NIGERIAN THEATRE JOURNAL
A JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF NIGERIA THEATRE ARTISTS (SONTA)

Editor
Osakue Stevenson Omoera

2023

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Nigerian Theatre Journal:

A Journal of the Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists

Vol. 23 Issue 2 2023

MAKING THEATRE IN DIGITAL SPACES: THE IMPERATIVE OF *IJOV MBAKUV* ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

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Abstract
The evolution of digital technology has affected traditional theatre practice in Tiv society just like it has done in many other African societies. Contemporary developments in theatre have marked differences from the theatre of the past due to massive revolution being witnessed in theatre practice. This is based on the changing phases of human development orchestrated by the advancement in digital and information technology around the globe. Notwithstanding is the hybridization of cultures which has brought about far reaching changing norms and forms in traditional performances of all kinds. The introduction of social media and its various platforms to society has transported traditional theatre from the local mode into a digital media which closes the barrier of distance and increases its visibility to a larger audience. Despite some limitations, the prospects are extensive. This paper considers the Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance from its conduct in the local mode and its transmission to digital platforms on social media. The finding is that, Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance in the digital media is not a counter-theatre but a theatre that has taken advantage of technological advancement and yet, maintaining the elements of its origin and opening the culture of a people for wider access and appreciation by varied audiences. Therefore, the paper notes that, theatre is part of society, the ever-changing nature of society also demands for changes in theatre forms so as to meet up with the yearnings and privileges of a new society. Ijov Mbakuv performance in the digital media is a response to new social demands.

Keywords: Theatre, Digital spaces, Social media platforms, Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv*, Performance.

Introduction

The digital transformation also called the virtual medium of social life has widened the concept of theatre across the globe. The statement accredited to Shakespeare that the world is a stage has become visible now than ever before through

digital space. The interface of technological materials between live performances and the audience has further made complex the ability to differentiate between video production, film or cinema and the theatre. However, scholars such as Beckerman have maintained that cinema production and theatre are not the same. He says "cinema presents a sequence of visual images which can be used to tell a story or describe a place or record an event. It makes use of actors, but they are subordinate to the images. It is the work of the man who arranges the images not the work of the actors themselves that reaches us, the viewers" (4), the medium of performance becomes the nucleus of debate. Where theatre involves acting before an audience with simultaneous reactions (or an occurring/happening event); the film does not. The use of technological materials in recording and transmission delays the reactions and can interfere in the quality of the performance being presented.

Another dimension that could be ambiguous in this context is when one considers the understanding from Doki's *Everyday Life is Theatre: Appropriations and Canonization* (2017), or James E. Combs and Michael W. Manfield's edited articles on *Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Societies* (1976), where humanly organised activities are analysed as theatre. Once this is said, human sociological actions that are not intended or crafted intentionally for audience attention and reaction comes up. For it is not everyday action done by a human being that could be referred to as theatre when the issue of intentionality with the actions performed is examined. Theatre is an intentional action by a human being done in space and witnessed by at least another human being. However, the opposite is that, the virtual theatre seems to be reorganising the sense and concept of theatre. As observed by Svich, "acts of performance are necessarily fleeting… from doubt, new forms have indeed arisen. But the inordinate pressure to bow down to an economic god has distinctly changed the questions artists ask themselves" (16-17). It is common observation that the introduction of home video production in Nigeria, has decimated the patronage of live theatre productions and this is partly due to economic reasons.

The advent of the pandemic (Covid-19) and rising cases of insecurity exacerbated the nostalgia about attending live theatre productions. From all indications, digital technology now places itself on advantage where artists could rehearse their performance, package it and advertise on social media, simply giving a link for the audience to join and watch it virtually. In the midst of this, "questions are being asked about the theatrical experience. Why do people go to the theatre at all? What happens when a spectator identifies with a character on stage? Why should this be valuable, or enjoyable? (Baker 152). These questions summarise that, current theatre practice seems to value and utilize the digital space more for productions with different approaches, different actions and intentions. It also implies that theatre can take place without people necessarily going to a particular venue designate for performance.

