

The Art of Directing in African Traditional Theatre

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Abstract

The existence of the director in African traditional theatre has always been a subject of controversy amongst theatre scholars. While some scholars believe that the director exists in African traditional theatre, others, especially Euro-American theatre sympathizers, radically disagree. This belief is premised on the argument that African traditional performances do not have sufficient theatrical elements to qualify as theatre. However, this researcher supports the position that African theatre does exist, and tries to locate the place of the director in African traditional performances. Furthermore, it examines what constitutes African theatre, its advantages and disadvantages, and goes on to examine the directorial aesthetics and implications of directing on the African stage, as this would provide directors who want to direct or reinvent African traditional performances with the necessary information and guide they need. The study employs the case study and content analysis research approaches of the qualitative research method to realize set objectives. This researcher observed that studies on the art of directing in African traditional theatre are few, and therefore calls for more studies to be carried out in this area to fill the knowledge gap.

Keywords: Directing, African Traditional Theatre, Stage, Fluidity, Arena Staging

1. Introduction

The word directing has been given a lot of definitions by theatre scholars and has acquired a lot of meaning overtime. Inih Ebong (2001) describes it as:

A behind -the-scene activity between the director and his team to create in the ‘private’ seclusion of the theatre, away from the curious and prying eyes of the public, the three-dimensional beauty that is seen on stage in production (p.27).

Robert Wills (1976) defines directing as the process of transforming personal vision into public performance (p.3). This therefore means that the director tries to convert his personal vision into reality before an audience using the human and material resources of the theatre. Johnson (2003) agrees with this position when he observes that directing is an intellectually-tasking, creative theatrical stage activity, which involves the management of artistic personnel and creative devices towards a deliberate moulding of a perceived vision, into its most sublime form (p.57). Bell-Gam (2007) describes directing as the auditory or visual interpretation of a play-script by the artistic director (p.71). For Oga (2007), it is the art of harmonizing the contributions of the various artistic collaborators in a theatrical production. The contributions of the different artistic collaborators manifest in the following areas: playwriting, acting, set design and construction, lighting, costume, make-up, stage properties and sound/sound effects (p.88). Therefore, theatre directing involves the creative interpretation of a play-script by an artistic director using the artistic and the non-artistic personnel of the theatre to present a play in the presence of an audience at a given place and at a particular time.

Theatre directing is a relatively new phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and is still developing. The role of the director began to receive particular attention during the modern age. Today, the position of the director has grown from a place of insignificance to a position where he wields and commands a lot of respect in the theatre. Prior to this, in ancient Greece, the “Choregus”, who was the head of the chorus, directed plays and was in charge of coordinating song and movement. Bell-Gam (2007) adds to this view when he opines that in ancient Greek theatre, the director was called “Didaskalos”, which if translated in English means teacher. The choregus “producer” was also a director (p.71). During this time, playwrights bore the responsibility of staging their plays and may have also done the casting by themselves. This tradition continued till the Roman times. During the Medieval era, it was the “Master of Secrets” (special effects expert), who was in charge of coordinating the productions. Later, during the Renaissance, there were Actor- Managers, who were usually senior actors in a troupe. These bore the responsibility of choosing the work, staging it, as well as managing the company.

However, modern directing began in the nineteenth century, with the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, who was chiefly a painter and a stage designer (Clurman, 1972, p.10). Meiningen was noted for unifying productions. He established the idea of ensemble playing, the coordination of various components of an acting company, so that a unified impression might be created-the total performance. This signaled the beginning of modern directing and gave birth to the myriads of styles and approaches in directing today.

