

IRENE SALAMI - AGUNLOYE



AFRICAN WOMEN

DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE



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“ We really need to understand how the very positive pro-active role women played in pre-colonial society was subverted, sub-subsumed and reconfigured through the male gender. When did this happen? How did it happen? How do we reclaim women from the penchant of the Freudian slight and organised intellectual second fiddling? ”



AFRICAN WOMEN

DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE

Edited by

IRENE SALAMI - AGUNLOYE

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The Roles of Women in the Yoruba Popular Theatre

AbdulRasheed Abiodun Adeoye

Introduction

The theatre, which celebrates the totality of human essence and existence, was historically an exclusive profession for men. R.A. Banks in his famous book, *Drama and Theatre Arts* supports this assertion through his historical reflections on the Greek theatre:

The leader the first of whom probably Thespis who often took several parts in a play and distinguished himself in dramatic masks; the invention of which is ascribed to him stood at the centre of the 'orchestra', on the thymele or altar. All the actors and members of the Chorus were men; women never performed in the Greek theatre (Banks, 1985: 19).

Relatively as well, "the Medieval Theatre (c. 950-1500) began in churches with Latin playlets performed by priests" (Barranger, 1995: 32). The roles of women in the Roman theatre were also minimal. Men also wore masks to represent women during the formative years of the Elizabethan theatre.

Presently, and except for specific experimentation, the western theatre is a unisex and non-gender-specific profession where every member of that society has the freedom to practice the theatre.

African men are essentially dictatorial, domineering and gender insensitive in most of their social lives. Women are therefore seen as objects of sex and symbols to be permanently subjugated and enslaved. Yoruba women also share from these male egocentric manifestations. There are therefore, some specific functions and professions that are historically within the purview of the African man nay, the Yoruba man. One of these professions is the theatre profession.

Interestingly, various historical documents have shown that Yoruba women were not initially given specific roles to play in the dialectical performative kernels of the famous Alarinjo Travelling Theatre which 'Ologbin Ologbojo' founded and which 'Esa ogbin' popularised and professionalised. The formative accounts of the Alarinjo Travelling Theatre show that:

There were six stock-characters, each representing a councillor; the hunchback (Basorun), the albino (Alapinni), the leper (Asipa), the prognathus (Samu), the dwarf (Laguna) and the cripple (Akiniku) (Adedeji; 1981: 222).

These characters were men and the failure of their adventure to thwart the will of the then king of the old Oyo Kingdom, Oba Alafin Ogbolu led to the formation of the "Ghost-

Mummers" and their final capture by the "Ghost-Catcher" by J.A. Adedeji. There is no female character or actor between the "Ghost-Mummers" and the "Ghost-Catcher" and this has a sociological and spiritual link to the very essence of the Yoruba worldview. Simply put, the Alarinjo Travelling Theatre which majority of the Yoruba popular travelling theatre troupes and even their modern dramatists depend on grew from the 'Egungun cult' and the well advertised popular Egungun masquerade festivals which spread across all the Yoruba-speaking towns and cities.

In the very formative years of the Yoruba nation, most of the secret societies in the nation were the exclusive preserve of the men to the detriment of the women. An adage in Yoruba land even supports this exclusivist inclination, "Obinrin ko nínú à kó òrò sí" which literally means that "women cannot keep secret", as such the secret of the cults were then the preserve of the men who must provide security for their women. This observation did not foreclose the fact that there were and are still some specific secret societies that were and are still predominantly dominated by women. The example of this is the society of witchcraft.

Since the Egungun cult has been demystified, it has thus become a plaything for men and women. Sunny Ade, a popular Yoruba musician once sang that:

Awo Egúngún lobinrin lè se
Awo gèlèdé lobinrin lè wò
Bóbinrin bá fojú kan orò
Orò á gbé

It is only the Egungun society that the women can join. They can also watch gelede masque performing. But women who watch Oro (a specific secret cult) will pay the supreme sacrifice.