Development in digital theatre has sprung up different dimensions of performances. Since theatre goes with the type of society, current thinking and way of life have introduced new thoughts in theatre. Nnamele and Nnalue describe the scenario as "a rapid technological development of theatre and cyber world or virtual

theatre which in turn produced new type of theatres where computer raises consciousness of the people in theatre performances" (13). This is the era of computer manipulation of characters in acting as theatre, projected on the screen. It is an era of simulated digital gadgets for the scenery of action. Nnamele and Nnalue also reading Tony and Kim see the internet as a virtual world and 'meta-stage' where people play different roles such as interacting with each other in adventurous manner as virtual theatre (14). Interrogating this idea and other nomenclatures such as 'Etheatre,' 'Cyborg Theatre,' 'Cyber Drama' and 'Digital or Networked Performances' will in this research amount to derailing from the focus. What shall be considered, therefore, is how digital technology has closed the distance between the audience and the actors in performance through the social media platforms. It is in this context that this article examines the Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance from its conduct in the local mode and its transmission to digital platforms on social media.

Theatre and Digital Space

Theatre utilizes both physical and psychological/philosophical spaces. The physical space is the stage where activities are carried out before the audience. As noted by Arnott, and reiterated by Barranger, originally the term theatre was referred to as a seeing place in the Greek society (20). It is derived from the Greek "theatron" (Barranger 14). However, studies in theatre have exposed the psychological/ philosophical space of the theatre. This space dwells within the playwright, actors, directors, designers and audience interactive exchanges in a play production. It is has been noted that there is "the literary space which can be termed as imaginary space of the playwright's creative construction. In this order, what is to be analysed are the characters drafted from the society into the world of the playwright, as well as the issues drawn for focus" (Fanyam 4). This same analogy can be likened to the psychological/philosophical space as what the digital space utilizes. It is a transient space.

It could be described as transient because it has fluid characteristics which involve the use of technological gadgets in the manipulation, amplification and transmission of images on screen for the audience to watch. It is not tangible whereas, the physical space is tangible and responsive to the stimulus of sight, hearing and touch. Audience watching performances in a physical space can openly interact with the actors on stage and even join them to participate in the story especially in traditional theatres. Most traditional theatres have these peculiarities and characteristics, even the Western theatre stage designs have the same attributes such as the arena, proscenium and thrust-stage platforms. The latter mentioned are common features of the physical space. However, the digital space which is the transient or fluid space has a lot to do with the psychological/ philosophical mannerism of audience who are the receptors of what the actors are presenting on the technological medium. The physical sense of touch is missing in this medium, so the audience rely on forced impressions projected via the screen and in most situations, their reaction does not elicit any feedback.

The digital space is a subjective medium which as it is popular with every computer language, is a matter of 'garbage in and garbage out.' What is described as a digital space is also not only fluid but characteristically, a wide space hosting wide

junk of performances both censored and uncensored, subjective and in few situations involving conferencing, it possesses some elements of objectivity. This means that watching theatre in the digital space requires considerations more than ever, beyond the physical appearance of the actors. This may be compared to performances on the physical space but in the case of the latter, there are dire opportunities for deceit as it is in the digital space, so audience can analyse the stage design and the actions he/she watches at the same time. On the other side, the audience only objectively derive meaning from the theatre through the dialogue, movement and gestures which are often familiar within the human experience. So, theatre in the digital space projects and relies on the psychological and philosophical meaning of the actions staged. It gives less about the environment and often jettisons feedback or reactions from the audience. It is easily manipulated and stereotyped by the producer or content creator.

Ijov Mbakuv **Performance**

Contemporary developments in theatre have marked differences from the theatre of the past to massive revolution being witnessed in theatre practice today. One of the propellants of these changes is the social media platform. The social media platforms are designed for chatting, sharing and posting/hosting sensible information, cultural, economic and political activities of human experience from different environments and backgrounds (Ehiemua and Omoera 185). In the last decades, social media has enhanced communication and exposure to different norms and forms in traditional performances of all kinds. The opportunity provided by these platforms for projecting different cultural materials across the world, enhances appreciation of different people and ethnicities for celebration of their cultures. The Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance is one of such. The performance is hosted on two handles on Facebook platform: *Kwagh alom ken zwa Tiv* and *Tiv kwagh hir*.

