

The Aspect of Trance in Aquatic Theatre

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Abstract

Most post-colonial Africans see indigenous cultural activities as barbaric. The sentiment is derived from their exposure to foreign forms of similar activities. Consequently, they forbid the growth of any theatrical activity in Africa that cannot be measured with the alien foreign standards. A good example is the aquatic theatre performance of the Ijaws. Aquatic theatre is a generic term that classifies forms of entertainment that are distinct and found mostly in the Ijaw speaking parts of the Niger Delta. One element that is germane to aquatic theatre is trance. The main thrust of this paper “the aspect of trance in aquatic theatre” therefore is to discuss trance by presenting it as a special effect in aquatic theatre which has the qualities to entertain as well as serve religious purposes. Trance is also seen as a means of communication as it is found to build bridges between the supernatural and the mortal worlds. This paper relies primarily on the participant observation method of research for its materials. It relies on experiences based on performances the authors witnessed in the past. It concludes that trance has great potentials and can be harnessed to enhance the sustainability of aquatic theatre. This paper recommends that Africans should see aquatic theatre as a new ground that can be explored to expand the content of literary drama in Africa.

Keywords: Trance, Aquatic Theatre, Ritual.

Introduction

In the traditional Ijaw world, religion is present in all affairs of life. The people believe in the existence of a myriad of gods, each representing a certain aspect of human condition, and even abstract ideas such as justice and knowledge could have their own personifications. This belief is reinforced as gods are appeased or consulted repeatedly at the least opportunity for protection, victories in wars, bountiful harvest, good fortune in business and so on.. EgbeIfie (1994) states that, “there is a clear indication of the relationship of the Izon (Ijaw) people with their various gods, either as separate entities or collective entities”(102). Thus, the people express their religious nature by offering regular prayers, observing divine rules and regulations, praising, singing and chanting to their gods using musical instruments such as rattles, drums, gongs, bells and so on.

The Ijaws believe that divine beings are mostly in the waters, rivers, lakes, seas and oceans. The Ijaws live naturally around the maritime terrain and often pay homage to their gods or goddesses with formal rituals performed in, on or around water which include offering of animal sacrifices and pouring of libations. This association with the gods that dwell in the rivers is clearly indicated in the opening passage of the first scene of JP Clark's *Ozidi* when the storyteller comes in to demand the company of seven young women, all virgins, to pay homage to the sea people (2). In pursuit of harmonious coexistence with the unseen water divinities in the environment that are said to play overbearing supervisory roles in his life concerns, the Ijaw man performs rituals such as paddling to the middle of the river with assorted drinks, biscuits, and groundnuts to entertain and invite or appease the gods of the river. When he reaches the middle of the river, he calls out to the deities, one after another, by their names and appellations and informs them of the people's need for their permission, presence and protection. He does this while pouring out the drinks, casting the biscuits and groundnuts into the river, and, at the same time, expressing himself in ordered movements and gestures. Aquatic theatre originated from such rituals which are still in active practice in most riverine Ijaw communities. The fact must be accepted that what some scholars usually and glibly call aquatic theatre more properly and essentially refer to elements of performance. It is not yet aquatic theatre but may be the raw material upon which aquatic theatre may draw, and draw with ever-increasing potentials. In most places, these ritual performances are re-enacted to perform other roles besides entertainment. J. W. Ernest (2017) states that, "aquatic performances in Rome are to entertain while its role to the average Ijo (Ijaw) man is entertainment of dignitaries and sacred function" (50).

Aquatic theatre is an old mode of riverine entertainment which existed before formal documentation of events was introduced within the Ijaw population in the Niger Delta. This is long before the first European travelers visited the Niger Delta area about 1471. Aquatic theatre can be classified into two general categories: 1. the ritual and ritualized enactments and 2. the ceremonial performances. It is extremely outside the purpose of this paper to determine the extent of theatricality of each of the categories and to distinguish their functions. However, the theatricality of each of the forms is not in dispute. As an emerging genre in the literature of African theatre, discussions are substantially required to profoundly explore the points of intersection between aquatic theatre and ritual performances. Trance ritual is one type of ritual activity that requires deep investigation. Adelugba (1981) discussed the *Orukoro* which is a "performance of rites of worship of the deities of the sea – the mermaids" (209). The *Orukoro* trance performance, according to Adelugba, is a ritual of the Ijaw people of Nigeria" (209). With that example, Adelugba posits

that, "there is an element of theatre in trance as manifested in traditional African ritual and festival practice". (216). Based on this assertion, the present paper argues that there is much of theatre in trance that defines the uniqueness of aquatic theatre.

