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Postcolonial African Theatre: Notes towards a Definition

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> 'We are not opposed to criticism, but we are getting a little weary of all the special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited' (Chinua Achebe, 1976: 62).

Introduction

As a critical apparatus, post-colonialism has witnessed an unprecedented institutionalisation in contemporary literary and cultural imagination. In less than three decades of existence it has acquired such repute that it is now accommodated behind, if not exactly *beside*, other cardinal 'posts-' as one of the principal frameworks in social, cultural and literary studies. This prominence is irrespective of its notorious theoretical and empirical shortcomings. As Graham Huggan points out, despite the avalanche of negative criticism which it attracts even from some of its ardent advocates, it continues to prosper, growing 'rich, it seems, on accumulated cultural capital while being increasingly acknowledged as methodologically flawed or even intellectually bankrupt' (2004: 279; qtd in Schulze-Engler 1). Virtually every critique of the theory decries its autobiographical reflexivity, perverse literary paradigm and lack of historical and social mileage. In the main, the term is received with great suspicion, if not outright apathy, by scholars and cultural workers in/from Africa. Many deride what they perceive as its distasteful insensitivity evidenced by its benchmarking of the infamous colonial encounter and the relegation of its debilitating legacy to the realm of meretricious discourse (what evidence is there of this claim?). It is therefore not surprising that many recommend that the term be discountenanced as a critical signpost in the analysis of African cultural, social, and political experience. However, considering the kind of institutional endorsement it has received in the

Western academic industry, and its enthusiastic reception by sundry African scholars, it is not likely that the vexatious term can be so easily deposed.

Most studies of African theatre display a literary prejudice over a performance procedure. Additionally, the field witnesses a form of conservative canonisation that focuses on a number of African plays written no less than three decades back by a very limited number of dramatists/playwrights – the very ones we studied in undergraduate classes in Nigerian universities in the early 1980s. It is therefore not surprising that the emerging field of 'Postcolonial African theatre' is burdened with these difficulties inherent in both the terms 'postcolonial' and 'African theatre.' The category has come to be commonly constituted by a limited number of received texts mostly written even before the term 'postcolonial' was invented as a critical model in cultural and literary studies. This practice grossly misrepresents theatre itself and aggravates somewhat the conceptual infirmity of the term 'postcolonial'. It understands theatre not only in its dramatic sense but also predominantly as a literary expression. Notably, it gives very little attention to drama as theatre or performance. Secondly, and most importantly, it is blind to the vigorous forms of theatrical expression that populate contemporary African experience. Thus it seems that African 'postcoloniality' is happening anywhere but Africa; that, for instance, postcolonial Nigerian theatre happened sometime, and occasionally does happen still, on the stages of London's Royal Court, Young Vic (London), Oval House Theatre (London) and West Yorkshire Playhouse (Leeds), rather than the National Theatre in Lagos, the Arts Theatre stage of the University of Ibadan, or the open streets and countless arenas that particularly witness indigenous performances.

This paper attempts to see how the term 'postcolonial' could acquire critical resonance for those who live, as Niyi Osundare puts it, in 'the real battleground of colonial encounter' (1994: 208). It argues that, considering the Leftist or counter-hegemonic postures of postcolonial theory, postcolonial African theatre ought to privilege what is happening *in* Africa *today and* focus on marginal rather than dominant or canonical expressions. The paper proposes what it considers a more appropriate perspective in order to accommodate the vigorous and prolific expressions in the output of contemporary African theatre. It suggests, for instance, that a better perspective is possible when the object of investigation is *theatre* rather than literary *drama*, and the *postcolonial* is adjudged, based on its foundational cultural and socio-political centeredness, as the people's resistance to the persistence of colonization administered by post-colonial regimes and infrastructures. Although this paper occasionally lapses into generalisations, it is predominantly restricted to Nigeria.

Postcolonial Africa

Alan Lawson *et al.* (1997) observe that the term 'postcolonial' has 'often sponsored ahistorical and acultural approaches which reify marginality and a sometimes naively self-defeating identity politics within a fashionable rhetoric of undifferentiated and unsituated anti-oppressive gestures'. It is for these reasons that they restrict the term, 'to the legacies of, and responses to, European imperialism and colonialism' (x). While this rather simple definition of the problematic term has much to commend it, it does not significantly minify much of the ingrained difficulties with the term. For instance, Katja Sarkowsky observes that, '[p]ostcolonial literary theory claims to be applicable to so many different texts that it necessarily generalizes, unifies and thus is devoid of any analytical power. Its focus on resistance, on 'writing back', on the relationship between centre and periphery results in trivializing the differences between various colonial experiences. It ignores contemporary social problems that may not be simply a result of European colonialism and thus reduces the literatures under consideration to the needs of the metropolitan academic context'. (2004: 161)

