

Hybridity and Aesthetics of Syncretic Lighting in *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* Performances

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Abstract

*Cultures interlace, enhance, create new perspectives, identities and understanding. Culture percolation may be blamed on colonialism, perhaps, further envenomed in post-colonial times by the advancements in digital technology, transportation and tourism, etc. In post-colonial times therefore, it is speculative to assert that many cultures are still in their authentic states. Thus, what obtains is a form of hybridisation-traditionalism and modernism. As cultures continue to evolve, so are their performance traditions-they integrate and assimilate new aesthetic innovations. On this pretext, this paper examines the aesthetics of the intermixture of traditional and modern lighting technology in *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir*. This technical continuum and or interaction gave these elements a new aesthetic niche and also broadened the understanding and aesthetic dicta and sensibilities of the bearers of these elements. It also led to the need to improve the skills set and techne of traditional lighting designers. The paper encourages indigenous and contemporary theatre practitioners to take advantage of modern theatre lighting to advance the aesthetics of African performances.*

Keywords: *Hybridity, African Performance, Modern lighting, Ogrinye and Kwagh-hir*

Introduction

Post-colonial thinking and scholarship are replete with polemics on the malevolent dent of colonialism on African cultural sensibilities and authenticity. While such problematics remain true, the overt negative coloration of colonialism without concerted consideration for its benevolence after many decades of this experience in Africa is worrisome. With specific reference to African traditional performance culture, cultural hybridization is mooted to have affected its sustainability and resilience while also altering its designs, perhaps mutating and recontextualising them along western precepts and ideations. However, accruable benefits abound from colonial experience in Africa. Instances can be drawn from the advancement in digital technology, the new media and technological innovation in the area of theatre lighting. These aspects of western culture which are fully entrenched within the fabric of African culture can be leveraged on to advance indigenous performances in the global space. Against this background, this paper is motivated by three

premises; (i) innovations in theatre technology, particularly in the area of lighting, which informed Professor Sunday Ododo's proposition for its integration into African traditional performance culture, (ii) the need to enhance the lighting aesthetics of traditional performances using modern innovative lighting technology and (iii) the researcher's modern lighting experiment with *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* performances.

To explore these premises and thus set the appropriate background, this paper derives inspiration from Sunday Ododo's proposition of the integration of modern lighting technology into the design evolution of African traditional performance culture. In his book, *Facekuerade Theatre: A Performance Model from Ebira-Ekuechi*, Ododo decries the absence of a deliberate and remarkable attempt at designing lighting in traditional performances which has consequently allowed the dominance of straight lighting for general illumination on the performance venue and stage. It is on the basis of this observation that he encouraged the introduction and harmonization of modern stage lighting concept with the unique demands of traditional performances (207). Meki Nzewi's earlier writing on the transition of indigenous performances laid an appropriate background for this paradigmatic shift in the design formation and other aspects of traditional performances thus,

... the artistic state at a given moment in a cultural history is bound to undergo a process of revision and redefinition. This occurs when theatre practitioners revamp or revolt against the status quo and evolve new trends on the quondam practices. This could be self-contained process circumscribed within a cultural homogeneity; or it could be informed by consciously adopted and integrated influences from other cultures. A dilemma of transition, on the other hand, could result from a case of calculated cultural brain-washing whereby the natural cultural-artistic sensibilities of a person or a group are systematically undermined and supplanted by foreign cultural perceptions. A resurgence of the suppressed cultural-artistic sensibilities at any historical moment is inevitable if the original cultural environment is not correspondingly annihilated. Such a resurgence could result in a crisis of identity. (436)

This research, the researcher intermixed traditional and modern lighting in the production of *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir*. The essence is to evolve new aesthetics perception and understanding of indigenous performances in a global space. African traditional performances rely on natural lighting systems such as moon and sun and artificial lighting source like bonfire. These lighting sources are 'rudimentary'; thus, they perform the generic function of creating visibility for the stage and venue of performances. Arising from this, the manipulation of lighting instruments to create aesthetics effects may be impossible. While these lighting sources provide the requisite

aesthetic sensation for the bearers of these performances, such aestheticism is now contested by many contemporary audiences.

Conceptual/Theoretical Grounding

In African ethnographical thinking, indigenous theatre speaks to variety of theatrical performances which reflect the socio-political, religious, economic and general wellness of the African man. They are primarily bifurcated into social and ritual performances, with each type servicing the physical and spiritual needs of the people. A.B.C. Duku (16) maintains that

Traditional African drama refers to indigenous African performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernisation over the years. They include those found in festivals which combine dances, songs, music, chants, speech/dialogue, spectacle, etc. The other instances are those that spring from religious rituals, comedies, storytelling, etc.

