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Review Article on African Theatres and Performances

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Introduction

This book of six brilliantly researched chapters is the first in the Routledge' *Theatres of the World* series, a framework for exploring selected theatre and performance traditions from various cultures of the world. The book uses examples, all popular and still culturally relevant in their respective regions in West Africa, to offer readers an exciting excursion into the aesthetics, production, and reception of indigenous African performance forms, why they continue to challenge their primary audiences and readers, and their capacities to evolve new interpretations. The book is based on four performance forms: the *Mmonwu* and *Bori* of Igbo and Hausa societies of Nigeria respectively, *Jaliya*; the musical oral tradition of the Mandinka *griots* and *griottes* of Senegal and the entire Senegambia basin that stretches as far as to Ghana in the east and Guinea-Bissau in the north-west, and lastly, the *Koteba*; the comedy and satire of the Bamana people of Mali known for its combination of effusive humor and loquacious banter. Each of the four forms or case studies is located within a socio-cultural milieu in which they have not only overcome historical upheavals but out of which they have continued to evolve in new directions and spawn internal aesthetic variations without losing their relevance and popularity.

Mmonwu, *Bori*, *Jaliya* and *Koteba* mirror the cultural landscapes of their particular societies; as examples of the diversities of performance forms in Africa and globally, Okagbue's choices are astute and significant for these are forms that do not only reverberate with cultural and historical developments, all four continue to catalogue and arbitrate social interactions locally. They satisfy these roles on accounts of their capacities to mirror the concerns of their respective

societies, in their integration of the serious and comic, and through serving as instruments of reflection and renewal. In other words, readers are not only given an account, they are invited backstage to view the making of the performances, to view the makers at work in collaboration with their audiences. The result is a book that offers readers the privilege of appreciating with insight and knowledge, how and with what each performance is made and presented. The book presents an objective theorized interrogation of the presentation and reception strategies of the forms and why they have remained successful. It offers more than an intelligent analysis and reading of the performances. It is also a practical guide for readers

Content, Scope and Management of Information

Each of the book's four main chapters focuses on a specific regional performance. In a brilliantly argued introduction, Okagbue's scholarly *expose* locates African theatres and performances within general performance discourse. He uses a number of established theoretical and critical paradigms to distinguish indigenous African performances from the new African dramas and theatres that came with colonialism and the western forms that some of them resemble or imitate. His recourse to Enekwe's (1987) and his own previous writing on the ritual/theatre interface in Igbo (Nigerian) masking (1993), Victor Turner's (1968) cultural performances, Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory* (1988) and other writings, Ruth Finnegan's (1970) misapplication of Eurocentric aesthetics to African performance, the constantly re-surfacing debate by the relativist and evolutionist schools of African drama and theatre such as M. J. C. Echeruo's (1981) about the development of Igbo drama from its ritual roots, is very illuminating and makes the work accessible to every type of reader. The introduction does not merely reveal the scope of the supporting research and the rationale for each case study; it sets up an effective, accessible presentation format for the book. Okagbue's aesthetic and theoretical frameworks are well critiqued and derive from a combination of specifically African and some global conventions and contexts. He avoids the temptation to romanticize the case studies but his detailed analyses justify the book's format and presentation style.

In Chapter 2 Okagbue interrogates *Mmonwu* masking in Igbo society in Eastern Nigeria as encounters between communities and their ancestors and spirits. His discussions of performance contexts, space use and spatial arrangements, management and organization of the theatre, training, rehearsal practices and staging techniques, performer-audience interactions, and the huge array of support structures and design principles surrounding every aspect of the theatre, from mask designs to costuming are quite revealing. Readers are given an overview of the drama, the plot, and narrative patterns of particular performances, the intertextuality prevalent in the combination of performance forms of music, dance, and drama in all four performances with the *Koteba* (in Chapter 5) providing a highly entertaining mix of social commentary and satirical comedy. The book's examples of *Mmonwu* and *Koteba* are awash with human

foibles and diverse theatrical scenarios, all used to communicate local wisdom and practices.