Considering the diversity and intensity of the debates that the term continues to generate, I limit attention only to a few critiques from African scholars themselves. This perspective is informed by the conviction that the term sheds much of its critical difficulties as it gains greater specificity. In spite of the fashionable anti-essentialist posture of current cultural/literary thinking it is obvious that 'postcolonial Africa' offers less conceptual difficulties than, say, 'postcolonial nations.' While acknowledging the divergent cultural, historical, political, and ethnic identities that inhabit the continent it is not impossible to suggest that these have produced heterogeneous conditions that are nonetheless more consistent within than outside the continent. Although the experience of colonization is not the same across the diverse geographies commonly conflated in the term postcolonial nations, some experiences are more similar than others are. For instance, in Canada, New Zealand and Australia a large population of settlers from imperial Britain supplanted and marginalized the indigenous peoples. Imperial administration was reasonably autonomous and independence was peacefully negotiated. The indigenous population, being governed and oppressed by the settlers, was not involved in this process, being governed and oppressed by the settler population. In the Caribbean, a number of European settlers wiped out the indigenous peoples and imported a large population of slaves from Africa and labourers from Asia. Although the struggle for independence generated conflicts and tension, it was achieved reasonably peacefully. In

India, independence was achieved only after protracted violent conflict. In Africa, the story is similarly disparate. Across the African continent contact between coloniser and colonised, except in South Africa, Zimbabwe and, to a reasonable extent, Kenya was less direct, and independence was attained through protracted agitation and eventual negotiation. In Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa independence involved much bloodshed and full-scale violent uprisings. In the West African region colonial administration, nationalist movements, and eventual independence followed a more similar pattern than elsewhere in the former British Empire. Apart from the differences in colonial presence and narratives of decolonisation, other significant processes, such as geography, politics, economy and culture, create familiar patterns of national identities. In Nigeria, for instance, although the colonial policy of 'indirect rule' did not have uniform consequences in all the regions and among all the disparate ethnic nationalities, it did leave fairly similar imprints on the various nationalities within the country, more than it did amongst those nationalities beyond the nation's borders.

In a talk given in 1991, Ngugi wa Thiong'o defines the term postcolonial to mean 'after formal colonisation.' Taking Kenya as his case study, he argues that there is really no significant change in the colonial superstructure which marginalized the majority of the Kenyan population at the base. He observes that 'although there has been some movement upwards for some Africans and Asians, with some of them occupying positions of real economic and political power, the colonial structure remained essentially the same.' Thus, he submits that '[t]he very things that made the people take up arms against colonialism – external domination and internal repression – still exist' (90). Therefore, it seems that Ngugi perceives the difference between the terms colonial and postcolonial as merely nomenclatural.

Apart from identifying some of the familiar conceptual infelicities of the 'post-' prefix, Niyi Osundare seems more vexed by the '-colonial' suffix. He observes that

> More than other terminologies of the 'post-' variety, 'post-colonial' is a highly sensitive historical, and geographical trope which calls to significant attention a whole epoch in the relationship between the West and the developing world … We are talking about a trope which brings memories of gunboats and mortars, conquests and dominations, a trope whose accent is blood-stained. We are talking about a terminology whose 'name' and meaning are fraught with the burdens of history and the anxieties of contemporary reality (1994: 205).

He argues that to apply the term 'so liberally to places such as Africa and Australia, the Caribbean and Canada – places whose colonial pasts are so fundamentally different – is tantamount to mocking the real wounds of the colonial infliction where they are deepest and most enduring' (1994: 207).

Femi Osofisan's ire seems to be more with the kind of critical tradition which the term endorses especially in Western discourse; what he describes as an 'erroneous mis/reading' (1999: 3) which gives the impression that 'all our work continues to privilege the 'Centre' – by which is meant a former colonial country in Europe, and that we still take this 'Centre' as the focal point of all our activities of resistance in Africa' (1999: 2-3). While he is in sympathy with the resistance strategy in postcolonial cultural and literary production, he contests its essentialisation of the 'writing back' schema which positions the West as the prime target of Africa's acts and discourses of resistance. Thus he is ached by the practice of 'analyzing the plays we write, and all the strategies we employ, as merely strategies to deconstruct the presence of colonization, as opposed to what they really are – attempts to confront, through our plays, our novels and poetry, the various problems of underdevelopment which our countries are facing' (3).