The demystification of the Egungun cult by the Yoruba women has not in anyway affected the mystification of the Oro cult and this also affirms the reality of keeping some secret out of the reach of the average Yoruba women.

Samuel Johnson in *The History of the Yorubas* reviewed the trades and professions of the Yorubas and concluded "music is a favourite pastime and gives occupation to many, both men and boys" (Johnson: 1976: 120). Johnson's conclusion sees the male gender as mostly concerned with the theatricalization of music in Yoruba land of yore.

The historical, political, social and domestic patterns of the Yoruba people also make the theatre an art basically meant for ceremonies. The theatres are used in ceremonies such as religious worship, coronation, marriage, naming, burial and transition ceremonies. All these ceremonies are built into the sociological worldview of the Yorubas, which is predominantly dominated by men. Professionalism in the Yoruba popular travelling theatre began to take shape after the theatrical exploit of "Esa Ogbin" of the Alarinjo Travelling Theatre fame.

Conceptual Clarification

Popular theatre all over the world is a denominational theatre of mass appeal. Its taxonomy of sociopolitical, economic, moral, religious and cultural reflections makes it an accepted theatre of the majority in a given ethno-traditional society although its tentacles often spread to neighbouring societies.

Popular theatre according to Obafemi (1991:1) "is a theatre of grassroots, popular awareness, mobilization and concretization. It is a theatre of organized and mass sectors of society-peasants, lumpen and urban 'proletariat' and marginanized people..." Biodun Jeyifo also sees the popular tradition as:

Tradition of strolling, itinerant players, mountebanks, jugglers, acrobats and mummery, is ephemeral and evanescent, even if it is often robust, vital and professionally disciplined (Jeyifo, 1979: 127).

The Yoruba popular theatre is the ethnic popular theatre of the Yoruba people where almost all their social idiosyncrasies are embedded into theatrical performances. It has always been a theatre of the moment for it is a mouthpiece of the people and the historicities of the past are also materials for its theatricalization. Relatively:

The Yoruba Travelling Theatre is considered by many studies as the first manifestation of modern trends in traditional Nigeria theatre (Gumucio-Dagron, 1994: 73)

Conceptually, the Yoruba Popular Theatre:

1. Is a form of drama where the plays are not scripted, remaining therefore largely improvised (Gumucio-Dagron, Ibid.).
2. In general, is a didactic one. Its aim is to instruct and inform as well as to entertain (Clark, 1979: 97).

The basic theoretical premise of this study then is that the contemporary Yoruba Travelling Theatre is first and foremost a popular cultural expression; its theatrical and dramatic expressions can best be comprehended in the light of the popular provenience of its production and reception (Jeyifo, 1984: 3).

Generally speaking, the Yoruba popular travelling theatre of Nigeria is the:

...most vigorous, widely popular and thriving theatre traditions in modern Africa, comparable only to such contemporary popular theatre expressions of the continent as the Concert Party Theatre of Ghana and the Hira-Gasy Troupes of the Malagasy Republic (Ibid: 1).

The Yorubas, being predominantly cosmopolitan through early contact with western education are naturally social and this social tendency invariably make them to see the theatre as one of the social institutions to further express themselves and the very essence of their worldview. The Yoruba popular theatre tradition therefore basically represents the expressive and the re-creative trends of the best of the Yoruba culture and all conceptual reflections must necessarily see the popular Yoruba theatre tradition as the generally accepted theatrical aesthetics that celebrate the totality of the Yoruba way of life.

The Roles of Women

We strongly believe that feminism, especially the one coloured in African garbs is fustian

and quite anti-culture and anti-African. This however is not to label this researcher as anti-feminist. The desire here is to see that the enviable role of women in Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre performances cannot go unnoticed.

The story of the exponent of the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre, the late Hubert Ogunde is incomplete without the appreciation of the performance essence of women in Ogunde's theatre profession. Egun Clark recalled the first advertisement put up by Hubert Ogunde in 1945, which read thus:

WANTED

30 CHARMING YOUNG LADIES AS PAID ACTRESSES

of

The African Music Research Party. Monthly salaries according to ability. Appointment to start 1 January, 1946. Apply in person between TODAY and THURSDAY December 20, 1945 between 7.a.m. 10.a.m and 5.30p.m. 6.30 p.m.