1.1 Types of Directors

There are three types of directors in the theatre, which Oscar Brockett, Cameron and Hoffman, and Wilson have

identified. The first type is that director that faithfully follows a playwright's script to arrive at the playwright's vision. This director is known as the "Slavish director". For Cameron and Hoffman, this type of director is a slave because he recognizes, accepts and follows the playwright as his master. This type of director can hardly look beyond the script; rather he/she obliges the playwright with obeisance of all instructions and if he/she has doubts, goes for consultation and discussion with the playwright to seek clarity (as cited in Johnson, 2003, p. 67). The second type of director is known as the "Auteur director". As observed by Johnson, this is the director that picks up a script and relates with it meaningfully to the extent of using it as a raw material for creation. This director remains fluid and independent enough and in a creative spirit of readiness to contribute additions or subtractions to the script, does not hesitate in doing so in an attempt to enforce or enhance the vision intended for communication (2003, p.68). David Cook describes the auteur-director as that particular director with a recognizable and distinctive style who is considered the prime 'author' of a film or in this case, a stage production (2004, p.910). Unlike the first type of director who merely takes someone else's vision and expresses same on stage; the auteur director is interested in experimenting with techniques, form and content. The hallmark of auteur directors are that:

- They repeatedly return to the same subject matter.
- They habitually address a particular psychological or moral theme.
- They employ a recurring style.
- They stick to a particular genre.
- They demonstrate any combination of the above.

The third type of director is what Milly Barranger describes as the reverse of the auteur-director and becomes the servant or coordinator of a group of actors, thereby de-emphasizing his/her vision of the play and rather opening his/herself much more to the suggestion, criticisms and encouragements of the group (1991, p.94). This type of director is called the "Collaborative director". In the words of Barranger:

This organic method involves director and actors working together in rehearsals to develop movements, gestures, character relationships, stage images and line interpretations. Rather than entering the rehearsal period with entirely preset ideas, the director watches, listens, suggests and selects as the actors rehearse the play (1991, p.98).

This style of collaborative approach to directing is common with experimental directors like Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Eugene Barbara, Joseph Chackin, Johny Papp and many others.

It is important to note that while the already identified three types of directors exist in the literary theatre; where plays performed are written according to the conventional principles of composing and performing drama, there exist another group of directors in Africa, who may not possess degrees in play directing, or have any formal education in the arts of the theatre, but are responsible for the organization and realization of traditional performances. This group of directors is known as the "Community/Traditional theatre director". These are the leaders or controllers of traditional or cultural groups who perform the role of overseeing these groups, rehearsing and ensuring that rehearsals hold, and that performances are successful. Musa (2002), citing the Nigerian situation, opines that the theatre directors under this group are hardly aware of their nomenclature as 'theatre directors'. They are the leaders, organizers and controllers of traditional festivals, community related performances and social entertainments, and all forms of cultural performances. Their position as leaders of community related festivals and cultural performances is thrust upon them as a result of their lineage or occupation. At times, they are spiritual leaders who must organize ritual performances for societal edification and social well being (p.52).

Although there are no written records regarding the exact date of the beginning or origin of the community or traditional theatre director, however, they are the facilitators and the organizers of most Nigerian traditional festivals and cultural performances whose origin can be traced to the Pre-colonial times. Examples are the Ologbin Ologbojo of the Alarinjo Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre, who founded his own theatre, instructed a carver to carve for him, engaged the services of a costumier and handled improvisations, as well as the harmonization of the efforts of other performance collaborators (Musa, 2002, p. 53). Another is the Akwafaribo (master drummer) in the Nji-Owu performance of Opobo in Rivers State, Nigeria, whose major function is to organize, control, manage, discipline, explain, motivate, inspire, dictate and command the entire members of the cultural troupe to ensure a successful performance.