These variety of art forms are intertwined with the daily life and living of African people. They are also a source of documenting the history of Africans which are transferred from one generation to the other. To Ebong Akpan, traditional African performance is the,

Oldest and most indigenous form of theatre in Africa, and comprised a congeries of atavistic events in the forms of myths, rituals, initiations, festivals, celebrations masquerading, puppetry, ceremonies, etc. Its elements are deeply rooted in the ontology and cosmology of the African society. Its drama has no literary or textual tradition, and its authorship is therefore believed to be communal and unknown. (Doki 3)

African traditional performances are communal art forms with no claim of individual ownership. They are documented in the memories of Africans and are passed from one generation to the other. Such performances may be therapeutic especially instances where they are used for ritual healing, socio-political orientation, communing with the gods, ancestors and other preternatural beings. Light is an essential component of indigenous performances and without which the objects and subjects on stage will be invisible. In traditional Africa, the major mode of lighting is the use of sun, moon lights and bonfire. However, western theatres deploy electric lights in theatre productions. According to Zagan and Kowalska, electric lighting is regarded as;

A technical activity which, depending on the object of application, must meet certain technical requirements and be non-fatiguing for the eyes. This technical-ergonomic look at lighting is more frequently replenished with an aesthetic quality assessment, as the light significantly affects the aesthetic experience, creates the mode, stimulates, motivates and calms. (144)

They further opine that “electric lighting has practical and aesthetic function at the same time or only one of them”. Accordingly, the practical function of light relates to its appropriateness in

illuminating the object, making it visible at the appropriate level. While the aesthetic function relates to the creation of effect or mood (144). Reid explicates that “the design of lighting for the stage or for any other medium is science in the service of performing art. While the “science” represents the technological bases for the making of lighting equipment, the “art” is the creative use to which such equipment is put” (In Duro Oni 9). It is from the above understanding that, Parker and wolf writes that: “... light begins to be a scenic element the moment a light source is visible to the audience” (In Oni 54). The implication is that the use of light outside the context of theatre cannot be qualified as a form of theatre lighting. Similarly, Ododo states that “light is used to illuminate the atmospheric scenery to give form to the performance environment”. Simonson further explains that this can be achieved by “reconciling and combining all the elements” of the setting into “a simplified whole”(in Ododo 250) . To this end, lighting in the theatre and film in its simplistic or complex form is designed and planned to light the actors and the scene-the room or space and background. Jones further explains that:

Lighting a scene consists not only in throwing light upon objects but in throwing light upon a subject. We have our choice of lighting a drama from outside, as a spectator, or from the inside, as a part of the drama’s experience. The objects to be lighted are the forms which go to make up the physical body of the drama ... the actors, the setting, the furnishings and so forth. But the subject which is to be lighted is the drama itself. We light the actors and the setting, it is true, but we illuminate the drama. (In Oni 39)

This explains why precision is needed in planning and executing lighting design for performances. Any form of lighting that falls short of the requirement for productions will not only create visual problems but also, fail to communicate the dramatic content and or message of the production. This will therefore, render the essence of production and audience presence in the theatre meaningless. Parker et. al. (*Scene Design and Stage Lighting*, 9th ed.) corroborate that “we are on the threshold of great change in the light source technology...”(496). From traditional bonfire, sun and moon lights, kerosine lamps, gas lamps, and candles to the invention of more sophisticated light sources like Flood, Par Can, Mood, Moving heads to spot lights, etc. These new light sources are capable of creating wonders in theatre performances. The use of these new lighting sources is informed cultural hybridization.

Improvements in human thinking, creativity and innovation, especially in science and technology is gradually drifting the world towards a global community. The advent of telecommunication has further advanced information dissemination and cultural cross-pollination overtime. Often

predicated on shared knowledge, ideas and information, people across the globe now have access to all sort of cultural materials from different cultures and societies. Against this backdrop, cultural hybridization is strongly gaining footage across the globe. Hybridization is imbued in the theories of globalization and glo-calisation. It is meant to indicate that, without losing a sense of diversity and differentiation, some aspects of cultures will merge to create new forms of identity. Ted Lewellen informs that “all cultures are already hybrid, so what we are witnessing today is one hybrid culture mixing with another”(5) It is against this backdrop that Lewellen finds most useful a definition of hybridity that attempts to take into account the intermixture of traditionalism and modernism. Kraidy Marwan also writes that “since hybridity involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries, is a requisite for hybridity”(5). Kraidy further writes that “rather than a single idea or a unitary concept, hybridity is an association of ideas, concepts, and themes that at once reinforce and contradict each other”(vi). He writes that “hybridity is one of the emblematic notions of our era. It captures the spirit of the times with its obligatory celebration of cultural difference and fusion, and it resonates with the globalization mantra of unfettered economic exchanges and the supposedly inevitable transformation of all cultures” (1).