To

Hubert Ogunde
88 Cemetery Street
Ebute-Metta (Clark, 1979: 3)

This rare advert negated the mood of the moment as even men who engaged in the theatre then were seen as never-do-well. To then further demystify the dignity of womanhood by calling them to join the theatre profession was an insult taken too far.

In summary, Ogunde changed his style and another advert read "10 CHARMING YOUNG GIRLS AS Lady Clerks wanted". Clark concluded that "the response was overwhelming" to the last advertisement and that was how Hubert Ogunde paid a price of becoming an unwilling polygamist, a negation of his Christian faith.

Interestingly, Ogunde's women became central figures in the making of the Ogunde Theatre. They performed the following functions:

1. Dancers who were mostly useful in Ogunde's opening glee (Ijuba) and the closing glee and also during dance drama performances.
2. Singers in almost all Hubert Ogunde's performances.
3. Significantly also, they were leading figures in Ogunde's performances with romantic, political and religious themes such as "The Garden of Eden", "My Darling Fatima", "Eden", "The Throne of God", "King Solomon", "Half and Half", and so on.
4. Above all, they matched the rigours and rituals of the domestic chores as wives to the ethics and values of a growing professional theatre company, which was then "a family business".

Adeshewa Ogunde, Ibisomi Ogunde, Beatrice Oyede, Abike Taiwo, Rosaline Daibo, Grace Okenedo and many other women contributed significantly to the Hubert Ogunde Theatre. Ogunde's love for women informed (not as a womanizer though) the production of a dance drama entitled Oh Ogunde! through his Ogunde Dance Company in 1969. This performance celebrates the performance essence of the Yoruba women in the famous Yoruba Travelling Theatre Tradition. As a core African polygamist, the following picture culled from Egun Clark's classic book; Hubert Ogunde: the Making of Nigerian Theatre speaks volumes of his appreciation of the roles of women in his theatre

company. They essentially served as his workers (artists) and wives.

This master-artist himself defended his decision to go into polygamy:

Now I was able to get some boys, but I was unlucky with the girls. And so... I remembered the tradition back home- polygamy is the answer! So I had to keep the girls as wives in order to keep going on (Jeyifo, 1984: 81)

He equally sees this style as the "traditional technique of management" where every member of the family is involved.

The Nigerian theatre profession started as a profession for men and Ogunde's voyage into accepting the theatrical essence of women also finds defence in Jeyifo's opinion when he succinctly observes that:

The disdain for a career in the theatre of course was most strongly expressed with regard to women and Ogunde's famous expedient of marrying most of his actresses to keep within the troupe – a tactic that has caught on with the most of the other founder-leaders of the movement. (Ibid, 1984: 52-3)

Jeyifo's documentary account showed that there are numerous Travelling Theatre Movements in the entire Yoruba speaking area of the South Western Nigeria. Out of a list of 115 Popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre Troupes that he documented, "Only two troupes are led by women: the Lady Funmilayo Ranko Theatre... and the Mojisola Martins Theatre".

This researcher had the opportunity of watching the stage performances of Funmilayo Ranko Theatre Group (based at Ilesha in the then Oyo State) live, in the early 80s. What interested this researcher about the founder of this theatre was the physical and theatrical attributes of this woman. I was a secondary school student always willing to get involved even if informally in social activities at the Agbeye Community High School, Agbeye – Osogbo. A friend of mine, Idowu M.B. usually wore various masks to dance round the town for massive publicity for the Theatre Group, and on top of a moving vehicle where heavy drumming and chanting often set the town glowing. One of the chants goes thus:

Funmilayo Funmilayo Ranko (2ce)
Ìyèrú Òkín Omo Iléshà,
Epe Ránkò!

