

**An Examination of the Festival Motif in Femi Osofisan's
*Morountodun***

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Abstract

This article examines the African traditional theatre which is interwoven into the daily life of the African. It affirms that festival theatre flourished in Africa in the distant past and has become the bedrock of modern theatrical productions on the African continent. The opulent and robust performance ethos of traditional theatre has continued to provide resources for contemporary African dramatists. It is in this context that we closely look at how Femi Osofisan assertively leans on the aesthetic apparatus of the African traditional theatre to create *Morountodun*. In *Morountodun*, the rich elements of the traditional theatre are used as motif(s) to create a vintage and delightful play, which is very aesthetic and scintillating, yet possesses a strong and radical socialist message.

Keywords: Festival motif, *Morountodun*, Dance, Music, Traditional theatre, Femi Osofisan

Introduction

Ruth Finnegan describes drama as the enactment or representation through actors who imitate persons and events (500). To her, it also involves other elements such as linguistic content, plot character, specialized scenery, music, and dance. Drama has been severally described as a potent tool in the remodeling of behaviour and a revolution of human psychology and mentality. Aliu opines that drama seeks to apprehend the truth of the universe and catch the decisive phase of social development in an immediate, spontaneous and effective manner in a way that the novel and poem cannot (6). The development of drama and theatre in Nigeria and indeed

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Africa has taken a very interesting turn. As a result of the political climate it found itself, African theatre developed quite uniquely distinct forms from those in the western world. Theatre has developed along the socio-political experiences of the Africans, trudging the pre-colonial, colonial and the post-colonial eras in Africa. Many westerners believe that theatre did not exist in Africa in the pre-colonial era of the continent; because Africa had little performance that resembled the theatrical forms they knew. This is very erroneous and demonstrates a display of little knowledge of what theatre entails. A robust and a rich theatrical practice and tradition had existed and is still existing in Africa.

Before the coming of the colonial masters, the African continent was teeming with performance activities in forms of ceremonies, festivals, religious rites, oral storytelling and various kinds of celebrations, all interwoven into the daily life of the African (Brockett 568). The African is a very expressive and religious person, who believes in the interference of the gods in the daily reality of the people. This has been a controlling impulse that gives impetus to celebration of many kinds and a ritualistic and devotional lifestyle, as a way of appeasing the gods of the land.

Ruth Finnegan tries to discuss the existence of drama in Africa in ancient times. According to her, the masquerade, which thrives throughout Africa, contains elements of drama which lay great emphasis on costume, music, dancing with little or no linguistic content and sometimes a rudimentary plot (501). This makes the focus of African traditional drama distinct from modern European drama. The emphasis is on music and dancing which overshadow all other aspects of the drama. A good example of this kind of performance is the Egugun of the Yoruba and the Igue of the Benin.

The Traditional African Theatre

The average African is very religious and very superstitious. It is

an inborn star that guides his or her path through life. He or she believes in the existence, superiority and superintendence of the spiritual realm over the physical. To the traditional African, we are in the hands of the gods as grasshoppers are in the hands of wanton boys. The gods control every aspect of life and existence. So to live a normal, happy and fruitful life, one must seek the favour, the intervention and the benign nature of the gods and the ancestors. It is religion, more than anything else, which colours their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon (Mbiti 262). Iyeh and Aluede add that:

Religion permeates deeply into the fabric of the African's earthly life and is in all facets of their life and endeavours. Africans are religious people who go everywhere with their religion, hence, they are always in touch with their gods. Africans communicate individually and collectively with their gods, and this accounts for why ritual and ceremonies pervade the rhythm of life in African traditional settings. Such rituals, ceremonies are observed both individually and collectively. When such ceremonies and rituals are observed collectively by a people at a set time of the year, it is called a festival. (86)

From the foregoing, it is clear that festivals, the major and the most opulent kind of theatres in Africa are undergirded by utilitarian purpose. In accordance with their subconscious drives of communicating, interacting and liaising with the supernatural world, and propitiating the gods, African peoples birthed diverse kind of festivals according to their diverse needs. Life is complex and so are the seasons and cycles of life. The complex nature of life and the impulse to seek supernatural intervention is clearly manifested in the various festivals taking place at various times of the year and at various locations on the continent. Ekwueme paid tribute to the spectacular aspect of festivity in Africa when she

describes it as: a celebration of a feast or an event that features music, dance, theatre masquerades, and many others usually organized in the same venue once in a year to commemorate community events in the society (158). Issuing from this, we could say that the concept of festival in Africa entails events, activities, ceremonies put together by a people in commemoration, acknowledgement and celebration of blessings, favour, and goodwill hitherto enjoyed. It is also an avenue to negotiate and request for more favour, grace, protection from God almighty and the gods and ancestors of the land.