A part from advancement in technology, Homi Bhabha advanced another factor that may led to cultural hybridization. He maintains that, “any cultural identity in the "contact zone" of intercultural relations is constructed in a hybrid-transcultural space, which he calls "the Third Space of enunciation... [that] may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based on ...the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity" (37-38). He coins the term in-between to characterize the "Third Space [as] the inter-the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between ...that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" 206). He further maintains that “living "in-between" cultures -in the transcultural space -does not suggest a mere exchange between cultures; it rather aims at the creation of new cultural forms”(Cultural Diversity" 206). Writing on the different spheres of society which have been percolated by the force of hybridization, Kraidy maintains that:

Indeed, “hybridity” has entered many academic arenas, ranging from traditional disciplines like literature, anthropology, and sociology to interdisciplinary venues such as postcolonial theory and performance studies. “Hybridity” is also employed in less obvious fields such as

architecture, tourism, and sports, and in more popular versions in trade books about travel, business, and economics, in addition to mainstream press articles on popular culture.(2) This study uses this theory within the context of performance. Therefore, the theory is relevant to this research-study because it foregrounds the researchers drive to mix or put more succinctly, synergies two cultural materials in one performance instance. Ted Lewellen referred to this as a mixture of traditionalism and modernism. In the context of this research, the traditional lighting systems of *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* of the Igede and Tiv people of Benue State is synergized with modern lighting systems. Though, experimental, this intermixture of lighting systems within the new context of staging *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* is capable of making these performances appeal to a heterogenous audience while also creating new identities and aesthetics sensation.

Perspective on *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* Performances

Ogrinye is a magnum opus that emanated from the sociological experience of the Igede people. It is a conscious mechanism set by the people to defend the territorial integrity of Igede land. Members of this art form are mooted to be great warriors and or heroes saddled with the responsibility of protecting the Igede people. It is also mooted that any member of the ensemble who went to war and returned with the head of the enemy was given the title, *Ibatu*. Therefore, two events call for the performance of *Ogrinye* ritual dance (i) triumph of the warrior ensemble over the enemy, and, (ii) the death of a member of the warrior guild. In the first instance, the head(s) of the enemies brought home by the warriors are stored in an *Ugbaju*, ant-hill for the ants to feast on the flesh. The skulls are then used as props in the dance performance. It is the triumphant return of the warriors that calls for *Ogrinye*. Within this frame, community people come together to celebrate their brave warriors.

The second event that calls for *Ogrinye* performance is the death of a member of the warrior guild. Both performance contexts exhibit almost the same aesthetic nuances in terms of the nature of song, drumming and dance movements, costumes and makeup, use of properties and more fundamentally, the form and nature of lighting. Traditionally, a bonfire is set at the centre of the stage and performers made to perform round it. At some point a performer could jump in and out of the burning fire without being hurt. While the celebration of their victory over the enemy begins and ends with drumming, singing and dancing, that of honouring a dead member of the guild ends with the ritual burial of the deceased hero.

The *Kwagh-hir* like the *Ogrinye* is also a social construct of the Tiv people. This performance form makes commentaries on the socio-political, economic and cosmological spheres of the Tiv society.

Suffice to say that *Kwagh-hir* exists in several Tiv communities, among which are Ushongo, Gboko, Konshisha, etc. This research focuses on the Kende Kaase *Kwagh-hir* in Mbatierev, Gboko Local Government Area of Benue State. This *Kwagh-hir* group is mooted to have emanated from the growing interest and formulation of *Kwagh-hir* in Tiv land. Just like every other group that existed, the Kende Kaase group examines the social conditions deterring social cohesion and societal development in Tiv land.

