

Connotations of Rituals and Immitation in the Origins of African Theatre

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Abstract

It has always been understood that the origin of theatre is linked to the Dionysiac rituals and myths of Ancient Greece. Hence, scholars have argued that ritual and imitation can be regarded as pedestals on which theatre evolved. This implies that ritual and imitation are dramatic and theatrical in nature. Thus, this study ascertained the role of ritual in the development of drama and theatre; it considered the notion that the first actors and protagonists emerged from the key players in a ritual procedure. Richard Schechner's Performance Theory served as the theoretical basis for this study, while the methodology adopted is a literature search in which relevant scholarly materials were examined in order to realise the objectives of the study. Hence, it was found out that from inception, drama has always been impersonational because of its imitation element. Ritual performances are selective and intensive and conceptualised into constituents like actions, actors, sceneries, times, costumes, dialogue, chants, dances, among others. In Africa, there exists a bi-cultural society that is a synthesis of the Western and African traditional forms. Therefore, this study asserts that theatre cannot be said to have evolved from a particular source or age, as dramatic rituals and the art of imitation have been practiced in every civilization.

Keywords: drama, theatre, ritual, imitation, connotation

Introduction: Theatre as a Concept

The term 'theatre' has its etymology in the Greek word *theatron* that meant 'seeing' or 'act of seeing', which ultimately came to mean the people who come to see. However, it finally came to be known as the location where people see a presentation, performance, drama or play. In effect, this, at a point, brought together the two words 'drama' and 'theatre' (Brocket, 1968).

According to Brocket (1968), people often assume that the two terms 'drama' and 'theatre' mean the same thing, but they are somewhat dissimilar, particularly in their natural basic contexts. For instance, drama can be spontaneous and can take place at any place at any time and does not depend on any audience. Drama could be very informal, unplanned, imaginative, actor-oriented or performance-induced. As a result, when drama is planned for performance before an audience, it turns out to be systemised or stylised, it becomes a design, it becomes an imitation and it becomes theatre. Theatre is a show, an imitation, a design, a finished work

of art designed for audience-consumption and there cannot be a theatre without an audience.

Brocket (1968) stresses further that theatre is the most ephemeral of all the arts, just as it has the most powerful effects simply because an audience visits the theatre to watch a performance in which human beings imitate or perform scenes that interpret human experiences as if such were happening at that very moment. This, according to Brocket, (1971), suggests that “theatre approximates life as it is lived and felt moment by moment”, just like in real life, with the audience experiencing each episode that will instantaneously elapse into the past.

However, (Biebuyck, 1987) asserts that dramatic performances by actors interacting with active audience can recur in formal settings, simple routine activities, and momentous occasions like initiations, burial rites, and explicit religious contents, among others. These are enacted within specific settings during prescribed moments that involve character portrayal, depiction of events, use of words, chants, songs, music, dances, gestures, rhythms, mimicry, costumes and artefacts. Over time, this interaction between these participants and the spectators became performance simply because the process gradually grew to become stylised and routine procedure that has attracted an extent of appreciation.

Hence, this study aims at ascertaining the role of ritual in the development of drama and theatre. The study tries to consider whether the first actors and protagonists emerged from ritual. This study aligns with Richard Schechner’s Performance Theory and, hence, it will strive to adding new deliberations to his argument that “efficacy and entertainment are not so much opposed to each other; rather they form the poles of a continuum...”.

Objectives and Methodology

This study seeks to add to the existing body of work on the discourse or polemics on whether drama and theatre have evolved from a particular source and age or not. Hence, the objective of this study is to ascertain the role of ritual in the development of drama and theatre, especially when it had been asserted that the first actors and protagonists emerged from ritual.

To realise the above-stated objective, the author embarked on a literature search on the key concepts of the study and also utilised the qualitative method of research in which the interview technique was applied in order to elicit information from a theatre expert who is knowledgeable in the area of theatre, ritual and performance. The intention is to get detailed and first-hand information and materials that would be invaluable in the much desired discourse and analysis crucial to a study of this nature.

‘Connotation’ as a Dramatic and Theatrical Concept

A connotation is a commonly assumed cultural or emotional link that a particular word or phrase carries, together with its literal meaning. In literature, theatre or film, a *connotation* refers to a non-literal framing of a term, which aims at adding an association beyond its literal meaning. Thus, connotations may possess negative, neutral or positive inferences concerning a term and is significant in literature, theatre and film as it indicates figuratism to the audience. Basically, connotation suggests the symbolic meaning of objects and words (Heckmann, 2020).