It is obvious that, to a large extent, the three scholars identify the persistence of Empire in the 'postcolony' in various forms: cultural, political, economic and even psychological. While Ngugi addresses this presence in the continued marginalization and repression of the majority of the population, Osundare sees the term as a touchy misnomer. In addition, Osofisan is pained by the inattention in the discourse to the more urgent 'resistance' which preoccupies the African socio-cultural worker. It is as a consequence of the obvious inadequacies of the term that Osofisan recommends a change of name from 'Post-colonial' to 'Post-Negritude.' However, as Zach Weir (2006) warns, 'the impulse to re-claim, to re-colonize must not perpetrate oppressive appropriations that mimic the colonial practice itself' (1). The question, however, is whether this renaming is likely to change Africa's condition of 'postcoloniality' or the commodification of the term which has engendered the 'postcolonial racket' – the claim to postcoloniality by those who do not in any real sense experience any form of institutional marginalisation; appropriations of 'postcoloniality' by the very marginalising Centres; an appropriation now evidenced in the claims often made by those, like the United States, who actually practice the new genus of colonisation that continues to produce today's 'postcolonies'. Considering the quantity and quality of literary and cultural production, which the term has engendered, one wonders whether any re-baptism would be of consequence. Attempting

to discard the ill-fitting garment might well amount to a wasteful and distracting physical and intellectual expenditure. I believe that the duty of 'those who are supposed to wear it, its passive signifieds' (Osundare 208) is actually to make it fit by contesting its essentialisation and its insensitivity to the social, political, psychological and political freight which the term hauls. 'It is time,' says Osofisan, 'to correct this erroneous mis/reading' (1999: 3); to re-examine the term from the perspective of those who actually inhabit it, for, as the saying goes, 'who feels it knows it'.

A look at the ideological precursors of postcolonial theory validates the necessity for a re-reading of the sort recommended by Osofisan. '(P)ostcolonialism as a self-conscious political philosophy' (Young 17) has its foundation in the Bandung Conference of 1955 at which the former colonies of Europe initiated an alliance of 'non-aligned' nations as an alternative body designed to disinter them from the then dominant capitalist West and communist East leagues. The idea of a 'Third World' emerged from this conference as a 'third' alternative to these two dominant blocs. From conception the Third World was a culturally and politically de-colonising strategy that aimed to forge an alternative body of knowledge independent of imperial hegemony. According to Young, '[t]he term gradually became associated with the economic and political problems that such countries encountered, and consequently with poverty, famine, unrest' (2003: 16). Eleven years later another 'global alliance resisting the continuing imperialism of the west' was formed at the Tricontinental Conference of 1966 in Cuba involving the three continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America. They founded the journal *Tricontinental* in 1967, and in its first issue Major Ernesto Che Guevara outlined

> the role that we, the exploited people of the world, must play… to eliminate the foundations sustaining imperialism: our oppressed nations, from which capital, raw materials and cheap labor (both workers and technicians) are extracted, and to which new capital (tools of domination), arms and all kinds of goods are exported, sinking us into absolute dependence. The fundamental element of that strategic objective, then, will be the real liberation of the peoples (Young 2003: 18).

Young asserts variously that the 'third world is the postcolonial world' (16); that 'tricontinental is a more appropriate term to use than 'postcolonial' (17); and that 'postcolonialism', or 'tricontinentalism', is a general name for these insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and *seek to change the terms and values under which we all live*' (20; emphasis added).

Ideologically, therefore, postcolonialism is a strategy that resists the political, economic, cultural and psychological processes that continue to reproduce the 'third world' conditions of poverty, exploitation, oppression, famine, and so on. It is an aggregate of procedures – literary and embodied, political and cultural, peaceful and violent, material and psychological (as exemplified perhaps by one of its foundational activists and theorists, Frantz Fanon) – which take the perspective of the marginalised and exploited peoples of the former European colonies and strive to counter, address, and redress the severe, deplorable and brutal conditions on which a majority of the world's population exists. It is more than a diagnosis of the culpability of imperialism; it is combative. It challenges those knowledges or regimes on which imperialism is founded and justified. Thus, despite the discursive scramble for inclusion in the 'postcolony' by metropolitan 'postcolonial critics' and imperial subjects, the postcolonial condition is not a celebratory one for those who are constrained to circulate within it.