It must be understood here that festivals are only commemorated amidst heavy cultural spectacles, ritualistic observance and lavish social entertainment. Art, therefore, constitutes the focal points of festival in Africa. It is a union of cultural, religious and artistic expressions. During festivals, the community deploys its best in artistic expression. It becomes an exhibition of artistic talents through drama, music, dancing, costume design, decorative and other creative arts. African festivals are a fusion of the religious/ritual and entertainment/arts. No festival can exist without music and dance in Africa. Music and dance set the mood and tempo of activities during the ceremonies. In fact, a typical African festival is dominated by artistic display and expression. In this regard, Okafor affirms that:

The myriad traditional festivals in the traditional calendars of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria are virtually all associated with music, dance drama, the arts, and of course the culinary arts. In a way, it could be said that since music and dance is the hallmark of every traditional festival, then every traditional festival is also a festival of traditional music and dance. (4)

Agreeing with this Vidal believes that music plays a lot of function in a festival, including providing signal and announcement (publicity); the role in the procession and outing which subsumes

the evocative functions; the panegyric and historical function; the satirical and the entertainment function and so on (27). Music begins and ends every festival in Africa. It sets the space and character of the festival. Akpabot believes strongly that African gods are music loving, manifesting themselves in situations in which ritual activities at festivals are performed. It is through their human mediums that the gods come down to participate in the ceremony (87). He believes that the gods and spirit demand an atmosphere physically elevated and ionized above human frequencies to become frenzied with men and women (Akpabot 87). In the same vein, Ehiwario contends that folk music is the prime agency through which the bond between the living and gods and ancestors is articulated, reaffirmed and reviewed. During and after satisfactory offering and sacrifices if you remove the functional presence of folk music from the organization of festival, there would be neither atmosphere nor mood for a community involvement (65).

Arguably, music and dance constitute the heart of any festival. It is like the soup with which pounded yam is swallowed. Without music and dance in any festival, the flavour, the effect and the objective of such a ceremony cannot be achieved. Ehiwario noted further that:

Music is the festival itself because music describes the mood (sad or joy) of the vehicle of communication. It is music that announces the beginning and end of the festival... the success of any festival is evaluated by the amount of music and dance employed in the celebration, such music type moves, evokes, expresses, and inspires the people to action either in the Entertainment sector or in the ritual or worship performance. (65)

A true application of the features of festival in a drama is clearly seen in *Morountodun*. The play *Morountodun* is based on the history and myth of Moremi, an Ile-Ife heroine, who saves her people from the incessant attacks of the Igbo marauders in ancient Ile-Ife. She tactfully infiltrates their camp by deliberately allowing

the Igbos to capture her as one of their victims against the passionate pleas of her best friend, Niniola and her husband, Oronmiyan. She undertakes this brave act in order to uncover the magic of the Igbo warriors. The Moremi myth is superimposed on the Nigerian Agbekoya uprising of 1969 in Oyo State, in which poor farmers who were docile and peace-loving revolted against the exploitation and oppression of the ruling class. The uprising starts with the refusal to pay tax (either overrated or overtaxed depending on the context of usage) in the face of hunger, poverty and deprivation. The people take up arms to fight against the government. Baba, Marshal, Bogunde and others are characters epitomize the farmers' collective will to protest. They also represent the downtrodden that rise against the bourgeoisie. They fight to overthrow the pinnacle of capitalism with brute force which is eloquently represented by Alhaja Kabirat and others. Although, Titubi, the wayward daughter of Alhaja Kabirat agrees to serve as a police informant for the protection of her bourgeois class she allows herself to be taken to the camp of the revolters in order to learn their secret and expose the head of the group. However, in trying to achieve this objective, Titubi undergoes a radical transformation. She is transformed into a position of affirming a bond and solidarity with the peasants in their revolt against tyranny of the government. She comes face to face with their sufferings, pains, deprivations, and oppression which fuel the spirit of revolution in them. This radical transformation is contrasted with the ancient Moremi legend whose mission was to protect her race from her bourgeois status. Titubi starts like Moremi, but through the process of reorientation and indoctrination, she undergoes a radical change to denounce what Moremi stood for:

Titubi... I knew I had to kill the ghost of
Moremi in my belly, I am not Moremi!
Moremi served the state.... the state was the
spirit of the ruling class.