The book debunks the view held in certain circles about the preponderance of symbolism and its effects on narrative; it provides interpretations of sample dialogues from each case study, revealing how simple cryptic dialogue and semiotic signs provide a performance language that effectively defines characters and stage business. While the characters require little elaboration, audiences' interactions with them are not only expected and anticipated, the resulting proxemic behaviors is active rather than passive and are of necessity factored into both the making and reception of presentations. This is quite unlike in modern dramas in which audiences are expected but required to keep to their section of the venue. In fact, although many of the characters in the stated performances, such as the spirit characters in *Mmonwu*, *Bori*, and in the masquerade / marionette genre of *Koteba* are very familiar to locals, non-locals sometimes find the sheer sophistication of their narrative, and the production and presentation strategies far too complex to follow. This book simplifies all that.

The writer varies his approach slightly in the case studies but for what turns out in the conclusion, to be a deliberate invitation to readers to appreciate African theatre, not merely as an aesthetic form but for its application and functionalism. This platform works very well in his explication of *Bori*, the ritual theatre of the Hausa of Northern Nigeria that has although continued to develop its theatrical elements, is also primarily applied to healing practices and functions that pre-date pagan, pre-Islamic ethnic societies in Northern Nigeria. In *Bori*, Okagbue revisits the 'interdependent relationship with spirits and deities' (Okagbue, 2007: 59) and communities as well as exploring how as theatre, the performance addresses complex themes and issues ranging, from homosexuality, transvestitism, gender imbalance, to women's roles and various forms of social and cultural marginalization.

Two of the many features that emerge from the book's analyses of *Mmonwu*, *Bori*, *Jaliya* and *Koteba* are the range of characters and themes; Okagbue boldly asserts and is right to do so, that the range of characters and themes in *Bori* are as varied as the human conditions and relationships that the Hausa imagination can conjure. The four performances share some common traits; the theatrical and performative features (Schechner, 1985, 1990) reveal the careful aesthetic decisions that underpin displays, the transformability of forms and contexts from ritual, cure, or therapy to aesthetic theatre and social commentary and vice versa, and the extents to which contextual changes shape performances. The book's discussion of *Bori* and *Jaliya* in particular re-opens debate and challenges in some respects, the views expressed elsewhere about the marginalization of women in African performance and especially in masking; Onyeneke, (1987); Kerr, (1995); Ukaegbu, (1996 and 2007), their places in *Jaliya* and *Koteba* are more positive and favourable.

Jaliya is the art of Mandinka storytellers, genealogists, panegyrist, entertainers, and singers in which performers transform commentaries about friendships, patronage, affection, obnoxious people and behaviors, into humorous

confrontations and banter with audiences. The performances are based on true life commentaries whose subjects cover anything in Mandinka imagination. They involve a mixture of standardized performance behavior and improvisation and consist mainly of singing, recitations, dance, music, and brief exchanges. Such exchanges may take the forms of 'calls and responses' between performers on one hand and between them and audience members on another, 'broadcasting' (as in when a *griot* (man) or *griotte* (woman) amplifies for another or as a distinct presentation in its own right. In a climate in which contextual shifts account for variations in forms, Okagbue simplifies matters for readers by identifying four main types of *Jaliya* based on performance occasions, forms of interaction between performers and their audiences, the setting and spatial conventions, and on the music instruments. What emerges is a theatre of many functions, and although based on a Dakar Senegalese example, remains a unique theatrical form that unlike most in Africa, transmits cultural history of the Mandinka people in their spiritual heartland in Mali and beyond to Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau.