African Theatre

Until recently, the perception of theatre had been fairly stable. It was conceived primarily in two senses. In the first instance, it described the literary genre drama or play, which represented actions through dialogue between fictional characters. In the second, it referred to a form of dramatic art that enacted or interpreted these literary texts involving two identifiable subject positions: an actor who impersonated a character through the execution of actions and speaking of the dialogue in the texts, and an audience who watched and listened to her/his performance. Of the two senses, the most dominant seems to be the literary. This is caused by the separation and veneration of literary and intellectual resources from, and over the sensuous or embodied. Significant shifts in the order of Western knowledge since the turn of the 20th century, and the growing influence of non-European cultures, have resulted in a radical refiguration of this classical notion of theatre. Mainly, the nature of this inquiry is the problematisation of theatre's relationship with the processes of the everyday; the instituted binaries on which mainstream theatre criticism is founded – actor/character, performance/audience, actor/audience, text/act, mind/body, and so on. The consequence is the breaking down of these conceptual boundaries by scholars and practitioners to accommodate practically every kind of engagement involving performer/s and an audience, thereby making theatre one of the most conceptually conflicted cultural category in contemporary literary and cultural thinking. The term has been further rocked by the regime of

interdisciplinarity that has come to dominate scholarly interest since the middle of the twentieth century. This has witnessed the discursive appropriation of the theatrical metaphor in the humanities and the social sciences. The character of this interdisciplinarity is a growing acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of knowledge as well as a greater appreciation of the significance of embodied processes over the literary or textual tradition, which dominated Western epistemology. For theatre studies, this condition has opened up the conventional frame to enable explorations of marginal cases, as well as initiate new perspectives on the canonical forms. Therefore, the dominant notion of theatre as literature has considerably budged to theatre as performance, and other forms of theatre, other than the dramatic, have come into contention. This condition has led to the emergence of 'performance' as a theatrical category or/and an alternative or independent discipline. In any case, it has led to what is obviously an attempt to contend with the limitations of the classical literary/dramatic model of theatre as well as the contemporary broader perspective signalled by the more current practice of conjoining both senses in much critical studies by adopting the compound term 'theatre and performance' or 'theatre/performance.' This new perspective has sponsored many categories of literary and cultural productions, which prioritise the material encounter or 'dialogue' between performers and an audience, in contexts that privilege the human body and its affective dimensions over the intellect and its cognitive resources.

Although the literary/dramatic sense continues to dominate critical perspectives, interest in theatre as performance has of late generated attention in African performances both from within and without. Thus, since the second half of the century, African theatre has attracted growing critical attention. In his book with Clive Wake, published over thirty years ago, Martin Banham suggests that '[i]t may, with some confidence, be claimed that theatre in Africa, today, is more positive, more *functional*, and more assertive than its counterpart in Europe and America. And it should be noted that the vigour of African theatre is not confined within buildings, but is free and flexible' (1976: 1). Why then is it that often, even under the broader and more fashionable category of 'theatre and performance' ('drama and theatre' or 'drama and performance') the very same dramatists as well as the plays Banham examined decades ago continue to dominate the discourse in African theatre? Why has criticism predominantly confined African theatre's vigour within conceptual and architectural buildings? The implication of this is that criticism has been unable to contend with, acknowledge or match this vigour and assertiveness that makes theatre easily the most prolific social and cultural engagement in Africa. While old forms continue to be re-visited in traditional and novel

ways, new forms, reflecting the vicarious changes in the African people's daily experiences, continue to be produced. However, these new forms are conspicuously elided in the discourse on postcolonial African theatre.

Banham acknowledges the diversity and immensity of performance forms that inhabit the world of contemporary African theatre, 'ranging from dance to storytelling, masquerade to communal festival, with a vibrant and generally more recent 'literary' and developmental theatre' (2004: xv). John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan identify a 'major pitfall of current African theatre criticism, namely its inordinate attention to literary drama and its stage realisation at the expense of the many non-scripted performative genres and events for which the continent is justly noted' (2004: 1-2). However, I see the major pitfalls in current African theatre criticism not mainly in this principal concern with drama but a disinterest in *current* African theatre and the predominance of an analytical regime that is more semiotic than visceral; more logo-centric than sensorial, and indeed, more conservative and reactionary than dynamic and radical. Hence, it is not so much the case that performances of literary drama are privileged in the criticism as that greater attention is given to certain established dramatists and plays in total neglect of what is happening in Africa *today*. And secondly, even when performances are investigated a textual rather than 'performance' paradigm is deployed, thereby disregarding the physical, sensorial, and embodied strategies which constitute 'performance', such as performers' bodily exertions, vocal texture, set, properties, costumes, sound, and performer/audience intercourse. Investigators predominantly search for 'meanings' or 'cultural texts' rather than the sensorial and affective dimensions of performances. For instance, the much touted functionality (religiosity or rituality) of indigenous African theatre elides what truly characterises African theatre. It is often the case, even in the so called 'ritual' behaviours, that *what* is performed is less important than *how* it is performed. This is a focus on the theatrical rather than the semantic or symbolic systems; a continuous search for more effective performance strategies; a continuous privileging of technical ingenuity or ways of making performances continuously refreshing for audiences who are often constrained to see them over and over again for many years. This guarantees that the repetitions of particular performances do not cloy or become unbearably boring. The focus on functionality or the so-called 'art-for-life's-sake' by many investigators of African performance gives the erroneous impression of a regime of rigorously policed and disembodied performance aesthetics. John Picton observes, for instance, that in the *eku* masquerade of the Ebira people of Nigeria, 'People remember the songs from year to year, and would soon jeer any performer who repeated himself from one