Literally, it means that:

Funmilayo Funmilayo Ranko (2ce)
The blessed peacock daughter of Ilesha
Shout Ranko!

This 'call' often makes Funmilayo Ranko herself to jump down from a moving vehicle and acrobatic dances then became the next dramatic enactment. She was tall, stoutly built and of light complexion, athletic, active and always in total control of her repertory theatre. She was indeed "the first Nigerian Super Star Lady 'Actor' ". Her manly qualities

did not make her an actress and describing her as an 'actor' was very correct.

In an interview conducted with Biodun Jeyifo, Funmilayo Ranko recounted her theatrical exploits:

We have produced plays such as "Igbo Oro" ("The Forbidden Bush"). That was our very first production. After it came others like "Ese Obinrin". ("A Woman's Ways"). "Ebu Ika" ("The Harvest of Malice"). "Ika a Ponika" ("Evil attends Evil"). For some time now, we've stopped production of plays of Folkloric or traditional inspiration; we have shifted to themes relevant to contemporary society. Some of such plays are "Akada" ("Acada") "Afro", "Gongo so" ("A Wondrous Affair"), "Omòokú Òrun" ("Spite"). We are currently at work on a new play titled "Ta l'ó jebi?" ("Who's to Blame") (Ibid: 170)

At school then, no advert was needed and most of her attempts to address us before production were usually disrupted by over-joyous students whose main intentions among others were to touch her and see her performing. These famous theatre practitioners 'founded her troupe in 1968' and was reputed to have toured major cities in Yoruba land, parts of the Northern and Eastern Nigeria.

Adeyemi Josaiah Afolayan the founder of Ade Love Theatre Group was another Popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre Troupe leader who married eleven wives and he also sees acting with most of his wives as cost effective. He has produced "plays like orí olóri, Móràmo, Ògá Benjamini, Nkan mi ni and many more". This theatre group metamorphosed into Ade Love Films in July, 1975 with Ìjà Ominira as the first flip. One of the Late dramatist's son Adetayo Afolayan, a final year student in the department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin observes that, "women played significant roles in my father's theatre organization. Some of these women came through the plays, others are unmarried ladies and the urge to marry a popular artist by women and ladies alike also made my father a polygamist. They (the women) all saw the theatre organization as a family business".

The role of Grace Oyin Adejobi one of the wives of the late (Dr) Oyin Adejobi of the famous Oyin Adejobi Theatre Group is also crucial here. Oyin Adejobi Theatre Group was founded in 1955 with Paradise Lust as their first stage performance which was performed the same year the Group was founded.

This theatre group produced many plays such as, Kóòtù Asípa, Orogun Adedigba, Kúyè, Èkùró olójà and so on. Grace Oyin Adejobi has acted in numerous sensational "Yoruba plays like; Kòtò Ayé, Eran Ìyá Òsogbo, Alága Council, Alaga Council, Ahan, Afonja and many others".

Like most of his co-travellers in the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre Movement, the late Oyin Adejobi married five wives. The interesting thing about this dimension is that, Grace Adejobi married more wives for her husband. She justifies her position and that of her husband in an interview she had with Tope Abiola of the Nigerian Tribune:

It was not in his interest to marry many wives. I encouraged him to marry more wives together with me, because of our work (theatre). The problem was that in those days, nobody would want her female child to go into theatre. If we co-opted them, their parents would come and take them at the peak of the rehearsals. This affected female

members who could sing, dance and act very well. That was why I encouraged him to marry more wives and we have since lived in peace and harmony without any crisis... (Abiola, 2002: 20).

This singular and all important action has rubbished a pro-feminist Yoruba adage that goes thus: "Òrìsà jé n pé méjì obìnrin ò dènú", which literally means that "a prayer of a woman to the god for her husband to marry another woman is a fake".