1.2 .Qualities of the Director

The theatre director must be well knowledgeable in the arts of the theatre. His position as a director and the leader of the creative and artistic arm of the theatre makes him a jack of all trades but a master of none. Corroborating this position, Susan Cole (1992) in her book entitled *Directors in Rehearsal*, identified some attributes of the theatre director, they include:

Director as Father-Figure, Director as Mother, Director as Ideal Parent, Director as Teacher, Director as Ghost, Invisible Presence, Director as Third Eye, Director as

Voyeur, Director as Ego or Superego, Director as Leader of an Expedition to Another World, Director as Autocratic Ship Captain, Director as Puppet-Master, Director as Sculptor/Visual Artist, Director as Midwife, Director as Lover, Director as Marriage Partners, Director as Literary Critic, Director as Trainer of Athletic Team, Director as Trustee of Democratic Spirit, Director as Psychoanalyst, Director as Listener, Surrogate Audience, Director as Author, Director as Harrower/ Gardner, Director as Beholder, Ironic Recuperator of the Maternal Gaze (p.5).

In the same vein, Bell-Gam (2007) asserts that the obvious qualities in directing include instructing, advising, explaining, teaching, motivating, inspiring, listening, creating, crafting, encouraging, timing, scheduling, managing and organizing (p.71). As such, all these qualities must be present if the director must achieve his defined objectives with his production team. For Harold Clurman, the director must be an organizer, a teacher, a politician, a psychic detective, a lay analyst, a technician, a creative being. Ideally, he should know literature (drama), acting, the psychology of the actor, the visual arts, music, history and above all, he must understand people. He must inspire confidence, all of which means he must be a “great lover” (1972, p.14). The above submissions illustrate why the director’s job is a very complex and tasking one. In Musa’s opinion, if the director cannot dance properly, he has to know the artistic relevance of the various dances prevalent in his environment and their relevance to his repertory. If he cannot sing melodiously, he must understand music and know when discordant tunes and tones are to be corrected. As a designer, he must also know the relevance of colour to his various theatrical concepts. If he has not received any formal training in costuming and makeup, he must be a willing collaborator and adviser in the art of costuming and makeup (2002, p.47).

Furthermore, a director must be logical when making decisions and not rely on sentiments because sentiments could hamper a production. The director must learn to have a warm disposition towards those he is working with. He must be disciplined, regular, time conscious and punctual at rehearsals. He must have good listening and observing abilities. He must be humble. Oga .C. Emanuel, speaking on humility, opines that humility is one of the striking qualities of a good director. However, it is important to note that such humility must not mean stupidity. The director may welcome suggestion, comments and opinions at appropriate moments. But on no account should the director allow actors/actresses or other theatre workers to usurp his/her role (2007, p. 90). A director must have high cognitive and intuitive abilities; he must be intelligent and be able to inspire confidence from his actors. He must be diplomatic, imaginative and creative. He or she must possess managerial skills which are necessary in managing the human and material resources of the theatre. He must learn and know how to manage time; he must be patient, accommodating and also authoritative. He must be familiar with play productions, willing to learn, ready to accept corrections and challenges, and confident in himself. He must know when to stand his ground, be good in public relations and must possess the sixth sense.

2. African Traditional Theatre

African traditional theatre refers to those forms of entertainments and theatrical nuances that were in existence before the colonization of Africa by the Europeans. For Krama (2000), African traditional theatre is an expression of the people, institutions and experiences of the African communal society (p.3). Traditional or cultural festivals are also part and parcel of African traditional theatre. As observed by Ebo (2012, p.170), commenting on the Nigerian situation, it is observed that live theatre in Nigeria is as old as the Nigerian society because the pre-colonial theatre, rooted in the people’s antiquity was a live theatre. African traditional theatre manifested in the people’s festivals, initiation ceremonies, dance, mime and other rituals that marked the birth and death of every African.