An Overview of Trance and Aquatic Theatre

Trance as a word traces its origin to two Latin words: *trans* and *ire*, meaning *across* and *to go* respectively. Trance means a "sleeplike condition, usually accompanied by a state of indifference to the objective environment and amnesia for whatever occurs while the subject is in this condition"(Harriman: 1977). According to Goodman, "it is the vehicle that does not just transfer the participants to another plane of emotion, but rather propels them to an altogether different aspect of reality, or, as others see it, to an alternate one"(34) Trance is different from some brain diseases or biochemical disturbances of the body which occasionally manifest themselves in a loss or change of consciousness, hallucinations, convulsions, and the like. In the words of A. J. Bahlsen, " A trance purposely and occasionally may be induced by a trained person...in order to gain an altered state of mind desired to see and experience a deity for the purpose of divination, or in another person"(303). Andrew Horn argues that," in the case of genuine trance, the psychiatric interests may be greater than the theatrical. But in consciously simulated ecstasies, the medium becomes a theatre artist, an actor who creates a character in a formal performance" (188). Trance may be in different types, however, to the specific scope of this work ritual trance will suffice.

The ritual trance is self-induced or self-craved and does not come without being invited or invoked by an individual. It is never automatic, it comes by conscious invitation to take temporary hold and control of the individual. It essentially represents controlled behaviour, capable of being called forth and terminated on a given cue or signal. Ritual trance is mostly religious, full of magical meanings to their performers and spectators. It can also be secularized for purely entertainment purpose. They include dances and elements typical of theatrical performances. In these rituals, the arts of the theatre are harnessed to serve religious and entertainment purposes. They are performed both on land and on water. The types performed on, in or around water are classified under aquatic theatre as trance ritual performances. There are quite a number of trance rituals in Ijaw which are performed in the environment of water. Some examples are: *ekian-sinmo* (purificatory ritual), *beni-kamai* (expiatory ritual), *owu-ten* (rite of invocation), and so on. Ijaw is famous for its many traditions of trance rituals, where one or several dancers fall into a trance by means of charms, music, chants, prayers, and sometimes special herbal connections. Trance may come by

singing a snatch of a song exclusively preserved for a god or even dancing one or two of a god's steps. Trance is an integral part of indigenous ritual theatre. It is a particularly compelling aspect of the tradition of aquatic performance used partly for its theatrical value and its function of communication. The fact that it is an agent of communication is abundantly clear when a view of it as a viable channel of communication in the performance of aquatic rituals is contemplated. Trance is used as a technique to enhance extra-human communication. The individual commissioned for this responsibility serves as a vessel through which the divinities pass messages to the watching public. In other words, the gods are given the right atmosphere to act, pass information and warn, as the case may be, only when the designated person swings into trance. When a worshipper or priest reaches the realm of trance, his inner eye becomes open to receive revelations from the Supreme Being for whose purpose the ritual is performed. The type of communication, whether in actual or simulated ritual performance is purely interpersonal; it is a situation of give and take between the person who is possessed and the unseen supernatural power.