The chapter on *Koteba* (which means 'big snail' in Bambara) offers a different indigenous performance experience that is found in varying degrees of sophistication in many African countries and societies; sustained dramatization and developed characterization, plot and narrative. *Koteba* is the generic name for the concept of theatre and for all Bamana indigenous performances. It indicates the concentric circles formed by the arrangement of performers and spectators at performances and symbolizes the culture and worldview of the Bamana. This conceptual feature explains the book's identification of two main types of *Koteba* as masquerades and marionettes performances, and satiric and farcical sketches. The book outlines other important specifications for the two genres; the former deals with mythical figures, is distant and rarely speaks to or about the realities of its audience while the latter deals with contemporary life situations, is more immediate and relevant to the experiences and concerns of audiences. *Koteba* is staged and supported by the *ton*, a very well-structured organization whose membership is open to men (from 15 to 45 years) and women (from 15 – 27 years).

The effect of the *ton's* association with the development and staging of *Koteba* is evident in the well defined production roles similar to guilds, the nature of artistic training and the maintenance of formal performance venues as in modern theatres. The subjects of *Koteba* are usually conservative elders, women and foreigners; the comedy derives mainly from absurdity and incongruity such as in muscular men struggling to fit into tight frocks and deliberately using husky voices in imitation of women. Any subject from a wide range of domestic and public scenarios could provide the stimulus for comedy, many examples of which the book provides. As with the other case studies and the common trend in most of Africa, *Koteba* staging, in terms of props, costumes and make-up, is minimalist and symbolic. Characterization in the form can be simple or complex, while personal and set props enjoy a level of multiple functions and uses that is absent elsewhere.

The Significance of the book in African Performance Discourse

The book side-steps cultural debate and polemics, Okagbue uses contextual and conceptual rationalizations to argue, but only in muted sense, that the most effective mechanism for the reading and critiquing of African performances is one, that in addition to the usual pre-occupations with aestheticism, plots, storylines and elaborate narratives as in modern theatres, includes aural and visual production and reception strategies in their own rights. Thus, the book's interrogation of the case studies within their cultural settings reiterates the significance of supporting structures and organizations, an understanding of the nature of performers' training and the difficulty there is in overlooking these factors and communal participation as legitimate critical indicators in African performance discourse. Among its many qualities, discussions on the features of *Koteba* and a majority of those in *Mmonwu*, *Bori*, and *Jaliya* reveal not only the distinctiveness of each form; they indicate the very richness and wealth of these traditional forms that modern African dramas and theatres will continue to rely on and draw upon.

Language, Style and Readability

The title of the book ought to have been different as the information is on West African forms and no reference is made to other regions of the continent. However, this regrettable slip does not detract from the wealth of information, and the timeliness of this publication at a time scholars are re-defining and shaping discourse in African theatres and performances. The book is written in confident graphic language and an expression style that reveals the confidence and assurance one would associate with the work of a researcher who knows his subject, firstly on account of the quality and scope of research and secondly, because of his or her familiarity with the area. Okagbue has both and the effects are all over the book. What the book demonstrates is not only the thoroughness of the supporting research, the writer's (and publisher's) decision to use pictures of performances to evoke and to underline theatrical actions and important features of the four performances is useful and significant. These features of the book give readers a first hand experience of the performances as well as directing their inquiry through appropriately-titled sub-sections and very effective language. In fact, the book anticipates readers' potential queries about the different types and functions of performances in Africa, who the performances are for, why and how they are structured, their combination of literal and metaphoric language, staging techniques, performers' training and supporting organizations and structures, the complexity of theatrical reality, etc.

Conclusion

African Theatres and Performances is a very significant contribution to African performance discourse, an obligatory reading for students, scholars and

practitioners of theatre and performance everywhere. Okagbue's delicate handling of material and information will appeal to a diverse category of readership; from theatre and performance academics and practitioners with scholarly and professional interests to researchers and students of African and cross cultural studies for whom the work is a real mine of education and information. The book has something for every reader, whether they are in educational settings, in the creative and performance industry, or they choose to read it for sociological and general interests.

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