Khushboo (2023) asserts that connotation can be positive, negative, or neutral and stresses that authors “commonly use dissimilar connotations to insert many layers of meaning into a word, phrase, or passage”. For example: “Actors make-belief” has a positive connotation, while the phrase “Actors imitates” has neutral connotations simply because it is a statement of fact. However, the same sentence is rewritten as “Actors impersonate” has a negative connotation as the word “impersonator” denotes that actors are criminals.

Hence, it can be affirmed that in literature, theatre or film, connotation creates a definite tone for a sentence, passage, scene, or entire story and can also be useful in creating imagery. For example, the idea that ritual and imitation is theatre gives a better visual sense as it basically implies that ritual and imitation is dramatic.

Theories of the Origins of Theatre

There are eight identified origins of theatre which are as follows:

- i. **Primitive origins:** Theatre is believed to have origins in the primitive era and every culture or society has some form of it, with every human being having inherent dramatic instincts. According to Ranes, Gula, Locke, & Eckard (2017), during the Stone-Age era (6000 BCE – 2000 BCE), anthropologists have studied cave drawings that depicted primitive men imitating or re-enacting the hunt, dancing while adorning costumes of animal skins and masks.
- ii. **Ritual origins:** A ritual is an established routine action that is performed primarily because of its symbolic value as agreed or prescribed by the traditions of a community. Ritual, as it is, is “conceptualized as factorable into constituents: actions, actors, places, times, objects, languages, and groups” (Grimes, 2023). In the primitive era, religious ceremonies, rites, sacrifices and acts of worship were performed in order to win the favour of the gods and these ritual ceremonies contained several seeds of drama and theatre. Priests often imitated supernatural beings or animals, and regularly imitated actions like hunting, war scenes, among others. In due course, tales, fables or stories developed around these rites, which subsist even when the ceremonies had died out and these formed the beginning of drama and theatre (Olujobi, 1992).

- iii. **Imitation theory:** One of the most important origins of drama and theatre was imitation. Aristotle asserted that “imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation”. He added that “it is also natural for all to delight in the works of imitation” (Olugboji, 1992).
- iv. **Sympathetic magic theory:** In some cultures, especially in Africa, ancient medicine men staged magic dances in order to, for example, invoke rain and ritualized rain-making into art. Hence, they imitate animals in their movements and sounds and titivate themselves with masks and costumes with the belief that their actions would work some magic and yield positive results. This is a combination of religious or magical ritual, that involves rhythmic dances and song and these rites are what anthropologists termed as Sympathetic Magic (Dhlomo, 1977).
- v. **Initiation rituals and ceremonies:** In Africa, initiation is a type of rite of passage that entails dramatic imitations of “supernatural beings and mythological, legendary, and prototypical characters”. The characters are ancestors, legendary individuals, eminent past initiates, personified animals and objects. This is realised through the deployment of rituals, sacrifice, masks and masquerades, imitation and mimicry, dance and movements, singing and chants, among others (Biebuyck, 1987). In other words, these initiations encompass organised dramatic sequences and stereotypical characters. These are all the seeds of drama and theatre, and many kinds of theatre have developed from initiation and ceremonies of that nature.
- vi. **Religion and worship:** There are a number of drama and theatre forms that have evolved from religion and worship of the gods that existed in some cultures and societies. For instance, the Western European theatre developed from the Greek religious worship that had its origin from ritual worship of Dionysus. In 534 or 535 BC, Thespis became the first actor as he leaped on the back of a wooden cart and recited poetry, while he imitated characters.
- vii. In Nigeria there are ritual dramatic festivals in the worship of the gods, such as the Ogun, Osun, Sango, among other ritual worships, which Soyinka (1976) asserts that the Yoruba tragedy evolved.
- viii. **Choral hymns and chants:** A theory suggests that drama and theatre had its roots in the choral hymns of praise, dirges, chants, etc. delivered at the tombs of a departed hero. It was stated that at some point, a speaker separated himself from the chorus and started to act out the great deeds in the hero's life. This steadily became more elaborate and stylised, thus diminishing the role of the chorus and, in due course, the stories were re-enacted or performed as plays (Olugboji, 1992),
- ix. **The folklore theory:** Human beings love story-telling. This is because stories

told in the moonlight or around the fireside re-enacted activities, such as the victories in hunting expeditions, battles, adventures, feats of departed heroes, the interventions of divinities with humans, among others, which developed into dramatic presentations of the events. According to Eckersley (2014), evidence show that Africa has the longest record of human activity in whichever part of the world. Thus, anthropologists and archaeologists believe that “rituals of performance, storytelling involving music and masks probably dates back to about 40,000 years ago in parts of Africa.” Eckersley (2014) stress further that:

Some African performers see that the most ancient of African storytelling performances involve three parts: the opening formula or group clapping or introduction or call; the story expository, and the conclusive formula.

