playwrights who produce outright dry plays without music belong to category 4; some playwrights who suggest where music should be used but do not specify the music belong to category 3; while some other playwrights who specify and provide song texts where desired are in category 2. The most crucial finding is that only a negligible few, such as Ola Rotimi in, for example, *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, provide scores for the music required to accompany their play scripts (see appendix 1 and 2). These most preferred belong to category 1.

Alongside Wole Soyinka (except for *Opera Wonyosi* that has a music score which I saw at the University of Ibadan), Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme, Osofisan falls within the second category of playwrights: those who identify songs, provide song texts but do not provide applicable music scores. Some of these plays in dire need of musical

scores to justify and enhance their rich musical content include *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, which premiered at Benin-City in 1984, *Midnight Hotel*, *Twingle Twangle* and *Midnight Blackout.*

In all of these specific cases at the University of Benin, in the productions which this researcher was part of, musical scores were not available. The melodies had to be taught orally by Osofisan himself. His musical accomplishment was quite evident in his singing and drumming skills as he taught melodies to his prescribed texts as well as the appropriate accompanying rhythms to the instrumentalists. His musical competence, as already observed, covers the traditional as well as the contemporary Nigerian musical genres. His knowledge of the guitar, the keyboard and other musical instruments of the contemporary highlife ensemble became apparent as he assigned rhythms to various instruments, to achieve the blend and harmony he envisioned for each play script. During such rehearsals in Benin in 1986, the melodies had to be electronically recorded for further rehearsals with the cast during his absence. For other productions after his sabbatical leave, when he was otherwise not physically around, he was usually invited by Awodiya for the sole purpose of teaching the songs to the cast, directly by rote.

Conclusion

Although by no means conclusive, the intention is that this paper which has focused mainly on the role and use of music in Nigerian drama, particularly as it concerns Osofisan, may be used as a paradigm for assessing other African situations of drama performance. The paper has examined the relationship and dramaturgical importance of music as the other basic means of communication besides verbal dialogue, especially in Osofisan's plays. What becomes evident from the findings is that the Western styled training of the modern Nigerian playwright is often inadequate for the requirements for satisfying his African audience. Rather, the clues the playwright requires as exemplified by Osofisan's generation are to be found in the living traditions of the people as recognized by theatre and performance forebears such as Hubert Ogunde who resorted to traditional elements in his productions. The emergent style resulting from rigorous experiments, involves the use of music as a valuable element that in fusion with other elements ensures more effective and adequate communication between performers and audience. The new form is observed to achieve the right appeal that suits the aesthetic sensibilities of the local audience. The paper concludes that

while the vanguard, represented by Osofisan, has established a satisfactory form of theatre that highlights music as a most viable tool of communication and access to the audience, it is hoped that trained theatre musicians and musicologists would collaborate with Osofisan and other playwrights to score the musical segments of their plays, which are yet presented as mere text within the play texts. See sample from Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* in appendix.

The recommendation arising from the findings of this paper is that other playwrights should now go a step further to prescribe appropriate use of music as established by Osofisan. For those who have already imbibed the use of music the recommendation is that they move further to documenting the musical intentions for their play productions, either in staff / solfa notation or in any other acceptable and usable format, as part of the play script. Finally, it is recommended that the musical scores be published either as part of the play or as postscript, to which the play directors may refer, albeit with the assistance of appropriately trained music personnel in the contexts in which these plays are to be staged, and in whose domain, such areas of research ultimately reside.

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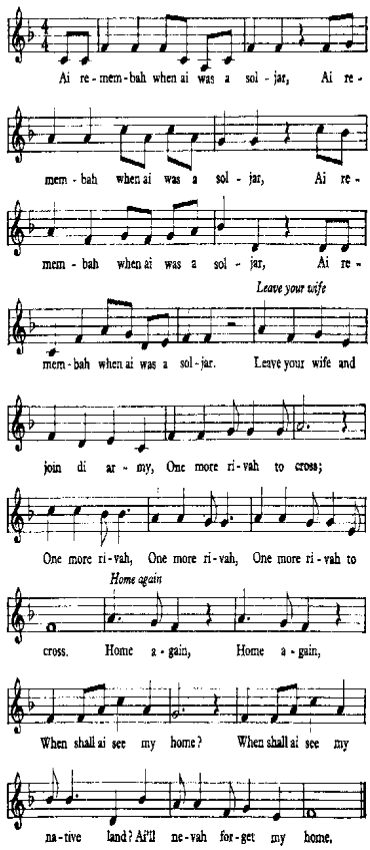
APPENDIX

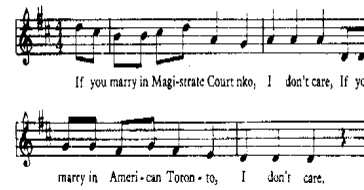
Ai remembah when ai was a soljar

Act 1 scene I



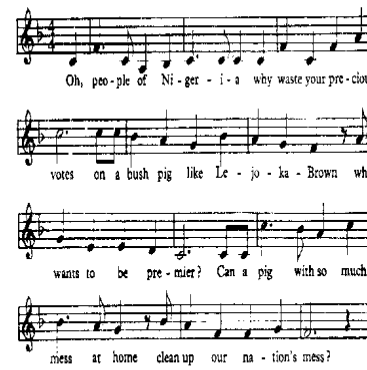
"Taxi Driver" Highlife

Act 1 scene III



Oh, people of Nigeria

Act 1 scene V



ACT 1

SCENE I

LEJOKA-BROWN'S *living-room.* SIKIRA *clad in buba and wrapper, with a veil fluffing loosely about her neck and shoulders, is sitting, legs wide apart, on the settee, listlessly eating an orange, and making mouths.*

IKIRA [*as if addressing the orange*]. Has my lord finished eating?

[*But the question seems unnecessary, as we now hear footsteps in martial rhythm approaching.* SIKIRA *quickly drapes the veil over her face and prinks herself up. Meanwhile, an imperious baritone is intoning in time with the marching.*]

EJOKA-BROWN [*offstage*]. Ah lef, ah lef, ah lef rai ah lef compana-a-, go!

[*A baritone and tenor duet croons lustily.*]

EJOKA-BROWN and OKONKWO [*approaching*].
Ai remembah when ai was a soljar,
Ai remembah when ai was a soljar,
Ai remembah when ai was a soljar,
Ai remembah when ai was a soljar,

[LEJOKA-BROWN and OKONKWO *march into the living-room.*]

Hippy ya ya, hippy hippy ya-ya,
Hippy ya ya, hippy hippy ya-ya,
Hippy ya ya, hippy hippy ya-ya,
Hippy ya ya, hippy hippy ya-ya,

3

Appendix 2
Music score of song at end of play text