Research on the conduct of Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance is contained in Tar Ahura's *Creativity and Continuity in Tiv Oral Play Creating and Performance: A Study of Mammywata Masquerade* (1987), Paul Tse Andera's *Origin, Form and Aesthetics of Selected Tiv Traditional Performances* (2014), Shadrack Teryila Ukuma's *Masquerade Theatre amongst the Tiv of Central Nigeria: The Mammywata in perspective* (2019) and Joel Avaungwa Fanyam's *Design Technologies in Tiv Traditional Performances* (2021). It is important to observe that the titles of these performances vary but contain similarities. Therefore, as read from Tar Ahura's work, the origin of *Ijov-Mbakuv* is traced from the early performances of *Akume* which was a religious based activity in Tiv society, to *Ajigbe* which was secular based. Like other oral traditional forms of performances, *Akume*, where *Ijov-Mbakuv* began, has no precise date of origin. Rather, "its prominent role in the highest Tiv rite (*Ikyase Akombo*) can give some guide as to when it was started" (23-24). Meanwhile, one can incline that Tiv rite (*Akombo*) came into existence at the time when the Tiv were formulating their worldview in an attempt to cope with and understand their world. When one of these members of *Akume* died the Ikyase Akombo ritual was performed." Those who performed the ritual did it for all the old men who have been initiated in the rites.

The implication is that, once a member of the ritual dies his core-initiates will have to repair (*sor*) the rite (*Ikyase Akombo*) to pave way for the progress of the land. At this time, children, women and men of bad or evil dispositions are not allowed to come near the council of elders. Thus, during these occasions *Akume* was performed. In the performance of *Akume*, those who perform wear masks to cover every part of their body. Every performer must have been initiated into a particular rite (*Akombo*) to qualify to join the performance. Part of the costume for the performance is the outer part of the mask which is made of raffia and in different colours. However, the advent of colonization and Christian ministries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Tivland created difficulties for the organization of these performances. The performance was frowned at and jettisoned as idols of heathen practices. The performance of the rite was prohibited even though no law was officially made to back up the prohibition. Therefore, with the colonial administrative law to prohibit the performance, *Akume* gradually disappeared and transformed into *Ajigbe* which was secular. It is *Ajigbe* that later transformed to *Ijov Mbakuv*. *Ajigbe* was designed to deviate from the religious and wild characteristics of the *Akume* performances. Besides, it had a sort of freedom from the colonial administration and Christian missionaries based on two views associated with it. Ahura states that:

> One view has it that *Ajigbe* is an indigenous Tiv masquerade performance that was improvised to replace the banned *Akume*. In order not to court the displeasure of the colonial administration it was divested of its entire religious context and made a secular performance for the purpose of entertainment during the Christmas and New Year celebrations. As a secular performance its aim was also to earn money for the group. The performers wore body masks that were made of raffia as in *Akume* except that the dance was changed. The raffia was dyed in different colours, though not the exact colours as in *Akume* for obvious reasons. This time the steps were jumpy moving from side to side. They also wore face masks made from wood. Another view has it that *Ajigbe* is a foreign masquerade performance that came into Tivland from eastern Nigeria probably around the Roman Catholic missionaries since it was the eastern Catholics that popularized it even outside eastern Nigeria. This view has it that *Ajigbe* was originated around the Roman Catholic Mission and was performed during bazaars and Christmas celebrations. It was from here that it gained popularity and spread all over Tivland especially as *Akume* had just been banned, so it came as a welcome secular substitute. This view is supported by the fact that the dance step is exactly like the malinge dance which was a popular dance in the Catholic schools. (32)

Furthermore, the Tiv people are music and dance lovers. It is possible that the Catholic missionaries discovered this habit and quickly introduced the malinge dance which could serve in the absence of the *Akume* performance. Therefore, one can conclude from the two views available on *Ajigbe* performances stated above that, the Tiv people saw the need for a social activity devoid of religion and decided to recreate their *Akume* performances in the form of *Ajigbe* to suit what was acceptable by the colonial administration at that time. *Ajigbe* then was not religious but was performed

during the religious Christmas ceremony and the New Year celebrations just as the malinge performance. From the start, the mask used for *Ajigbe* was designed from a broken calabash but the growth of aesthetics of the face masks moved from the broken calabash to a more complex wood carving. This means that the Tiv people borrowed the idea of face masks of wood carvings that were introduced by missionaries into the society and indigenized it using the Tiv indigenous materials and design. Again, "since *Akume* was frowned at by the colonial administration, efforts were made not to pick up too many of the things with which *Akume* was associated with. Yet the continuities or linkages were obvious enough as in the use of raffia for the body masks, the holding of a whip and the fearlessness as shown in the braving of the spirits" (Ahura 32-35).