The process simply involves a particular or individual performer that imitates many characters in the story before a gathering of people that are considered as the audience. This, no doubt, supports one of the theories of the origin of theatre in Africa.

From the above outlined origins, it can be observed that each of the origins has elements of ritual and imitation when they are carefully examined. Moreover, it could be argued that the eight origins that are stated above are performance oriented in the sense that, individually, there are presentation and enactment within the process of each of the origin.

Ritual, Imitation and Theatre

Theatre developed in different societies around the world from myth and ritual, storytelling, imitation and the imagined. In the West, the origin of theatre is linked to the rituals and myths of Ancient Greece. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, theatre evolved from rituals organised in honour the god Dionysus in Greece. There was not any form of imitation or representation, apart from the chorus, that was outfitted as satyrs, that is, half men half goats. The leading man of the chorus called the *korifeos* detached from the group of chorus and started a spontaneous dialogue with the satyrs. They responded by singing and that suggested the birth of the theatre, which gradually became a planned activity with plots, performance space or stage, costumes, characters (Grammatikopoulou, 2017).

Within the African context, the origin of theatre was a mixture of religious or magical ritual, rhythmic dances, chants and singing, which anthropologists refer to as sympathetic magic. Therefore, imitation sets in as the people needed to precipitate rain, engage in sanguine activities or war, and so on. Hence, they imitated these activities. (Dhlomo, 1977).

Aristotle affirms the idea of representation and defines the theatre as *mimesis*,

which means an imitation of an original deed. Plato asserts that art is an imitation of the real world, that is, it is mirroring the world of ideas. It is, in fact, *Imitatio dei*, or imitating the gods. These ideas have helped to shape the concept of theatre,

Human beings are conscious of the Supreme Being and have close connection with the supernatural forces so as to get their support and protection. Accordingly, sacrifices were offered and this became formalized and developed into rituals. Priests are the intermediaries between the gods and the community as they know the mode to approach these divinities.

Rituals contain many seeds of drama, as the priest has certain attributes of the actor and could wear a mask and assume the status of a supernatural being, man, or an animal. No doubt, rituals were religious activities, but, as human grew in confidence, his individual powers increased, and this gave room for secularity. Theatrical elements began to be accentuated and, eventually, theatre emerged. Ritual and theatre individually employ similar elements like performers, stage, audience, music, dance, spectacle, masks, costumes, speech, and make-up. They also share similar themes and production methods (Trumbull, 2007).

Thus, from the foregoing, Biebuyck (1987) explain that in traditional Africa, “everyday life, blending profane and sacred activities, is permeated with music, dance, rhythmic movement, symbolic gestures, song, and verbal artistry”.

Africa is multi-cultural in nature, with various religious rituals and festivals existing in many of its communities. The functionality of these festivals and rituals arose out of the need for man to interact between himself, nature and society. These have led to the origin of the African theatre and drama through the African himself. Thus the African will re-enact these sacred ritualistic activities, which later became adapted and idealised by the myths, stories, tales, songs, and proverbs. They were further isolated modified or stylised and acted out as traditional drama and theatre. According to Enekwe (2014), in his summary of Richard Schechner’s essay, “A ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency”.

Contextualizing Ritual, Imitation and Theatre: Nietzsche in the 19th Century and Soyinka in the 20th

This section illustrates the imaginative, interpretive powers of both Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century and Wole Soyinka in the 20th century. Friedrich Nietzsche asserts that tragedy evolved from the interface between Apollo and Dionysus, which he refers to as “Apollonian-Dionysiac duality” (Nietzsche, 1872). This infers that the connection between Apollo and Dionysus that are referred to as ‘sprouting deities’ is analogous to tragedy, which evolved from the rituals. In Greek mythology, Apollo is the god of light, archery, poetry and prophesies, while Diony-

sus is the god of wine and fertility. The rituals entail a chorus singing and dancing with actors wearing masks. Thus, while Apollo is considered as the god of plastic arts and his art more serene, Dionysus is regarded as the god of wine that propelled people to drift into frenzy and ecstasy.