2.1 Characteristics of African Traditional Theatre/Stage

1. African traditional theatre originated from the ritualistic practices of Africans, just like the Greek theatre. The places of performances include shrines, burial grounds, forests etc., where rites and other traditional ceremonies are performed.
2. As observed by Bakery, African traditional theatre is not mutually exclusive in rites and festivals but in secular activities in the form of storytelling, as well as an array of genres. It could involve not a straight forward narrative but a real dramatic scene interpreted by a performer to whom the audience listens and whom they acclaim with their cheers and encourage with their laughter (as cited in Krama, 2000, pp. 8-9).
3. African traditional theatre does not only bear ritual contents, it also has in it storytelling as well as the retelling of myth and history.
4. African traditional theatre is divided into secular and sacred forms. The sacred forms are theatrical forms tied to ceremonies of worship in context of its origin. These range from rites of passage and propitiation. These performances are sometimes closed to outsiders, while the secular forms refer to those rituals, ceremonies of worship and activities that serve dual purposes. They may still be tied to worship but can

- also be performed out of context. Most secular forms are myths and legends lifted from rites or life processes (Krama, 2000, pp. 9-10).
5. African traditional theatre thrives in the communal nature of the African society. It does not seek to alienate the individual as is common with Western theatre, but strives to reintegrate the individual back into the community. As such, African theatre thrives in communal existence.
 6. The structure of the African theatre is cyclical and not lineal, as is evident in Western theatrical structures. The Western theatre, in terms of structure, terminates at the denouement, which may alienate the individual and the community. However, African theatre extends into reincorporation expressed in the feasting and convivial games which celebrates the oneness of the community despite the extent of demise or defeat. African theatre has three dimensional structure of opening (separation), performance or action (threshold) and gamous or resolution (reincorporation), which extends beyond the confines of structured time, location and theory (Krama, 2000, p. 14).
 7. African traditional theatre has evolved into a modern theatre which has two categories: Popular or Folk theatre and the Literary theatre. The popular or folk theatre as a genre of African theatre developed from secular rites and thrives more in urban centres. It draws heavily from oral tradition and festivals. The folk or popular theatre in Nigeria was popularized by Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo etc. The Alarinjo, Kwahir, Khana/Bornu Puppet and Wizzy are examples of folk theatre. While the Literary theatre is a genre of African theatre modelled after European theatre models, in terms of content and structure. The themes range from adaptations of European stories in African settings or exploitation of African folk stories based on European structures (Krama, 2000, p. 11).
 8. The elements of African theatre include Rituals (libations, festivals, magic, spell, masquerade), Speech Surrogates (chants, prayers, songs, riddles and incantations), Instrumentals Sounds (signals, flutes, drums, bells, rattles etc), Costumes (masks, stools, skins, weapons, clothes, live animals, tattoos, scarification etc), Drums, Audience, Actors, Gods etc (Krama, 2000, p. 23).
 9. Legends and myths are strong elements of African traditional theatre. Legends are stories about historic personages handed down by tradition, which are believed by many but cannot be proven to be true, while myths are tales about a hero or the early history of a people, usually involving supernatural beings and events. When certain activities or events become out dated, they serve as references or myths.
 10. The audience of African traditional theatre is part of the performance (participant-audience). The audience consists of members of the community and they make contributions in the creation of the performance. The performance mode of African traditional theatre can be christened “festival theatre”. Ola Rotimi, a renowned Nigerian theatre director and playwright used this term to describe his directing style; which aims to reenact the African communal experiences.
 11. Although, in African traditional performance stage, the acting area is clearly defined by the nature of the performance space, the flow of the performance or rites clearly defines the actors and the audience, even if there is the absence of an arch separating the spectators from the performers; one can define the audience from the actors.
 12. The actors in traditional African theatre comprise human actors, spirit actors, and audience actors. The human actors as observed by Krama (2000) have no limitation in terms of number or gender as both male and female actors play complementing roles. The Chief Priest or a prominent actor may be a male or female, depending on the role and nature of the performance. In the Gbogo Ko and Iria rites of Ogoni, Kalabari and Abua, in Nigeria, the female roles are prominent. In masquerade performances, though the males carry the masks, the females may be the attendants or dancers. The human actors include dancers, drummers, mask carriers, attendants, choric groups and the audience. At some points, there is fluidity in the distinction between the audience and the prominent actors. The audience may join in the dance or may interrupt into the performing area to cheer or paste money and gifts on the performers. At this point, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the spectators and the actual performers. The spirit actors; the gods, are also believed to be actively present in the performance. Sometimes, the gods become physically visible by the presence of a masquerade or totem, and sometimes invisible only to be communicated through signs or mediums like the Priests. The spirit actors include gods and ancestors; and accounts for why certain leaps and falls by performers may be attributed to the influence of the gods and spirits, who are present at the event. The audience actors comprises the people who gather to watch the performance without participating (nominal audience), the audience which actively participates in the performance (participant - audience), and the spirit audience which represents the presence of the gods and ancestors, which are believed to be present; supervising the performance (p.31).
 13. The African traditional theatre stage varies according to the type of performance. According to Krama (2000), the stage may be aquatic as found in most displays or a secluded camp or forests for initiates. The stage or place of performance has a special significance and honour in most performances. Most performances are done in the shrine, playground or street. The arena, which is the central meeting place,