After the Tiv people had succeeded in creating a performance that was tolerable with the colonial administration, it was easy to recreate it and link it up to their worldview. This gave rise to the creation of *Ijov Mbakuv*. In the Tiv belief system, *Mbakuv* is considered an abode of spirits while *Ijov* (singular) is considered as a spirit which lives in the abode of spirits called *Mbakuv*. This is "more or less a metaphysical creation of the Tiv to explain the continuity in the world of man, spirits and the land. It is believed that *Mbakuv* is a place where the natural spirits and sometimes the spirits of the dead mix freely and carry their nightly chores" (Ahura 35). Akiga (cited in Hagher) "defines *Ijov* as the thing that appears in human shape, but no one who sees it. It lives in the wood or in the hills, and does whatever it pleases; good and evil. (26). Similarly, Hagher sees the concept of *Ijov* as "the unseen counterparts of man, that engage in all human activities, but in addition to this are free from the control of Mbatsav" (25). This means that *Ijov Mbakuv* performance is an attempt to explain the carved figurine on the masks which appear in the seeming nature of human beings. Hagher specifically claims that "the Tiv believes in the existence of *Adjov* (plural of *Ijov*) as the spirits that occupy the same space as the Tiv, engage in the same art of living (cultural practices) and at times could manifest themselves in human form" (25). It is correct to assume at this point that with the evolving or emergence of face masks made of wood figural carving, it became more suggestive for the Tiv man to refer to such performance as *Ijov Mbakuv*. This idea brought the performance closer to their religious belief even though religious conditions were not prevalently attached to it.

Tar Ahura alleged that one Atem Ikye claimed to have originated the performance with the target to frighten stubborn or heady children in his compound so that they will desist from the wrong behaviour and conform to the acceptable behaviour or they will be captured by *Ijov Mbakuv* (36). Normally, stories about the performance of *Ijov Mbakuv* are weaved in story telling performances called tales about the hare (kwagh u alom) which is very popular in Tiv society. These are stories used for oral or traditional education. The creation of *Ijov Mbakuv* theatre is then an attempt to bring to physical realm the spirit (*Ijov Mbakuv*) held in Tiv belief. Ahura claims that "the aim was to produce a grotesque appearance that would accomplish the aim of inducing the fear" (37). He further asserts that the mask had a social function, "it is what Meki Nzewi describes as being a potent entity endowed with livingness and apportioned some earthly role by man" (Ahura 37). The *Ijov Mbakuv* performance thus serves a social function with specific cultural meaning. It is imbued with the policing

function which the *Akume* performance hitherto had, except that it is denied of ritual content. This performance which started as a way of checking erring children has now spread across Tivland.

Successively, those who were captivated with the performance adopted it to their communities and soon introduced new changes. The performance also took a new dimension from a child's play to a serious affair. Tiv drums, metal gongs, flute, choral stand, etc., were also added to it. The performance also moved from compounds of the group leaders to the market square and other areas in search of money. That is to say that, people saw in the performance the ability to make money from the audience. Thus, the performance became competitive. What came into Tivland as a form of borrowed culture became a refined and dominant part of Tiv cultural activities. In fact, with the sculptor's imagination and variation of these face masks into the market, it became a booming business even for sculptors, "since every kindred or clan tried to have at least one performing group of its own" (Ahura 42).

Similarly, new sculptural face mask designs which flooded the market coming from eastern part of Nigeria, gave a boom to the performance with new title such as *Mammywata* which is akin to its familiarization from the Igbo culture and the riverine areas. This theatre is always performed during Christmas and New Year celebrations across Tivland. But in recent times, it enjoys skeletal appearances and less competitions due to influences of the digital media which also create alternatives for recreating activities. Despite this trend, Tiv people are still eager to watch it any time it appears. Ukuma observes that, "the *Mammywata* has come to be established as a seasonal masquerade performance amongst the Tiv" (286). However, the introduction of social media and its various platforms to the society has transported traditional theatre from the local mode into a digital media which closes the barrier of distance and increases its visibility to a larger audience despite some limitations and of course, the prospects are far reaching. In the next section, the limitations and its advantages will be analyzed.