performance to another. That would be the end of his singing career'. (2002: 51) It is evident therefore that the repetition of certain performances over long periods makes both performers and audience privilege sensorial strategies, imaginative and technical genealogy, over meaning, function and symbolism; newness over antiquity.

Postcolonial African Theatre

In the context of African experience I suggest that the postcolonial be judged, firstly, in its rational sense of 'after' formal colonisation; and secondly, in its counter-discursive agenda of positioning a subaltern perspective. We have observed the persistence of colonial institutions in contemporary Africa and that postcolonialism does not strive to maintain, or merely to identify, but to unsettle these institutions and the conditions that they produce, such as hunger, misrule, poverty, illiteracy, natural and man-made disasters. Therefore, postcolonial African theatre ought to be theatre produced since flag independence, under the prevailing socio-political and economic conditions, which commits itself to challenging the unsavoury conditions that marginalise and de-humanise a majority of African peoples. This is a theatre produced under contemporary conditions of underdevelopment, engaging and contending with these conditions. Obviously, such theatres as those produced within the period described as 'post-independence' but under the enabling 'First World' conditions, or entrenching, defending, or simply representing the concerns of the bourgeois minority ought not be seen as *truly* postcolonial. Conteh-Morgan and Olaniyan (2004) submit that '[i]t will be simply impossible to understand major traditions of African drama and performance, especially contemporary scripted traditions, without adequate attention to this self-reflexive concern for their own *conditions of existence*' (3; emphasis added). They proceed to argue further that the 'broadly reformist, progressive orientation' of this theatre is a product of this social self-reflexivity ('an anxiety which afflicts all of postcolonial African literary production') brought upon by 'the unusual moment of birth of these cultural forms in which the imperative of a counter-discursive angst precedes that of self-exploration and apprehension' (4). Thus postcolonial African theatre addresses its conditions of existence, the social, economic and political contexts of its production. And it does not simply diagnose, represent or implicate the social inequities, but strives – ideologically and often materially – to survive them and effect a positive change – or at least argue the possibility of such a change. It is this concern of African theatre with the immediate conditions of its existence that Osofisan defends when he accuses 'postcolonial theory' of eliding, in its 'writing

back' framework, the actual conditions and concerns of production in the African 'postcolony'.

It can be inferred from the argument so far that the majority of what is described as 'contemporary' African theatre is postcolonial. And that postcolonial African theatre is produced by, and committed to changing the prevailing conditions of social inequity witnessed by the majority of African peoples. However, it is unfortunate that much of the theatres that are *truly* postcolonial are locked out of the 'buildings' that criticism erects and polices in the discourse both of 'contemporary' and 'postcolonial' African theatre. It would seem, therefore, that to be truly postcolonial, African theatre has to possess most, if not all, of the following credentials: it has to be produced within the temporal period *after* colonisation; it should be influenced by prevailing debilitating social reality; it should be positively concerned to survive and change this reality; and it should take the perspective of the majority of the marginalised population. Those that are not *truly* or at all postcolonial would be those that may be produced within the period but from a position of power; theatres that neither reflect nor adopt the perspective of the marginalised, and perhaps theatres that present positions, which further marginalise the majority or defend the status quo. Fortunately, this genus of theatres is largely uncommon in contemporary Nigeria.

