

Dr Esiaba Irobi: A Tribute

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In 2006 Esiaba Irobi invited me to read the manuscript of his proposed book *African Festival and Ritual Theatre: Resisting Globalization on the Continent and Diaspora Since 1942*. He then asked me to write an Introduction to the book, which I was delighted to do. To date this fine study has not been published, but some indication of its richness may be found in the Introduction I wrote.

‘A coconut’ observes Esiaba Irobi, ‘that floats from the shores of Accra across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, is still a coconut’. This exuberant and wide-ranging study argues that indigenous performance forms from Africa, having always essentially chronicled and shaped the social, political and cultural identity of the home community, inform and generate theatre, carnival, dance and art in the diaspora. He asks (and offers answers to) important questions – ‘what was there on the continent of Africa as theatre before the arrival of Europeans?’ – and shows that ‘African cultures were existential spaces where life was and still remains an intensely ritualized and performed activity’. That ‘still remains’ is important, for Irobi’s study powerfully illustrates the continuity of the central function of performance in African cultures: ‘the African’, Irobi claims ‘is master of his or her time, not the other way round’. A central thesis of the study echoes Wole Soyinka’s famous statement in his essay *Drama and the African world-view* that what distinguishes African from ‘Western’ performance forms is a difference between the former’s ‘cohesive understanding of irreducible truths’ and the latter’s ‘creative impulses...directed by period dialectics’. The core examples Irobi draws upon to show the roots and continuing relevance of African performance culture are taken mainly from his own Igbo nation in eastern Nigeria. Igbo society has an astonishing range and scale of complex festivals and ritual enactments, remarkable in every sense of the word ‘scale’. We are introduced to festivals that are prepared over months or years of rehearsal,

that show the power of women in Igbo society ('the primary carriers of culture', Irobi suggests), and that are central to society's sense of its own identity and – crucially – its relationship with a colonial and pre- and post-colonial world. The role and power of performance, Irobi shows, is not limited to specific occasions or individual community celebration: it is a powerful weapon in its own right. For instance, in a chapter on 'Feminine Aesthetics in African theatre in the Colonial Period' Irobi shows how the women of Igbo society confronted both the colonial power and their own corrupted male leaders in the poll-tax riots that occurred in the late 1920s. Here we are shown women, outraged by injustice and the ineffectuality of their men-folk, challenging, parodying and fighting their oppressors using as tools dance, song and satire, often literally in the face of bullets. Here, as elsewhere, Irobi restores one's faith in the power of performance to counter oppression. It makes the role and impact of much Western theatre look positively anaemic by comparison.

Irobi does not neglect the modern literary drama of Africa, but argues that it is rooted in ancient traditions and cannot be fully appreciated without that understanding. It may, as it were, draw the eyes of contemporary attention like the snow-cap of Kilimanjaro, but only exists because of the ancient mountain below it. He also, through chapters on theatre for development and theatre involved in the fight against AIDS, shows old remedies being applied to new problems. All is not light in this study, however, for while he celebrates the fundamental strengths of Africa's various traditions of performance, it also recognises the corrosive effect of the impact of Westernisation on contemporary African culture. Sometimes, as he illustrates, it is the coconut that has been its saviour, carrying the power and purpose of African performance to flourish and develop in the diaspora.

Critically this passionately argued study draws on an impressive range of theories and argument, plays and performances, but crucially it prioritises the African perspective, countering the dominance of much Western theorising with a vigorous alternative view from an African and diasporic perspective.

To the memory of Esiaba Irobi