Women's wonderful performances in almost all the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre Troupes cannot be over-emphasized. They are the dancers in the front of the drummers without whom the functionality of the drummers would cease. And beyond their theatrical roles in the Yoruba traditional ceremonies such as marriage, burial, naming and transition/initiation, they also performed numerous roles to make the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre unique both as family members, dancers, singers, choristers, musicians, actresses and instrumentalists. Some of them even have deserved stage names for their theatrical exploits; Abiodun Ladipo – "Oya", Aduke George – "Iya Sala", Ibisomi Ogunde – "De Madam" and Grace Adejobi – "Iya Osogbo". Theirs was and is the story of a few African women who are committed, loyal, hardworking and brainy.

A Cul-De-Sac

This is a digression and indeed an important one, for one noticeable development in the Nigerian modern theatre practice is the general acceptance of the celluloid and the Home-Video bug. This trend therefore has practically put to a stop the thriving tradition of the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre. Almost all noticeable and known Yoruba Popular Theatre founders and practitioners have abandoned the live theatre for the cinematic tradition. For instance, Jide Kosoko Theatre, Eda Theatre, Ajileye Theatre, Baba Sala Theatre Group and many more are now active participants in the cinematic theatre tradition, a reality of the capitalist economy where the spirit of individualism usually triumphs over that of collectivism.

With this development, the bubbling, dancing, singing and so on occasioned with live theatre, are now massively hidden inside a box television. This unhelpful scenario is perhaps being revived through the community theatre practice and live theatres in the citadel of learning. One only hopes that the theatres in our higher institutions too should see "travelling" as a necessarily ingredient for cross-cultural fraternization and theatrical revivals.

Conclusion

The past must necessarily inform the future and a direction or misdirection of the past is also an evolutionary trend in the growth and development of institutions one of which is the theatre. In this theatrical reflection on the role of women in the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre performances we have shown that some Yoruba women are allround artists whose enviable roles helped to direct the Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre Troupes whose professional theatrical activities captured the entire Yoruba nation between 1940s and late 80s.

While men were the founders of most of these theatre troupes, this research work has shown that women performed dual roles; matrimonial and theatrical in shaping and re-shaping the theatrical direction of their husbands who were travelling theatre troupe

founders in Yoruba land.

We want to conclude by calling for the revival of the dying theatrical culture of the Popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre Movement. If this is achieved perhaps the Nigeria theatre will be able to see more of Ibisomi Ogunde, Aduke George, Abike Taiwo, Grace Okenedo, Funmilayo Ranko and Grace Oyin Adejobi shaking the Nigerian stage like true lionesses ready, willing and determined to make a living out of the living theatre. This revival will then complement the ever-growing cinematic theatrical tradition. Women dramatists must especially ensure that the living stage does not die.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This invaluable engaging book, *African Women: Drama & Performance* is the first comprehensive and diverse contribution to the study of African women's theatre. It is a collection by scholars of outstanding reputation in their various fields. They bring deep insight to theatre and women studies. The anthology provides a clear and comprehensive examination of emerging perspectives of African women's theatre. It is a selection of writings on the different forms of African theatre which presents a fertile ground for further investigation; it is an illuminating up-to-date discussion on the many varieties of African women's theatre. The varieties of the different approaches and viewpoints discussed, illuminate the powerful role women have played in the African theatre. The book is structured into four sections: Female Playwrights; Women Performers on Stage, Women Performers on Television and Film and Women Oral Performers. Irene Salami-Agunloye sets the pace with a wide-ranging introduction which places her selection of chapters in context, crystallizing the current debates in the field. The chapters are intellectually challenging, bringing together various concepts in theatre and women studies. The anthology will provoke useful debates in the intellectual arena and beyond. This is a landmark reader in African Women's Theatre.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye is a Playwright, Screenwriter and a Professor of African Drama and Women Studies. She was the Head of Department of Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos. She is currently the Director of Centre for Gender and Women Studies. Her plays include: *Short Plays for Juniors, Emotan, Queen Sisters, More than Dancing, Sweet Revenge and Idia, the Warrior Queen* etc. Other Anthologies include: *Women, Theatre and Politics; Contemporary, Perspective, (2008), Retelling History, Restaging African Heroines in Drama (In Press)*.



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