usually contains the shrine of the paramount deity which assembles the community either for propitiation, judgement or entertainment. The performance space or place maybe a family or compound shrine and it symbolizes the relationship between the major social groups, their ancestors and channels of communication between the humans (p.34).

14. African traditional theatre has four types of stages: The Fluid Stage, The Shoreline Stage, The Avenue Stage and The Arena Stage: **The Fluid Stage:** This is derived from the aquatic stage, common in aquatic performances. For the aquatic environment, water is a convenient performance area. In this type of stage, the performers are submerged in water while the masks carried by them float and are very visible to audience. **The Shoreline Stage:** This is another derivation of the aquatic stage. The shoreline stage is the beach. An essential aesthetic feature of the fluid stage is the movement of the masked performers from the fluid stage to the floating stage and to the shoreline from where the performers move to the shore. **The Avenue Stage:** The avenue or street or parallel stage is the route through which the performers pass to the arena. The performers display with the audience standing on both sides of the route. Usually, this stage is a mobile stage. **The Arena Stage:** The arena stage or theatre-in-the round is a common stage in traditional African theatre performances. The arena is usually the ancestral meeting place which contains the shrine or the market. It transforms to a stage when the audience surrounds the performers. The shrine may be the only permanent structure of the arena stage (Krama, 2000, p.35).
15. African traditional theatre thrives on the concept of “total theatre”. This is because African traditional theatre represents the shared experiences of the group life, the institutions derived from the group life and the values and rapport essential to the continuity of the group. The idea of total theatre means a theatre presentation that has the assemblage of all the elements of theatre in a final performance. It pays less attention to the written text and places more emphasis on the use of all or most of the theatrical elements such as music, dance, song, story, mime, spectacle, costume, make up, special effects, drumming etc.

3. Advantages of African Traditional Theatre

1. The African traditional theatre stage favours the spectators because it destroys the traditional arch that separates the actors from the spectators in conventional stage orientations. Hence, the spectators are active participants in African traditional performances.
2. Unlike Western stage orientations, African traditional theatre allows for performances both on land and on water, as seen in the aquatic theatre.
3. The African traditional theatre stage allows for much flexibility in terms of the nature and use of the performance space, as most African performances take the form of arena staging and may not need the use of lavish set properties. In some cases, a shrine may be the only permanent structure, and usually, actors and participants may have to move from one performance locale to another.
4. The traditional African theatre stage is not a structure or conventional theatre house built, for which spectators must pay a stipulated amount before they are admitted. It is accessible to everyone in the community. Although, in most African performances, women are not allowed to participate. However, the performance is derived and owned by everyone in the community.
5. In terms of staging, it can be argued that African traditional theatre performances are cheaper to fund than conventional theatre productions, as most of the paraphernalia needed for the performances are provided by the local townspeople. Materials for staging might include wood, Indian bamboo, raffia palm, mud, thatch and wattles etc

