Yorùbá Theatre in Crisis: Death or Transition?

ORÚBÁ THEATRE TODAY is in crisis, and one of the aims of this article is to present some of my own personal reflections, as an active practitioner, about this crisis, as well as about its possible implications. But first, what do I mean by “Yorùbá theatre”?

What is ‘Yorùbá theatre’?

The fact that I have to ask the question at all is of course already an indication of some semantic unease. When one talks, for instance, of “French Theatre,” there is no ambiguity. The spontaneous assumption is that one is speaking of the theatre that is written and performed in French. Similarly for a term like “German Theatre.” But not, however, for “Yorùbá theatre.” Here the meaning has been split by history into multiple, problematic significations.

Yorùbá theatre refers to the theatre in Yorùbá, but not to this alone. It also embraces drama that takes place in English, and sometimes even, in French and Portuguese. It refers equally to all the drama written by Yorùbá drama-

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1 Some of the arguments pursued in this essay have also been mentioned in my paper “Is the Theatre Dying in Africa?,” published as “Stirbt das Theater in Afrika? Überlegungen aus nietzianischer Perspektive” in Kreatives Afrika, ed. Susan Arndt & Katrin Berndt (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 2005): 35–51.
tists, and showing a demonstrably Yorùbá world-view, no matter what lan-
guage it is performed in, but which is not necessarily intended for an exclu-
sively Yorùbá-speaking audience.

In fact, this problem of definition has long haunted the territory in critical
discourse, particularly for scholars trying to apply Cartesian delineations to
categorize the various manifestations of theatre among the Yorùbá community.
Yet, as far as I am concerned, this problem can be solved by a common-sense
approach of simply dividing all these activities into two broad categories (as
Dotun Ogundeji\textsuperscript{2} did) – namely, the oral, unscripted tradition on the one hand
and, on the other, the written, \textit{pre-scripted\textsuperscript{3}} one. The first category would then
be called the \textit{“Yorùbá oral drama”} – embracing, that is, the so-called \textit{‘popular’ theatre} – while the second would be called the \textit{“written Yorùbá drama.”}
Once this is accepted, then each of these two categories would again be fur-
ther divided into two sub-categories, with the Yorùbá oral drama embracing,
first, the traditional repertory of festivals, masquerades and quasi-religious
rituals, and then, secondly, the recent urban theatres, also known as the Yorù-
bá popular travelling theatre.\textsuperscript{4} The pre-scripted tradition, on the other hand,
would also be split into, first, the plays written in, or translated into Yorùbá,
and then, secondly, the plays written in English (or, rather, \textit{“Yorubenglish,”} as
in Dapo Adelugba\textsuperscript{5}), but carrying a Yorùbá perspective, plays that, for want
of a convenient term, we may refer to here as anglophone Yorùbá theatre.
The interest of all this to scholars is that, until quite recently, Yorùbá
theatre was perhaps the most vibrant on the African continent. Dramatic acti-
vity in all the outlined categories flourished among the Yorùbá communities,
whether in their home base in the southwestern Nigeria, or in their \textquoteleft‘diasporic’
settlements in several other towns in Nigeria itself or in neighbouring coun-
tries such as the Benin Republic, Togo or Ghana.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[2] Philip Adedotun Ogundeji, \textit{“A Semiotic Study of Duro Ladipo’s Plays”} (doctoral dis-
sertation, University of Ibadan, 1988).
\item[3] Ogundeji’s terms are \textit{“scripted”} and \textit{“unscripted.”} But I believe that it is neater to say
\textit{“pre-scripted”} here instead of just \textit{“scripted,”} because, as he himself acknowledges, some of
the previously unscripted plays later come to be scripted, which would then create some
confusion with the categories. But \textit{“pre-scripted”} would definitely stand for the plays
written \textit{before} performance. Also, as will become evident, I do not accept Ogundeji’s ex-
clusion of plays written in English.
\item[4] Biodun Jeyifo, \textit{The Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Nigeria} (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine,
1984).
\item[5] Ademola Dasylva, \textit{Dapo Adelugba on Theatre Practice in Nigeria} (Ibadan: Ibadan
Cultural Studies Group, 2003).
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