There is what may generally be termed selective possession within the ritual trance tradition. Selective possession explains the religious belief that there is a god for everything – material or abstract. The trance here highlights a situation where a drummer, dancer or singer is mounted by a god believed to have created the art and begins a euphoric display of dexterous drumming or climatic dancing or singing. When a drummer falls under such metaphysical influence, he is said to have been visited by the god of drumming (*Oziorn*). A dancer is presumed to have been taken over by *Sei-orn*, the god of dance when he overwhelms his audience with a display of extra-ordinary skills. This phenomenon occurs for the god to manifest himself as the repository of the art of dance or music and to introduce new forms or steps of dance. Essentially, selective possession attests to the position that trance occurs for many reasons and its functions are enormous. This is extremely common in aquatic rituals. It is a useful technique applied by performers to create a sense of spectacle and give an impression of supernatural endowment in aquatic performances. Each of the ritual forms of aquatic performance has its own peculiar style in the realization of the trance associated to it. Usually, the arts of costuming, drumming, chanting, miming, and dancing are utilized in such a manner closely similar to their usage in Europe and elsewhere. Trance functions in the aquatic theatre as an agent of communication, characterization and to add aesthetic value to the performance.

Aquatic theatre is referred to as any theatrical performance that takes place in, on and or around the water (Abraye, 39). The performance of this theatre

tradition involves dance, mime, music, chants, incantations and a performance area. Examples of aquatic performances which are frequently observed by the Ijaws in the Bulou-toru axis of Delta State include *ekian-aru* (ritual boat), *Su-aru* (war boat), *Anda-aru* (wrestling boat), *Owu-aru* (masquerade boat), *Duwej-aru* (funeral boat) and *Sej-aru* (love boat). The Ijaw man takes advantage of the river as a performance space by using canoes or boats and other watercrafts as moveable stages. One function of the canoe or its equivalent is to enable performers to move from one spot or audience location to another. It also serves as a platform for performance. The canoe is an indispensable floating space for performance. It helps in the distinction of aquatic theatre from other forms of water activities. Dancers perform on the river as their boats head to and return from funerals or festivals. Wrestling boats announce their arrival by parading mostly along the waterside to the accompaniment of drums, songs, and vociferous boasting, and spectacular war boats highlight festivals of various types, recalling the Ijaws' warlike past.

A number of these performances are religious ceremonies which are re-enacted as aquatic theatre forms to celebrate the people's history and culture and their attachment to the riverine environment and the pantheon of divinities located under the water. Essentially, the performances contribute to the community in a huge way by bringing them into remembrance with the glories of the past. In effect, such events serve as cultural treasury where the collective heritage of the culture of the community and the shared identity of the people are showcased and preserved. The nature of the ceremony determines the type of boat that goes with it. If the event is about the celebration of a saviour hero, heroine or god, about a past victory, about origin of a communal title, or about remembrance of communally owned treasure, the emphasis is on festivity. The nature of the ceremony also has a way of determining the choice of the colour of the boat and the costumes to use in each performance. Some of the ceremonies performed to celebrate great events or entertain persons considered to be important because of high rank or office are secular variants of religious ceremonies.

Discussion of Trance in Aquatic Theatre

Trance is induced to achieve characterization in the ritual boats. Trance synchronizes and regulates the rhythm of a performance. In the ritual boat, trance is seen as the central action that climaxes a performance. It also serves as a source of spiritual assurance and a vessel of spiritual renewal, restoration and reunion. For the ritual boat, there is a medium who is bestowed with this role. Depending on the type of ritual, the medium could be the priest of the community god or a priestess who has the favour and approval of the god to

perform such functions. This religious official observes natural signs, especially the behaviour or movement of birds, fishes and interprets them as an indication of divine approval or disapproval of a proposed action. He functions as an augur. The priest sits in the centre of the boat. His declarations are considered divine instructions and are binding on everyone. Where there is no priest specifically assigned to carry out the task, a god may select anyone for his medium. More than two persons can be possessed simultaneously by different gods in a single ritual performance. In the case of pre-festival ritual, the role is performed by the chief priest of the communal deity. He may be assisted by a priestess who moderates when he loses his consciousness. The content of the ritual boat in Ojobo, for example, is composed of a mixture of male and female worshippers who are appointed through divination. This is particularly so with ritual ceremonies of purification. The boat is usually not overburdened with too many performers and it is sparingly decorated. When the boat is finally prepared and the dramatis personae have boarded, the drummer begins to send drum signals to invite the chief priest who is at the shrine of the god where he must carry out personal cleansing and fortification, and to obtain the god's material symbol. He is accompanied by a set of three male attendants, of whom one is a praise-singer who sings and dances as they head for the boat. The praise-singer is, at all times, in a dancing position at the stern seat of the boat. He moves swiftly from the stern to the bow in the manner of an acrobat without falling into the water. This technique is meant to entertain the audience as well as inspire the other performers. This is highly technical and requires special skills to achieve. It is believed that this cannot be achieved except by the influence of the gods and by a rising tempo of drumming, clapping and singing which usually proceed a moment of possession.