Titubi's level of awareness and change represent the socialist spirit, which makes her to commit class suicide. She

comes to the realization that the peasants are pursuing a just and egalitarian cause. She joins forces with them and becomes the epitome of their struggle. This drastic turn of Titubi leads to negotiation for peace and equity between the two opposing camps. Osofisan uses the festival motif to realize the theme of *Morountodun*. He combines verisimilitude with the cinematic device of flashback in presenting the Moremi ancient myth. The festival technique of narrating *Morountodun* inspired the copious and eloquent use of dance and music as akin with festivity in Africa.

The Festival Motif in *Morountodun*

Music and dance are used in *Morountodun* to achieve the play's radical and revolutionary objective. The fabrics of the play are built on the festival motif of the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria. It provided the legitimate platform for the abundant and creative use of music and dance in the play. In *Morountodun*, music and dance are skillfully employed to create a rich cultural atmosphere, flavour and festive mood. They serve as intermissions between scenes; they are used to comment on the actions of the play and involve the audience emotionally; they are used to achieve aesthetics, spectacle and to enhance the play's visual and aural qualities and significance.

The festival motif is used to achieve the radical objective of *Morountodun*. It imbues the play with the cultural, communal and festive atmosphere associated with African societies. Festivals in African communities provide occasions for unity, merriment and joyous celebration amidst singing, dancing and drumming. The play draws its roots from the Moremi myth of Ile-Ife. The Yorubas, like most traditional Africans, are well known for the veneration of their gods, resulting in a myriad of festival and ceremonies. These activities are motivated and given momentum by music and dance. The cultural, communal and festive nature of the Yorubas, are eloquently expressed in the variety of songs, dance and festive air in *Morountodun*. In the play, people come face to face with war music and dance, music and dance of celebration, of protest, or of work and of the celebration of love, life and history.

Titubi: ... If I offer you cash now... you won't dance for me.... Dance, Ijimere! Dance for me! (She starts the rousing song again, and her followers join again and again clearly intoxicated now...).

This incident which occurred in the first scene between Titubi, her crowd and the director is reminiscent of a typical energy filled ceremony in Yorubaland. Scene seven opens with a war song, setting the mood of antagonism: (*...simultaneously, a war song fills the air in sudden violent upwelling...*). Scene fifteen presents a group of women (peasants) in the stream washing. Afterwards, they play and joke in solidarity and finally the atmosphere changes to that of war. The capricious nature of this scene is well captured in the five songs weaved into it. It opens thus: (*...Dancing silhouette celebrate harvest and gradually disappear... The peasant women again by the stream side. They have finished their washing.... Now they are relaxing, singing, washing their feet in the stream...*). When Marshall and Bogunde appear in the scene - they are playfully prevented from seeing Titubi. As they sing: (she flees behind another woman who also runs till finally they form a circle by linking hands and dancing round Titubi, so that she is still inaccessible to Bogunde. They improvise a short song).

In professing his unending love for Titubi, Marshall presents her with costly beads and names her Morountodun! The ceremony is skillfully presented thus:

Marshal:... I name her Morountodun!
 (Ovation! The women begin to sing the praise Song: -Morountodun eja Oson! They beat out the rhythm on their hands and feet. Marshal Drinks from the gourd and hands, it to Titubi... Kokondi sings a love song. The dance and Merriment are at a peak when Baba entersí)

The scene climaxes in Marshall's resolve to fight to finish along with his peasant warriors. The mood swings and modulating

tempo of the play are achieved through song and dance: (Marshal: I Kokoundi! Kick me awake! Let me have a song of fire to rouse my spirit! (*Kokondi starts a war song which they all pick up*). The rich communal life style of the African, the deep spiritual union with music and dance and extravagant display of cultural splendour is well captured in the play through music and song. It is worthy of note that all the songs in *Morountodun* save two are rendered in Yoruba. This gives the play a sophisticated traditional and cultural Yoruba flavour which is to be savoured. Music and song also function as intermission work songs between scenes. Their brisk nature is meant to aid the set changes. An example is in scene one where Titubi volunteers to assist the superintendent in infiltrating the camp of the peasants: (...*Meanwhile on stage, the actors rearrange the furniture of their dressing area, singing a prison work song. The set now approximates to a prison cell. They salute the officer with the mock song of prisoners*). Also, the song *Àyawo nfo so* at the stream side scene is used for intermission between the stream side scene and the Deputy Superintendent's office.