4. Disadvantages of African Traditional Theatre

1. The African traditional theatre stage destroys the traditional demarcation that exists between actors and spectators in conventional stage orientations; consequently, it may be difficult to separate the actual performers from the spectators.
2. African traditional theatre stage cannot survive harsh weather conditions due to the nature of the materials it is composed of. Consequently, such environmental and weather conditions as rain and harmattan may impact negatively on the performance venue or space; especially if the venue is a burial ground, a playground, or a road side.
3. African traditional theatre lacks the convenience provided by conventional stage orientations, especially because of the presence of good theatre seats, lighting equipments, air conditioners etc., that help to ensure the comfort of spectators. In traditional African theatre performances, spectators are expected to stand or move about following the performers as the performance dictates, while others may retire to take shelter under surrounding buildings, trees etc.
4. African traditional theatre stage is not designed to accommodate conventional stage plays, although it is suitable for unscripted performances, in which case the director may have to adapt the performance to suite the locale.

5. In African traditional theatre, one cannot boast of the existence of a professionally trained scene or set designers that cater for every need of the performance space or stage. However, some persons perform these functions and can stand in as set/scene designers at the local level.

5. Directorial Indices and Implications of the African Traditional Theatre Stage

In Africa, controversies have risen among scholars regarding the place of the director in African traditional performances. While some believe that the director exists in traditional African performances, others are of the opinion that he does not exist, premised on the belief that African traditional performances do not qualify as theatre. Interestingly, Nigerian theatre scholars such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Kalu Uka, J.P. Clark, J. A. Adedeji, J.N. Amankulor, Micheal Echeruo, Oyin Ogunba, Oyekan Owomoyela, and Euro - American African theatre sympathizers such as Micheal Ertherton, Ruth Finnegan, Peter Johnathan, Berth Lidfors, James Gibbs and many others have risen up to defend the position that African theatre does exist. Speaking on the controversy regarding the place of the director in traditional African theatre, Adeoye (2010) observes that it is, however, fascinating to note that the presence of the theatre director in the traditional theatre or otherwise has always been a subject of controversy. While theatre scholars such as Nzewi (1979), Adedeji (1981), Amankulor (1981), Akinwale (2000), Ejeke (2000), Bakare (2002), Ogundeji (2003), Bell-Gam (2003), Johnson (2001 and 2003), Musa (2002 and 2006) and others support the notion that the theatre director is eminently present in the traditional African theatre, Finnegan (1970), Echeruo (1971), Gbilekaa (2000) and so on radically disagree (p.85). Supporting the existence of the director in traditional African performances, Bell-Gam (2003) argues that the master-drummer (Akwararibo) who uses drumming to influence, detect time, punctuate the performance of a masquerade in the Nji-Owu performance of Opobo, in Rivers State, is also a director (p.9). Adedeji (1981), speaking on the Ologbin Ologbojo, the founder of the Alarinjo theatre; a traditional Yoruba travelling theatre as a director, observes that:

Ologbin Ologbojo founded the Alarinjo theatre. A worshipper of Obatala and of the Oba clan, it is claimed that it was on account of his hybrid son, Olugbere Agan, that he established the theatre as a permanent part of Court entertainments. To launch him, Ologbin Ologbojo got Olojowon, the master carver, to carve a wooden face mask and Alaran Ori, the costumer, to build a set of costumes. With these Olugbere Agan careered as a costumed actor and a strolling player. Ologbojo himself served him as the masque-dramaturge or animator who handled the improvisations while the Akunyungba, the palace rhapsodists, provided the choral chants (pp.223-224).

The above description of the duties of the Ologbin Ologbojo matches some of the duties of a director, as there existed playwright - directors in the classical period of theatre history, who did not only create the stories of their plays, but also saw to the management and staging of their productions, in which they also performed as actors. This researcher therefore agrees with the position that the director exists in traditional African theatre.