All the performers, including the chief priest, are dressed in sparkling white clothes. Apart from the white wrapper which flows freely from about his waist, the blue band on his wrist and the halo of native chalk around his left eye differentiate the priest from the others. The white colour suits the purificatory ritual for which the occasion is meant and to symbolize the world of the water divinities. The gods who receive sacrifices and offerings for communal or personal cleansing are assumed to be in a state of purity. That is what the dominant white colour represents. The ritual boat usually departs the community to a hallowed circle of shallow water at the middle of the main river where such rites are performed. The drumming and singing which herald the ritual action set the mood of the whole community agog and make the people to crowd in to form an audience at the waterfront of the town square. As the drumming and singing climax, a moment of character transmutation is reached. This occurs immediately after the priest concludes the task of addressing the invisible world of water gods. The priest gradually changes from his normal personality to a full

manifest of the god. His voice grows stronger, more authoritative and more eloquent while he speaks to the people with a profound and sophisticated diction. This difference in personality is often very striking, especially when a priest who is never known with the talent of a dancer suddenly dances with exceptionally skilful steps. Indeed, it is this transformation the people seem to find most thrilling of the trancerituals.

One dramatic moment that summarizes the character and attributes of the god is when the drummer calls him over and over in a name he loathes. The priest who is now the god openly shows a flaming anger and suddenly announces discontinuation of his interest in the festival. This swing of mood sends fear into the spines of the people and reminds them of the grim consequences of a failed attempt to bring the deity into town. The implications are serious for the community should a person so possessed gets himself drowned in the river. It signals rejection of the sacrifice. It also may lead to the medium not returning alive. Therefore, the general concern of both audience and performers is to avert the looming calamity. There is a general chaos among the spectators as people begin to run helter skelter to carry out one action or another to assuage the anger of the god and normalize the tension. The actions of the audience are mostly intended to fire up the spirit of the artists in the performance to carry on with full courage. The efforts of the attendants who break into a semi-circle formation to create a barricade succeed only in preventing the priest from throwing himself into the water. The persistent persuasion of the praise-singer, the unending series of incantations by the frantic and agitated priestess and the ensuing mystical dances restore his tampered temper. The superbly orchestrated *mami-water* dance of the young female dancers follows soon after the brief moment of placating the offended god. The presence of an impressive blend of the *mami-water* dance, a neatly coordinated rhythm of drumming and a stream of spontaneously created songs is sufficient for the desire of the spectators for a moment of spiritual relief and pleasurable spectacle. The melody and the esoteric content of the songs reassure the people of the invisible presence of spirit beings. The occasion seems to bring the audience into contact with the spirits. Andrew Horn (1981) makes the indication that, "it is, therefore, in its spectacular, theatrical qualities that ritual most resembles drama, and in its capacity to entertain and give aesthetic pleasure, for these are present in even the most somber of rituals" (195).

The ritual boat, returning at the conclusion of the sacrifice, is led under the dominance of the aura of trance. Trance is activated and the boat moves as the dancers swing their hands rhythmically to flow in harmony with the synchronized movement of the paddles. This is another kind of *mami-water* dance, an ancient sacred dance of indigenous origin which is performed to