Thus, what Friedrich Nietzsche is saying in essence is that drama and theatre arose from ritual and imitation that was a fusion of dance, music, visual mask as represented by the Greek masks. He submits that Dionysus inspired the drama, while Apollo introduced the visual aspect of the theatre in the form of mask, costume, etc., and the theatre is a combination of the visual and the nonvisual art.

This theory has had a remarkable bearing on Soyinka's "The Fourth stage" which is an appendix to his book titled *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Soyinka acknowledges the light thrown by Nietzsche on the birth-search of tragedy (drama) and he makes the point that it is not a culturally universal experience. In other words, every society should search for the root of this art in its own soil. Indeed, he drew inspiration from Nietzsche's idea, and he is saying that there is a parallel to Nietzsche's theory on tragedy (drama) in every society in Africa and elsewhere.

Soyinka avows that there is a parallel between the Dionysian-Apollonian relationships on the Obatala-Ogun relationship, albeit with a caveat that it is not an exact replica of Dionysus and Apollo. In Yoruba mythology, Obatala is the god of creation and the quintessence of the serene art, who to a large extent, is like Apollo - the serene artist. According to Yoruba belief, Obatala moulds the form, carries such to Olodumare who then breathes life into the moulded to become alive. Hence, whichever deformity in any creature moulded is traced to Obatala as it is believed that he must have made such inaccuracy through the blunder of Esu. Nevertheless, Soyinka declares that Obatala is not the artist of Apollonian illusion, but of inner essence.

According to Soyinka, Ogun who is the first tragic actor and the tragic actor is the unresisting mouthpiece of the gods. The actor is assumed to be under a kind of possession and restraint. The actor is under two mutually contrasting forces, which are: (i) the inspiration and ecstasy of Ogun and (ii) the serenity and control of Obatala. Soyinka avers that the Yoruba regards the past as the world of the dead, the present to be the world of the living and the future to be the world of the unborn. He adds that there is constant movement among these worlds and there is a mystical or numinous gulf between these worlds, which are constantly diminished through sacrifices in order to reduce the perils of transition from one realm to another. This gulf is referred to as the chthonic realm that is guided by a powerful god.

The movement of the process of transition from one realm to another is what Soyinka referred to as the home of the tragic spirit. At that stage, there is a perilous plunge and the soul endures the dangers of transition across the bottomless "chthonic realm" that is replete with immeasurable spirits. Hence, Ogun is spoken

of as the first tragic actor because he was the first to withstand the travail and agony of the tragic hero by leading the other deities through this gulf. Consequently, Soyinka ascribes many firsts to Ogun: the first suffering deity; the first creative energy; the first challenger; and the conqueror of transition.

According to Soyinka, the role of music in the Yoruba tragic art is instructive as music leads the votary into the pristine or primeval art of tragedy. This has a psychological effect on the actor, unlike the Eurocentric tradition that cannot separate the music from the content/poetry of the action because it is charged with symbolic meaning. In the words of Soyinka, the nature of Yoruba music is intensive through its language and poetry is highly charged, symbolic, and myth-embryonic: The musical form is often charged with deep meaning and, in Yoruba tragic music, language undergoes transformation through myth and it appeals to the emotions than to the intellect.

The hypnotic nature of Yoruba tragic music leads the actor on to his tragic end and this is a re-enactment of the experience of Ogun in conflict with the cosmic spirit in passage through transition. Thus, because Ogun is strong-willed, he is designated to lead the other deities and this happens to be the sole factor that rescued him from a total annihilation in the gulf. Soyinka adds that the tragic mask derives its function from the same source as its music.

Discussing the Relationship between Theatre and Ritual

This section focuses on the interview conducted with theatre arts theorists, who is knowledgeable in the area of theatre, ritual and performance. The interview helps to shed light on the link or connection between theatre and ritual and it remains invaluable in helping to draw out some findings that is relevant in a study of this nature.

Question: How will you describe African theatre, based on its origin?

A: African theatre is not monolithic; it can be viewed from two perspectives; the pre-colonial that is based on ancestry or heritage, and from the perspective of the theatre that developed during the post-colonial era.

Q: Can you then describe the African theatre?

A: African theatre is primordial and multifaceted and is communal in nature. It exists within communities and evolves from religious rituals, community festivals, and seasonal activities, as well as in the work of popular entertainers and storytellers.

Q: But there is a school of thought that shed light on the fact that theatre had its origins in ancient Greece?

A: The ritual theory of the origin of drama and theatre maintains that probably theatre started from the dithyramb, which is a hymn chanted in the religious worship of

the Greek god known as Dionysus. It is a worship to honor this Greek god. Thespis became the first actor as he carried out poetic recitations and imitated gods and characters, hence he kick-started the birth of theatre.