In addition, in most African traditional performances, some scholars say it is the Chief Priest, choreographer, drummer or a senior member of the group or troupe that performs the role of the director. Bell-Gam (2003), in an article entitled "Akwararibo: The Directorial Function of the Master Drummer in Nji-Owu Performance of Opobo", asserts that an Akwararibo is a director in his own performance rights, using the Nji-Owu masquerade of Opobo, in Rivers State, Nigeria, as case study, he argues that the organization of cultural groups is not a new phenomenon in the cultural history of Nigerian rural communities. Long before the advent of European colonization, rural communities in Nigeria had a variety of cultural groups and these groups had leaders who organized them (p.9). In Benue State of Nigeria, such a person is called the "Kwagir" by the Tiv people. Among the Ibos, he is referred to as the "Isi egwu". The Ibibios call him "Akwa uneg", the Isokos call him "Osu", the Kalabaris call him the "Kuku faribo Iyala", while in Opobo town, the person who handles such responsibilities is the "Akwararibo"; the master drummer.

According to Bell-Gam (2003), the major function of the Akwararibo is to organize, control, manage, discipline, explain, motivate, inspire, dictate and command the entire members of the cultural troupe to ensure a successful performance. Although, an Akwararibo does not have a formal training in the arts, he is able to artistically design, create and organize people to the satisfaction of the audience with the informal training he has through observation, and drumming is a talent handed down from a generation to another (p.10). Speaking on the nature of the African traditional artist, Helen Chukwuma observes that:

The traditional artist is thus every man and any man and woman sufficiently knowledgeable in the literary traditions of the people and capable of communicating this in an entertaining way to an audience (as cited in Bell-Gam, 2003, p.10).

Bell-Gam says he agrees with Helen Chukwuma if the words "literary traditions" are substituted with oral traditions.

To achieve the beauty of the performance and its acceptability to the audience, the Akwararibo (master drummer) undertakes several responsibilities, assisted by Oru-Ogolo (singer) and Owu-Korigbo (masquerade leader) in his directorial exercise. The Akwararibo (master drummer) in Nji-Owu performance selects the

performers through an audition process involving young men for the masquerades, maidens for the dancers and singers; the best amongst the singers is selected as the Oru-Ogolo. Two good dancers are Owu-Korigbo respectively. Oru-Ogolo, a female, rehearses with the maiden dancers because women are not allowed into the “Ikina” masquerade house where rehearsals take place mostly at night. On the night prior to the public performance, the Ikina (Masquerade cult members) keep a night vigil after an intensive rehearsals, all rituals and sacrifices needed to appease the water spirits are done that night. The masquerade head-gears and all the costumes and properties are prepared that night; all under the direction of the Akwafaribo (Bell-Gam, 2003, p. 11).

As early as 5am, while people are sleeping, the cultural group proceeds round the town silently with highly spiritual songs which are rendered intermittently, interspersed with drumming. This procession is called “Ijumangi”. It serves three functions. Firstly, it is a ritual which proclaims the arrival of the water spirits into the community. Secondly, it is an effective advertisement technique in an oral environment. Thirdly, the members who are absent from rehearsals without permission are visited and sanctioned that morning. By 6am, the masquerades and other performers including the maiden dancers and singers are ready in their full colourful costumes and regalia. The Ijumangi group joins them for a formal entry into the arena after a brief stop over at the shrines. A full performance is held at the arena which has also been designed to create an atmosphere of a typical aquatic environment. This early morning performance is watched by few audience members especially children. The actual performance holds between 4pm to 7pm (Bell-Gam, 2003, p. 11).

