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Biodun Jeyifo. *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*. Lagos: Department of Culture, Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth, Sports and Culture, 1984. xi + 213 pp.¹

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Biodun Jeyifo's *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* remains one of the most consequential interventions in African theatre scholarship. More than a historical account, it offers a methodological blueprint for studying popular performance as a modern, organised, and intellectually serious cultural practice. At a moment when African performance studies increasingly grapple with questions of labour, mobility, media transformation, and the politics of cultural production, Jeyifo's work retains a striking contemporary resonance. Its enduring value lies not only in the breadth of its documentation but in the analytical discipline with which it treats the travelling theatre as a dynamic cultural institution shaped by social change, artistic innovation, and audience agency.

The book is grounded in extensive fieldwork. Jeyifo travelled widely, observed performances across multiple regions, conducted interviews with practitioners, and compiled records of more than one hundred troupes. This empirical foundation distinguishes the study from earlier accounts that relied on anecdote or impressionistic

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description. As he notes in the preface, his engagement with the theatre tradition began in Ibadan and Ile-Ife, and while this personal history is acknowledged, it never overwhelms the scholarly purpose. Instead, it clarifies the intellectual stakes of the enquiry and the conditions under which knowledge was produced.

The eight-chapter structure reflects a deliberate and cumulative argument. Chapter One, 'Perspectives', resists reductive classifications of the travelling theatre as folklore or mere entertainment. Jeyifo situates it firmly within modern cultural production, shaped by urbanisation, mobility, and the demands of expanding popular audiences. Chapter Two, 'The Performance', advances a methodological position that remains foundational for African performance studies: performance, rather than dramatic text, is the primary site of meaning. Acting, music, movement, spectacle, and audience interaction are treated as constitutive elements of theatrical signification. This insistence on performance as evidence anticipates later theoretical developments in African theatre scholarship, including Karin Barber's work on popular culture and Margaret Drewal's emphasis on embodied knowledge.

Chapter Three provides the historical foundation of the study. Jeyifo reconstructs the emergence of the travelling theatre with attention to continuity and transformation, demonstrating how inherited forms were reconfigured within changing social and economic conditions. The theatre appears not as a static cultural residue but as a modern response to mobility, urban growth, and the aspirations of a heterogeneous audience base. This historical clarity prevents romanticisation and situates the form within a discernible trajectory of development.

Chapters Four and Five extend the analysis to the operational and organisational dimensions of the theatre. Touring circuits, company structures, repertory systems, and modes of production are examined with a level of detail that remains unmatched in the literature. These chapters are particularly significant for theatre management and production studies. Jeyifo demonstrates that the sustainability of the travelling theatre depended on disciplined coordination, resource management, and adaptive scheduling. In

doing so, he anticipates later discussions of labour, logistics, and institutional practice in performance studies.

Chapter Six, 'The Dramas of the Troupes', addresses the dramatic corpus without isolating it from performance conditions. Jeyifo reads the plays as products of troupe practice, audience expectation, and performative convention. This approach is crucial. It situates the published works of practitioners such as Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola within the living economy of performance, rather than treating them as autonomous literary artefacts. The analysis preserves the relation between text and enactment, a relation central to understanding Yoruba theatre practice.

Chapter Seven, 'The Social Impact and Uses of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre', extends the enquiry to function and reception. The theatre is shown to operate as a medium of public instruction, cultural affirmation, entertainment, and social commentary. Audiences emerge not as passive consumers but as active participants in a shared cultural process. Jeyifo underscores the theatre's capacity to mediate between tradition and change, articulate collective values, and respond to the aspirations of its social base. The concluding chapter consolidates the argument, while the appendices — interviews, scenarios, and a detailed listing of troupes — significantly enhance the book's archival value.

One of the most enduring contributions of the study is its refusal to subordinate popular theatre to elite literary standards. Jeyifo treats the travelling theatre as a modern, organised, and intellectually significant form, thereby establishing a methodological model for the study of African performance traditions. His Marxist-inflected attention to labour, class, and cultural production situates the work within a broader intellectual tradition that includes scholars such as Adedeji, Barber, and later, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, whose analyses of video film and popular media extend the questions Jeyifo raises. Although the book predates the rise of Nollywood and digital performance cultures, this temporal limitation does not diminish its value. Rather, it secures its status as a foundational historical record, capturing the travelling theatre at a moment when its structures and practices were still fully operational.

In conclusion, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* stands as a landmark in African theatre scholarship. Its empirical depth, analytical clarity, and structural coherence render it indispensable for scholars of African theatre, performance studies, and cultural history. More importantly, it models a mode of scholarship that is attentive to performance, grounded in field research, and committed to the documentation of cultural practice. Any serious engagement with Yoruba theatre, or with the study of popular performance in Africa, must begin with Jeyifo's work.