Kwagh-hir began as a form of story-telling, a form of moonlight theatre where young members of the Tiv society were told stories of brave lions and heirs. These stories were later transformed into dance movements and dramatization. As time went on, puppetry was integrated into the performance. Today, *Kwagh-hir* consists of animation, masquerades and puppetry. *Kwagh-hir* is a performance that unites the people; it brings the people together in both bad and good times. *Kwagh-hir* is performed when the people are happy; it is also performed for economic benefits, especially in organised competitions and commissioned instances. In the course of performing, especially outside the shores of the bearer's community, the opportunity to choose and marry spouses is tenable. Also, performers make new friends as they go about performing. Also, *Kwagh-hir* teaches people the traditional values and belief systems of the Tiv people.

Aesthetics of Syncretic Lighting on *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* Performances

The *Ogrinye* and *Kwagh-hir* traditional performances exhibited a quantum of aesthetics opulence under the influence and or deployment of modern lighting technology. The addition of more lights combined with the original lighting formations of these performances created a new vista of aesthetic sensation and stimulation, thereby creating in the audience an entirely pristine experience which they revered. *Ogrinye* makes use of bonfire which is made of logs of wood. These logs of wood are placed center stage and lit to illuminate the performance. However, this lighting source is riddled with some challenges. Firstly, audience can barely see the performer(s) due to the poorly lit atmosphere or environment. Specifically, the sides and backs of performers are drawn in the blurry atmosphere created by the lighting source. The implication is that, rather than watching a set of warriors, what the audience sees are shadows. A little visual clarity is ascertained only when the performers draw very close to the bonfire. However, with the syncretization of modern and traditional lighting sources, visibility is apt and the revelation of forms and shapes achieved. Below is an *Ogrinye* warrior performing in a space lit with traditional and modern lighting technology.



Plate 1: An Ogrinye warrior performing in a space lit with traditional and modern lighting technology.

The performing space is rigged with different kinds of modern lighting instruments namely, Fresnel lights, Par can light, mood light and flood lights. The Fresnel and Par can lights made use of gels to create different shades of colours ranging from red, blue, orange, and green. These colours helped in creating a somber atmosphere for the performance. As can be inferred from the picture above, the costume of the performer is clearly visible. Audience can tell and appreciate the colour combination that characterized the performer's costume. Also, the prop is clearly revealed for audience visual consumption and appreciation. With this new form of lighting, audience can see the performer(s) from every side of the performing space irrespective of their viewing positions. In addition, the dance movements, gesticulations and mannerisms of the performer(s) find much clarity and applause from audience.

Similarly, the *Kwagh-hir* of the Tiv people also find new aesthetic expression with the synchronized deployment of traditional and modern lights. The original lighting source of this performance form is bonfire. A tin long rod is inserted into corn chaffs which are soaked in kerosene or diesel before been lit. The lighting man holds the lighting instrument and moves around the performer and the performing space. Below is the picture of *Kwagh-hir* skit to corroborate.



Plate: 2: *The Galimagirigi performing in a space lit with traditional and modern lighting technology.*

To the left in the picture above is the lighting man holding the traditional lighting instrument. The aesthetics output of this performance when lit with the traditional lighting instrument seems to be low. This is because audience could barely see the performer. At most it is the part of the performer that falls within the energy path of light that is revealed. This is however, not the intention as there are no specific actions requiring such lighting specifications. This further explains why the lighting man moves round the performer(s) in other for the audience to see them. The audience within this lighting context are therefore, able to see the performer(s) based on the side(s) of the performer his light reveals. This is a serious design challenge, especially for an audience that seat on all sides of the performance space. The implication is that, the performer(s) cannot be visible to the audience at the same time. While a segment of the audience sees the performers in action, other segments may only see shadows. The integration of modern lighting changed the visual outlook of the performance. The use of different gels to create different colour effects helped in simulating a sombra atmosphere for the performance. There is visual clarity, costume and props of the performer are visibly and highly beautified by the modern lighting. Most fundamentally, audience can see the performer irrespective of their viewing positions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Integrating modern lighting into traditional performances is a creative step towards improving their aesthetic qualities. Beyond such improvements, this innovation has the propensity to formulate new performance identities, perceptions and understanding of indigenous performances. It also exposes indigenous theatre practitioners to the challenges of their lighting technology in a globalized world. More fundamentally, it prepares them for the challenges they may be confronted with in the event of performing in different contexts and to a heterogeneous audience. Against this backdrop, the paper encourages conventional theatre practitioners in Nigeria to partner with traditional theatre practitioners to integrate modern lighting instruments into traditional performances. In addition, a critical study of these performances to understand their intricacies before integrating modern lighting into them is pertinent. Proper permission must be sorted from the bearers before such integration. It therefore, means that where the bearer's rejects the idea, their position must be respected.

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