show off triumph and to express the joy that the gods have not deserted them. This action continues for a minimum of thirty minutes. When the boat approaches the shoreline, the priest brings forward the scepter in his hand and touches it on the head of the praise-singer to signal him to introduce a new song. The new song awakens into consciousness those in the boat who are engulfed in their various actions. The music is faster now as over twenty men and women, dressed in white clothes, are already on a two line formation to take the troupe to the shrine in a procession. Just before the performers and the spectators come in contact at the shoreline stage, a deity enters into a drummer and turns him into a divine messenger. As soon as it is noticed that the hand of the drummer has been possessed by the spirit, the focus of attention becomes centred on the language of the drums. The drummer, at that moment of possession, communicates through the distinct sound of the drums. The drum messages may seem encoded but an initiate finds them not too complex to decipher and interpret accurately. A person who has the ability to understand the drum language may not hesitate to appropriately respond when a message is directed at him. When the drummer and the praise-singer, in some examples, grow deeper in direct interaction, a high level of dramatic dialogue is achieved. The praise-singer is a clever and humorous songster who occasionally leads the chorus or makes comic expressions to balance the atmosphere with conviviality. The orchestrated body movements, the discreet tonal modulations and the solemn musical accompaniment of the flute make the praise-singer an extremely interesting performer. There is a spirit language known only to the specialists, a language that situates the spirits in remote times. The drums sometimes communicate in such language to command a spectator to perform any tasks. This communication situates human beings and spirits in a client/master relationship. This form of trance is absolutely unique. Although the drummer is lost in the act, no remarkable change of personality occurs in the process. An entertaining aspect of this display is derived from the swiftness of the movement of the hands and the manner the drummer deftly controls the mood of the atmosphere. Another highly celebratory moment is when the god of dance overwhelms the female dancers through special tones played by the chief drummer. The praise-singer changes his role as interpreter to become chorus leader in such instance. This happens usually when the performers have successfully landed feet on the shoreline stage where performers are in direct encounter with spectators. The height of this type of spectacle is when a dancer who is under the influence of the god of dance (*Se- ori*) tears off and makes to transit into the fluid stage. Abraye says, "performance on the fluid stage is when activities take place directly in the river" (6). A mock drama ensues when attempts are made to rescue or fetch him or her from drowning. As earlier stated, it is a risk of death for a masquerade or a person who is possessed by water spirit to allow himself into the river. This is a frenzied yet exciting

moment as it elicits the jubilant participation of the audience. This audience involvement that does not exactly correspond to the traditional Western conceptions of theatre is part of what gives aquatic theatre an African identity. The audience behaviour confirms that the most remarkable feature of ritual trance is a blend of religion and entertainment.

Audience participation in aquatic performance is spontaneous and without it the success or otherwise of a performance cannot be measured. The audience participation, in the first instance, is propelled by the need to partake in the spiritual blessings that follow the rituals. It could also be driven by the fact that the significant form of the performance is given by the element of communal sharing and identity. The audience in an aquatic theatre setting can be divided into three main types. They are: the spirit audience which is made up of the invisible guests from the water, the nominal audience which traditionally watches without participating in the activities and the participative audience which doubles as performer when involved in the performance (Krama 2013).

Conclusion

Aquatic theatre is a unique genre of traditional African theatre which is yet to receive due attention from African scholars. It is a form of performance which promotes and preserves the culture of the Ijaw people living in the Bulou-toru axis of Delta and Bayelsa states of Nigeria. Aquatic performances are numerous, one of which is ritual boat. The traditions and ways of life of the people further constitute the ritual boat into sub-groups. Trance ritual is one of the categories of ritual boat which are preoccupied with the intention to entertain the spectators and the spirit audience, and communicate with the gods. In the trance ritual, the audience draws satisfaction from both the religious ceremonies and the spectacle of the performance. To achieve this purpose, a person must go into a state of altered consciousness. This trance state is either as a result of a visitation of a god or simulated in some way. Trance is the central driving force of the performance. Trance has a number of uses that are significant to the ritual boat form of aquatic theatre. The aesthetic qualities, the nature of communication, the levels of role playing, the skilful drumming, the rhythmic singing and dancing, the costumes, and the rest of the theatricalities derived in a single performance are special effects that give the ritual boat a unique outlook. Trance, however, is an effect that needs to be harnessed and developed further to advance the performance of aquatic theatre.

The fact that trance can be consciously created and terminated when necessary, assures that it can be imported into literary drama in Africa for its special effects and many qualities highlighted.

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