Challenges and Prospects

It is evident that technology has brought social life into a new form as it is experienced today. The digital space has projected happenings in every sphere of human existence in almost every discipline on earth. As one reels through these happenings, there is a conceding sense of optimism mixed with pessimism over participation of human experience through projected images on digital facilities. A feeling created by the panic about what next will happen to our cultures as well as the confidence that our practices too have found its way before others for their consumption and appreciation. As Svich notes, "the once divinely ordained universe has been split many times over, and as citizens of the global village we have become inheritors of a new way of thinking about the essential nature of randomness in our lives" (15). This new way of thinking and the nature of randomness is anything but visible in the social media of communication.

The development of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and YouTube have opened a wide space of digital participation of human

experience in such random nature. Different people post different performance experiences on the platforms for the world to see. Hence, these apps are available on mobile phones, the accessibility and participation through reaction and responses is enhanced for those sharing the experience and those receiving it. There is that opportunity to randomly access performance experiences as one clicks on different posts on the social media platforms. As regards the Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performances hosted on social media platform, you can easily access it on google search. The advantages of this are many: it allows for on the spot recording or distribution of videos on the performance to a large viewership. Since the social media can be operated with mobile phones, arts performances going on within a traditional locality can be easily transmitted on the social media platform and made available to present and distant audiences. Such performances can be documented through other digital materials and kept for future use. It could also be edited and transformed into another form.

The latter, however, accounts for some disadvantages or limitations with the digital technology, especially where the original form of the performance can be tinkered with or edited into another form. It can likely create a counter culture from the original culture. More so, some restricted or classified boundaries that are not cultural bound could be exposed to the audience on the social media. For instance, watching *Ijov Mbakuv* on the social media adversely affects the physical patronage of the audience to the artist work. It affects the touch or physical characteristics and peculiarities of the performance where in traditional African circles, the audience can freely participate as an actor and audience simultaneously. Another limitation is that, it takes away the copyright of the performance and the benefits from the artist who may not be in control of the material on the digital space. Hence, anybody can post it and anybody can watch it without gratification to the artist.

Be that as it may, there are prospects. The easy availability and accessibility to this material that is hosted on social media platforms helps a great deal by informing interested audience about it. Not only that, one would understand that there are different motives for hosting, sharing or posting performances on the social media. It may be to create awareness, educate, document or entertain. The case of Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance bears the four, being to create awareness about the existence of such cultural material, to educate the Tiv young people in urban centres and in diaspora about aspects of their culture, most of whom may not have experienced it. More so, to document it and entertain the Tiv people and other interested audience within the Tiv society and outside the society. By the means of social media, not only is it interesting for one to watch one's culture on display, it saves cost for one who may need to travel long distances to watch the performance in the villages. It also draws one to the honour and prestige of one's culture. In the spate of incessant challenges of insecurity, one is also conserved within one's bedroom to entertain one on an art performance that could have been performed in a distant village in an open space under the sun or moon. The digital space helps to preserve the performance. Hence, it is safer to store documents in space now than in some technological materials such as CDs, DVDs, tapes, among other devices.

Conclusion

This article has posited that the Tiv *Ijov Mbakuv* performance as it is currently in the digital media is not a counter-theatre but a theatre that has taken advantage of technological advancement to maintain the elements of its origin and opening the culture of a people for wider access and appreciation by varied audience. The interface of technological materials between live performances and the audience has further made complex the ability to differentiate between video production or film and the theatre. Digital or virtual theatre seems to be reorganizing the sense and concept of theatre. The introduction of social media and its various platforms to society has transported traditional theatre from the local mode into digital media that closes the barrier of distance and increases its visibility to a larger audience. In this new form, it becomes a digital material open to editing and limited boundaries as opposed to its originality but creating awareness, education, documentation and entertainment. Therefore, theatre is part of society and the ever-changing nature of society also demands for changes in theatre forms so as to meet up with the yearnings and privileges of a new society.

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