Q: Are you now saying that theatre and rituals are the same?

A: Theatre and rituals cannot be said to be specifically the same. We should observe that both have or share the same process, which includes preparation, performance and audience. The participants involved adhere to a number of processes that can well be passed off as ritualistic.

Q: Can you elaborate on the idea of preparation, performance and audience in theatre and ritual?

A: On the surface, theatre and ritual performances are more or less indistinguishable from each other. In other words, the two of them are inclined to consist of a plot or scenario. In a theatrical performance, the plot unfolds in its totality on stage by actors and actresses through their dialogue, while in a ritual performance the story is methodically chanted by the priest and votaries as a part of the larger entire ritual process. Nevertheless, both theatre and ritual performances align or fit under the same narrative, that is, there are performers in a designated performance space, who are symbolically performing a demonstrative action before an audience. Theatre and ritual share the same production elements, such plot, location, dialogue, chants, costumes, make-up, music, set and lightings. They both embrace movements, gestures, body-swaying, and dance. No doubt, these elements are symbolic, interpretive and functional.

Q: Aristotle in the *Poetics* talked about Catharsis, which is about the audience purging themselves from tension and emotions through theatre; is this applicable to ritual as well?

A: There is audience involvement or participation in both theatre and ritual. This is because the audience is spectators who come to see or partake in the performance process and their involvement helps to induce conviction, which rouses their emotions because the performance will affect the psyche. The performance makes the audience to be filled with effects of surprise, awe, astonishment, amazement, elation, disappointment, disbelieve, as the case might be and the strength of this emotional release makes the performance to be functional to the audience. Whether theatre or ritual, the performance purifies the audience and it gives them such relief that are precisely the manifestations of the audience-effect peculiar to theatre and ritual performances.

Q: So the performer of the theatre and ritual are the same within their respective performance space?

A: The performer in the theatre and the ritual performer are somewhat the same. We

should also note that actors in the theatre who perform the same role for lengthy periods of time makes the theatrical performance to be ritual, while, as Richard Schechner's has argued, ritual turn out to be entertainment once it is taken outside its original performance space.

Findings

Based on the foregoing, the following were discovered:

This study found out that the origin of drama and theatre is traced to the rituals attached to the Dionysian festival in Greece which is ritual. Similarly, this same drama and theatre can also be traced to the Ogun ritual and all other uncountable rituals - with more dramatic elements, existing or that had existed in the various communities in Africa and other parts of the world.

It is discovered that drama and theatre that evolved from rituals, was, hitherto, a sacred activity within different societies around the world. Rituals contain many seeds of drama, as the priest has certain characteristics of the performer and could adorn a mask and assume the status of a supernatural being, man, or an animal. Theatrical elements began to be accentuated and, in due course, theatre grew into what it is in this contemporary period.

It is also observed that ritual and theatre independently employ similar elements like performers, stage, audience, music, dance, spectacle, masks, costumes, speech, make-up and share similar themes, production methods, among others.

From inception, drama has always been impersonation because of its imitation element and the audience, who are participants, experience after-effects, which is rightly described by Aristotle as Catharsis. Theatre and ritual performances are selective and intensive and have been conceptualised into constituents like actions, actors, scenes, times, costumes, dialogue, among others. Man imitated supernatural beings and mythological and prototypical characters are accomplished not only through masks, but also by simpler methods of chants and recitations, mimicry, music, dance, objects and gesture.

Conclusion

The above explanations have very important meanings, which ultimately will help in drawing a conclusion for this essay. It has shown that there is a relationship between theatre and ritual as the first actors and protagonists emerged from ritual.

It remains prejudicial or imbalanced to assert that theatre started exclusively in Greece, as similar rituals, akin to the Dionysiac festivals, had existed, save that they were not documented as the Greek ritual was. The only form of traceable and significant legacy, especially in Africa, is the oral tradition in which traditional material was recounted from generation to generation.

What is being stressed in essence is that theatre cannot be said to have evolved

from a particular source or age, as dramatic rituals had been practiced in every civilization. The advent of the Europeans, Christianity, and civilization in the nineteenth century actually changed the theatrical scene in Africa. There exists a bi-cultural society that is a synthesis of the Western and African traditional forms. The early Christian missionaries did not appreciate the various dramatic traditional rites that were taking place as they saw them as pagan and devilish practices.

Therefore, this study supports the submission of Enekwe (2014), in his summary of Richard Schechner's essay, that "A ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency."

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