Postcolonial Nigerian Theatre

There is more theatre in Nigeria today than other kinds of literature - I am not indifferent to the misleading co-option of oral forms into the literary in the invention of the term 'orature'. However, by 'literature' I strictly consign myself to the more conventional sense of 'written' expressions. These range from the indigenous oral forms, through the popular, to the literary. Many of these theatres are postcolonial not in the fashionable direct sense of 'resistance' to colonial infrastructure but often in appropriation, exploration, hybridisation, syncretisation or just problematisation of the colonial encounter and its enervating, and somewhat invisible, legacies. They do not endorse, in any programmatic manner, the 'writing-back' schema. Rather they seem to focus on the presiding problems of underdevelopment and cultural representation, and seem to identify both causes and solutions within prevailing economic, social and political systems in their communities rather than the West. For instance, many of these theatres, especially the popular and the literary, adopt a certain attitude to English language that cannot easily be described as *resisting*, but actually welcoming it, imaginatively modelling and remodelling its form from a perspective that not only centres the social

experience of contemporary Nigerians, empowers the language itself as well as the citizens that use it, but also vitalizes the expressive power of Nigerian theatre. Thus the strategy in this case is more of an appropriation and exploitation of the colonial heritage for the self-interest of Nigerians rather than resistance *per se*.

In contemporary Nigeria, especially in cosmopolitan centres like Lagos and in the numerous higher institutions, true postcolonial theatre is very much alive in all its various forms. Dances, musicals and dramas abound in purist and vigorous eclectic forms. Not only are the old literary and traditional forms being continuously re-visited, often from new perspectives, but also there is a lively interest in new plays and other forms of theatre. Practically all of these productions qualify as postcolonial for various reasons: they are ideologically skewed in the direction of the marginalized; most of them are produced under very difficult conditions of underdevelopment (economical, infrastructural, and so on); and they do not only thrive despite these difficulties but also display a latent and often conscious commitment to the rectification of these harsh conditions of existence. In the various Nigerian metropolises, such as Lagos, Ibadan and Abuja, there exist, a vast number of professional, semi-professional and amateur companies who produce various kinds of theatre. Unfortunately, much of the vigorous productions of this body of hard-working artists are 'unwritten' not only in the sense of being largely elided in the elitist discourse but also in the sense of not being published in print and therefore not easily analysable textually. What emerges is a picture of postcolonial theatre that is not representative either of 'postcolonial' or 'theatre;' a picture that is blind to contemporary material realities of the 'postcolony'. These practitioners have created, and continue to create telling and widely acknowledged theatrical forms and narratives, and demonstrated their absolutely unpretentious and unprogram–matic syncretist and popular traditions. Although working somewhat within the Western paradigm, most of these practitioners continuously incorporate indigenous and popular forms of performance, and often engage with social and political critique. Their angst is certainly not cultural marginalisation by a superintending Western narrative but survival in the profession and in the society. Examples of only a few of the most visible of these companies include Ijodee Dance Centre and Crown Troupe of Africa, both in Lagos, and Jos Repertory Theatre in Jos. In several respects, these three are representative of the different techniques, interests and forms of postcolonial or contemporary Nigerian theatre.

Ijodee Dance Centre is a Lagos based professional dance company with a standing troupe founded in 1999 by one of Nigeria's most talented

choreographers and dancers living and working in the country today, Adedayo M. Liadi. As a graduate of the International School for Dance and Choreography, Ecole Des Sable, in Senegal, Liadi is one of the few Nigerian dancer/choreographers with a specialised professional training in dance, unlike most others who possess a more general training in the performing arts. This specialisation is evidenced by the largely purist and non-literal dance technique of Ijodee. With a number of award-winning productions, both national and international, Ijodee is an African contemporary dance company with an eclectic technique that witnesses the fusion of indigenous African, basically Nigerian, with other dance forms, especially modern and contemporary Western dance techniques. Amongst their numerous productions that have gained international commendation is *Ori*, a 35-minute dance piece that emerged first prize winner in the 5th African/Indian Ocean Dance competition in Madagascar in 2003. This particular production has had a very successful tour of over ten countries in Europe, Africa, South America and the United States. In a review of one of the performances at The Place in London, on 10th November 2004, the dance critic, Thea Nerissa Barnes, locates the work within the general tradition of contemporary dance marked by 'the desire to cultivate vocabularies for each dance work individually as opposed to inventing an individual language to build all of their works,' with a movement vernacular obviously articulated 'from studying a variety of techniques from traditional African forms to ballet to the varied contemporary techniques, body therapies and culturally specific practices' (*Ballet-Dance Magazine* 2004). Through most of his works, Liadi visibly references his entire experience as a dancer who has received training in a variety of dance techniques. Beyond this, however, he displays a profound anchorage in his physical and social reality, a contemporary 'post-colonial' landscape plagued by insufficiency, anguish, frustration, anger, and so on. These themes come through not necessarily in a literal sense, since most of his compositions are non-literal or abstract, but in the sheer texture of sounds, shapes and movements; a sharp, ascetic, tortuous, sometimes discordant and erratic vocabulary that constitutes an apt signifier of the anxieties that inundate the socio-political terrain of his immediate Nigerian society.