According to Bell-Gam, another aesthetic quality of Nji-Owu performance which justifies the Akwafaribo as a director is the blocking on the arena. Deep sea, shallow areas, shrine grooves and mangrove shores are demarcated with the use of sea plants and trees. Each fish masquerade is placed at the appropriate habitat through mime swimming movements into the main open arena (water front) in search of the other smaller fishes to feed on. The drummer, maiden dancers and the singers occupy the same stage area. The Owu-Korigbo shares the same space with the masquerade because of their protective function to the masquerade (2003, pp.11-12). Bell-Gam further observes that a major aesthetic difference between “directing” in conventional theatre and that of “Nji-Owu” performance lies in the directional time span of the two. While in the conventional theatre, the process of directing ends at the technical rehearsals, directing in the Nji-Owu performance progresses into the main public performance, although, one may argue that prompting an actor during a public performance is part of directing; it is essential to note that the prompter is not the director. The key elements that dominate the staging of Nji-Owu performance are music, dance, mime and song. With music, the Akwafaribo dictates the dance steps, punctuates the mime actions and harmonizes the rhythm of the songs. Examples can be drawn from his directional music concept of mime in the sequence of the performance (2003, p.12).

Also, as already stated, directors must note that when reinventing African traditional performances or directing African traditional theatre performances, space is determined by the type of performance performed on it. More so, the staging style of traditional African theatre is the processional and arena staging technique. In this regard, Idemudia (2012) advances that performances in traditional African performance space are fluid and allow for movement from one point of a community to another. In most cases, these are processional movements that begin from the premise of a shrine to the house of the traditional ruler and culminate in the market square. The space utilized for a performance like this is not restricted to a specified environment or locale, hence, its space is defined and determined by the procession and everything it embodies in its pathway. Musa et al. describe the African actor in his use of the natural performance space at his disposal thus:

The African actor is a combination of acrobat, musician and dancer. He performs against the background of a natural environment which is always a commodious playground.

The African concept and the use of space is based on this requirement and the actors performance. He indeed needs space for all his acrobatic displays (as cited in Idemudia, 2012, p. 157).

At every level of performance, there is usually a performer along with a procession of onlookers who are either fully or partially involved in the performance. As the procession moves with the performance, every space utilized by everybody involved in the experience translates into a performance space. The scenic design is of course accentuated by the presence of humans, the natural grooves and the surrounding environment. In this case, each moment of performance is done in transiting space fluidity and devoid of any form of gulf or restriction from the audience who like the performer, moves from one performance space to another in time. Enendu Molinta describes the contemporary scenic design for fluid performances of this nature in his article entitled “Experimental Kinetic Survey in Contemporary Nigeria Scenography” and calls it ‘Kinetic Scenery’. According to him, “kinetic scenery comprises scenic units that appear and disappear, visually complementing the flow of the drama. It is a practical means of moving or developing scenery as the play develops and progresses without any visual human assistance” (as cited in Idemudia, 2012, p. 157). Hence, as a performance evolves and moves, so does the scenic specification evolve and acquires a different scenic look at each performance space, thereby creating a multi - transitional space that acquires multiple scenic aesthetics concurrent with the dictates of the performance per time. Consequently, the directorial function in an African traditional performance allows for some flexibility and fluidity, in the same

way the performance nature is fluid and flexible.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the concept of theatre directing, types of directors, qualities of the director, characteristics of African traditional theatre, advantages and disadvantages of African traditional theatre, and has attempted to locate the director in African traditional theatre. Using the case study and content analysis approaches of the qualitative research methodology, it has examined the directorial indices of African traditional performances drawing from the Alarinjo Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre in Nigeria, and the Nji-Owu Performance of Opobo, Rivers State, in Nigeria. Although, most scholars still hold on to the notion that African theatre does not exist, this study has, however attempted to clear this erroneous notion held by Western theatre sympathizers.

More so, Africa is replete with a lot of theatrical nuances which before now have suffered neglect, especially from the academia. The case is however different because African traditional performances are beginning to gain scholarly attention because of the growing need for studies on how cultural representations of the environment withstand and challenge the forces of globalization in this postmodern era, and this, thus, gives credence to the importance of this study.

In addition, this study would be of great value to African directors who wish to direct or reinvent African performances on the African theatre stage, as it provides them with all the necessary information that will guide them in their attempt to realize performances on the African theatre stage. This researcher observed that studies on the art of directing in African traditional theatre are few, and therefore calls for more studies to be carried out in this area to fill the knowledge gap.

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