Most of the scenes begin and end with one song or the other and sometimes endure throughout the scene. This is a calculated technique to set the mood, tempo and climate of the play and ensure a connection with the audience. They also help to heighten dramatic effect and to engender audience involvement and participation. This way, the audience can better appreciate the views being presented in the play. The music and dance in *Morountodun* are utilized effectively to comment on the action on stage. In the eighth scene, the director celebrates the spirit of courage, revolt and revolution in Moremi and by extension all those who dare the consequences and react against exploitation.

Hail Moremi! The huge sacrifice that wards off death. The big offering that prevents diseases. O! like the Ikoyi, you fearlessly faced battle. Moremi! You dared death to bring peace to the World. You braved war that Ile-Ife might be peaceful. No kind deed

is ever forgotten. Moremi has become a deity (worshipped yearly) Moremi is like the sun, You shine so brightly.

As well, the songs are injected in such a way so as to lessen the audience's resistance to the political message being espoused. The image of fruitfulness expressed in the song of the harvest in scene eight symbolizes the metamorphosis of the seed from death to regeneration and then bounteous harvest. This imagistic expression predicts the positive outcome of every resistance against evil which is symbolized by Moremi and Titubi's adventure. The festival motif in *Morountodun* adds to the quality and aesthetic significance of the whole play. The music and dance create beauty, entertainment and direction which are some of the paramount reasons why anyone would visit the theatre. The cultural and traditional atmospheres created by their performance make the play a spectacle to behold, giving extravagant visual and aural pleasures. In the lush atmosphere of music and dance, the audience loosens up and swallows willingly the bitter socialist ideologies which Osofisan intends to pass to the unsuspecting audience.

Morountodun is laced with local songs, music and dance steps projecting the Nigerian culture and the consciousness of negritude. This style must be embraced by stakeholders if we must salvage our culture, values, and identity from extinction. Extinction is possible if we do not consciously preserve and historicize our culture via a delightful agency such as the theatre. We must capture and transmit our cultural idiosyncrasies in our theatre, just as Osofisan has succeeded in doing in *Morountodun*. Because of the passion and energy of the festival motif contained in the play, it possesses participatory qualities that evoke responses from the audience. This technique pulls from the audience that yearning to participate. The songs evoke responses from the audience, who either, shake their heads or tap their feet or make unconscious movement or even sing along. This participatory style of *Morountodun* should be emulated and practiced by younger Nigerian playwrights and theatre makers. After all, the objective of

the theatre is not passivity but correlative responses and purgation of emotions. This participatory technique will only make drama more accessible to the people and more potent in effecting the desired change that the society deeply needs.

Conclusion

Aiwodiya has aptly described Osofisan as an intellectually versatile artist (80). This is consequent upon the robust emotional, ideological and aesthetic quality of his dramaturgy. Osofisan has artistically applied the total theatre technique to lend a provocative and evocative mien to *Morountodun*. His effective use of the theatre motif in *Morountodun* makes the work a master piece and a delight to behold. In his desire to thrill his audience, Osofisan has embarked on a tireless odyssey of adventure and experimentation which have resulted in such quintessential and vintage work as *Morountodun*. Dramatists in Nigeria and Africa should borrow a leaf from this Nigerian theatre virtuoso in order to make African theatre more prolific and scintillating. *Morountodun* is not a static mirror of society, but rather an instrument that provokes the audience to action. In it, Osofisan delicately and consciously connects the audience to history by using familiar mythical artefacts in the ancient Ile-Ife heroine, Moremi and the Agbekoya uprising of 1969 in Oyo State, Nigeria, which has come to represent the symbol of revolution and the will of the people to enforce good and egalitarian governance by any means necessary. When Osofisan artistically envelopes these monuments in the atmosphere of music, dance and the festive energy to create *Morountodun*, he creates a blend of myth, fact and artistic prowess, one that Nigerians and indeed Africans can easily and clearly identify with and thus is absorbed in the theatrical world of Osofisan and his radical ideology. Other playwrights and theatre practitioners must borrow from this tireless passion to infuse creativity and novelty into the theatre. The beauty of the theatre must be summoned to correct the moral decadence and spiritual banalities of contemporary African leaders.

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