Ijodee Dance Centre hosts an annual international festival for solo/duo performances tagged Trufesta, which has featured distinguished performances by groups and individuals from around the world. Apart from performing for audiences in a number of Nigerian cities, such as Lagos, Ibadan and Ilorin, participating individuals and groups also hold workshops with students and select members of the public on dance and choreographic principles and techniques. Its latest and fourth edition,

tagged TRUFESTA 09, held for eight days (from 1st to 8th November, 2009) and featured guest performers from Cameroon, Kenya, Republic of Benin, Ghana, Senegal, Australia, India, Nigeria, South Africa, Germany, Canada and Burkina Faso.

Ijodee's performance technique differs remarkably from that of Crown Troupe of Africa (CTA), another accomplished and award-winning dance theatre company founded in 1996 by Segun Adefila, also based in Lagos. With a BA degree in Performing Arts from the University of Lagos, Adefila's composite technique seems to be largely informed by his rounded exposure to all the arts of performance. Although also 'contemporary' in its eclectic approach to creativity and its versatility, the troupe is more literal and narrative, creating mostly performances which can best be described as 'dance-dramas'. While Ijodee can be described as purist, CTA is more affiliative, adopting a generic openness, which witnesses an ingenious deployment of every available theatrical resource, such as dialogue, song, music, costume, poetry, set and mimesis. Their debt to indigenous performance forms is not only evidenced by their 'total theatre' framework but also by the rhythmic intensity of their movement and drumming. Crown Troupe utilises a less individualistic and experimental technique, obviously in conformity with its political, community-centred prerogative. Hence, the company deploys a more literal/narrative framework in productions that are conceptually less experimental but more grounded in social and material reality, often with an accessible thematic concern or socially-conscious message. Although the troupe can be described as a relatively successful company, having won national prizes and awards, with performances and workshops in Europe, and many national commissions, their journey this far was only made on a most challenging and even suicidal terrain; one accomplished only through doggedness, selflessness and passionate determination to survive against all odds. One experience that demonstrates *only* one such 'odds' against the troupe was in August 1999 when it was forced to perform on the open street because they arrived at the scheduled venue only to discover to their chagrin that the management would not let them in because of a misunderstanding arising from their failure to make a full payment of a scheduled booking fee. As if that was not enough, they had no access to their costumes, drums, and other theatrical resources, because they were locked up in the theatre where they had performed the night before. Highlighting the troupe's financial and technical impoverishment after the street performance, Segun Adefila said: 'Our girls do not want to go into prostitution. We guys do not want to join secret cults. We need help.' (Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, 1999: 28) Today the story is reasonably different not because they received much of the needed help

from any institutional or corporate body, but because of their individual tenacity and self-sacrifice.

Crown Troupe engages in imaginative re-interpretations or revisions of drama texts into its characteristic dance-theatre format, as well as original devised works based on common myths and legends. However, the company's most notable performances are devised works visibly informed by material everyday difficulties that the average Nigerian goes through, especially in the city of Lagos. On the practice of mirroring his troubled society, Adefila claims that they do not create their performances; rather 'it is the society that writes our plays for us' (in Shobowale Alder, 2006:20). For instance, one of its creations titled *Exodus*, which premiered in 2002, focuses on the negative effects of the mass migration of Nigerians to Europe and America. In addition, it chronicles the ubiquitous difficulties the average city dweller faces everyday: massive unemployment which drives the youths into unwholesome engagements such as armed robbery, prostitution and exile; the total absence of such essential utilities as transportation, electricity, water and housing; poverty and its entourage of difficulties such as illiteracy, hunger, disease and child abuse. With its minimalist or 'poor theatre' technique, obviously determined by its focus on the making of performances that are adaptable to every kind of performance space, the troupe relies strongly on symbolism and the human body. Between 2006 and 2009 Crown Troupe engaged in an itinerant community theatre project tagged 'bukARTeria'. Today the troupe has devoted even greater commitment to community theatre, devising 'mobile' works suitable for open-air spaces as well as for conventional indoor environments.

Jos Repertory Theatre (JRT) is not only distinguished from Ijodee and Crown Troupe in its bias for conventional drama, it is also located in Jos, far away from the city of Lagos, which is considered the 'nerve centre' of live entertainment in Nigeria. Founded in 1997 by an experienced theatre producer and administrator, Patrick-Jude Oteh, with a string of academic degrees – a Diploma, Bachelor's and Masters' degrees in Theatre Arts from the University of Ibadan, and another Masters' in International Law and Diplomacy from the University of Jos – JRT is visibly more organised and empowered than Ijodee and Crown Troupe. However, like all the others, the first few years of its existence were very challenging. It started by staging productions of recommended plays on the West African Examinations Council's (WAEC) literature syllabuses around Secondary Schools in Plateau State and its neighbourhood. Its major breakthrough came when it attracted the attention of Ford Foundation whose initial grant of $22,000 enabled it to procure minimal furniture, pay the salary of its four-member staff, and undertake Theatre for Development (TfD)

projects in a few states in Northern Nigeria. Its pallet comprises, in addition to schools outreach projects and TfD productions, a wide range of conventional Western and African dramas. Within the past ten years, J. R. T. has had a few high-brow outings. It participated in the Music Society of Nigeria's (MUSON) festival in 2000 with Wale Ogunyemi's *Queen Amina of Zazzau*; All Africa Games (COJA) in Abuja in 2003 with Yahaya Dangana's *The Royal Chamber*; a British Council co-production of a devised work 'Our House' which toured the UK in July 2005. Although JRT has enjoyed the patronage of such organizations and institutions as The British Council, Association of Nigerian Authors and United African Company (UAC), its most generous supporter remains the Ford Foundation. Currently JRT convenes the annual Jos Festival of Theatre, which is growing into a formidable festival of contemporary theatre and performance in Nigeria.

Within its relatively short period of existence, Jos Repertory Theatre has had a record number of productions and overseas engagements. With over fifty productions in thirteen years JRT does look like the most productive professional theatre company in Nigeria today, perhaps very well along the track of its vision '[t]o be the most successful and longest surviving private, independent theatre organisation in Nigeria' (*Jos Repertory Theatre 2000-2009*, nd: 1).

Conclusion

Every analytical category is relevant as far as it is able to include and exclude certain forms, moments or traditions in/from its critical cartography. The reasonable failure of postcolonial theory in this critical engagement has prompted many scholars to recommend the abandonment of the critical model. In fact, many African scholars whose colonial and postcolonial experiences the term purports to accommodate would be glad to be rid of it. It seems to fall into the category of those critical postures that wearied Achebe even in 1962, long before the birth of postcolonial theory; those 'special types of criticism which have been designed for us by people whose knowledge of us is very limited' (62). However, considering the theory's unprecedented stature, especially in North American and European institutions, and its enthusiastic reception by a number of African scholars in a habit also described by Achebe as 'a facility to tag on to whatever the metropolis says is the latest movement' (2000: 81-82), it seems very likely that the term is going to be with us a while longer. Consequently, I suppose the best option, which is now being stressed by sundry scholars, is to underscore the peculiarities within those identities that are commonly conflated under the term, and

perhaps arrive at 'postcolonial theories'; each national identity articulating its own peculiar 'postcoloniality' the way many feminist scholars now posit 'feminisms' in order to accommodate the peculiar identities of women in different parts of the world.

The postcolonial Nigerian subject is not the sort that is searching perennially and painstakingly for the chameleonic hand of imperialism or colonial presence in every aspect of existence, the sort that proclaims, and even celebrates, its postcoloniality. It is not the well-fed African academic, permanently domiciled in comfortable Western institutions, marketing alterity and waging a War of Identity in/against the 'centre', even as s/he has already somewhat become 'centred.' For the postcolonial Nigerian, a 'crisis' of representation or identity is not implicated in the human, environmental and infrastructural problems in the oil-rich Niger Delta, and in the expansive slums that frame and punctuate the affluent landscapes of Victoria Island and Ikoyi in Lagos. It is certainly not an issue in the incessant ethnic-, political- and religious-centred tragic conflicts in various parts of the country; the pathological looting of national treasuries by politicians; and the oppression of the citizenry under the most insensitive democratic dictatorships. Since practically every postcolonial critic invokes the words, sentiment, and ideology of Frantz Fanon who underscored the liberation of the suffering masses in the 'Third World', there certainly are a lot of practical blind spots which postcolonial theory needs to contend with. Perhaps until these difficulties are resolved, the theory's putative social and political imperatives would continue to be for many African theatre scholars and practitioners, as it is for Osofisan, 'a battle with which, naturally, I am in sympathy. But if I may confess, it is a battle not my own' (1999: 1).

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