

Introduction: The Edo Theatre Exegesis in Contemporary Light

Israel Meriomame Wekpe (Guest Editor)

University of Benin, Nigeria/ University of Leeds, United Kingdom

The Nigerian theatre has its roots in the cultural heritage of the past and the competing realities of the present. This is manifest in the confluences of theater traditions linked to the ethnic diversity of the country. For years, interest in Nigerian theater has been restricted to that of the larger ethno-linguistic groups (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani) and a few minority ethnic entities. Interestingly, Edo festivals are given tangential mention as part of Edo theater, yet little attention is given to the seminal contributions by playwrights such as Emwinma Ogie (Ogieiriaixi), who emerged in the 1960s and has to his credit a corpus of published plays and scholarly essays on Edo arts and culture, or better still the pioneering efforts of D. U. Emokpae (*Adesuwa*, 1933) and Jacob U. Egharevba (*Imaguero and the Tragedy of Idah War*, 1950).

Importantly, these plays have been performed extensively in Benin, Warri, Ibadan and Lagos.

Against this backdrop, this special issue is a deliberate attempt not only to celebrate the contributions of these Edo playwrights but also to situate the major contributions of an emerging crop of writers with a glocal outlook. Notably, three Edo playwrights take the lead: Irene Salami-Agunloye, Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki, and Ossa Earliece. Their significance lies in the performance aspects of writing and staging that incorporate the robust elements of ritual, dance, music, and mobile dialogue. In several instances, their works critically present the imagery of the Edo worldview. Viewed through another prism, their dramatic oeuvre demonstrates the use of play, performance, cultural actants, Edo semiotics, philosophies, and conversational language.

Indeed, the conversational language used could be described as bridging Edo idioms of the past and present. A close reading of their works universalises the Edo concept of Ododo — a nativist philosophy rooted in the Edo understanding of s/heroism and s/heroics.

This troika represents a generation of writers with strong theater-making skills who blend ensemble playing aligned with a uniquely African performance culture. What they bring to Nigerian theater practice is reflective of the many layers of competing realities in the contemporary space. Perhaps, more interesting is their artistic mandate to reduce the apparent dis/connection between traditional and modern theater, merging them.

These writers reinforce Edo cherished heritage and politico-cultural /psycho-social deficits with a global allusion, realigning them in such a way as to make ostensibly meaningless themes creatively engaging. This occurs through using language couched in the basic idioms of the multiple strata of Nigeria's socio-demographic landscape specific to Edo folk culture. In some of their plays, the authors encourage a certain vibrancy amongst young people as they render a youthful narrative and assume a performative conversation.

Importantly, these playwrights present a unique performance idiom about Benin in the Nigerian theater that has encouraged an army of other Benin writers and artists. Instructively, their vocation as writers, theater makers, or academics underscores their glocal dexterity. Indeed, their practical engagements, glocal corpus of literary drama, and avowed dedication in reinforcing Benin performance tradition inspires this special issue and underlies its philosophy. More importantly, this particular issue underscores the contributions of other Benin/Edo playwrights and the corpus of other writers who have imaged or re/presented Benin/Edo in their literary engagements.

Research in Benin studies mostly focuses on the Fine Arts or History, and this is understandable. This special edition is arguably the first attempt to examine Edo playwrights or to imagine Benin in the eyes of non-Benin playwrights. The preoccupation of these writers is generally the reinforcement of their cultural history and the realignment of certain aspects of their socio-cultural truths in the light of contemporary reality. The idea of play or representation finds resonance in Benin verbal arts or oral performance traditions which manifest as cultural markers. Within these representations lie their cultural memories. In other words, these moments serve as heritage: a reminder of Benin history, mores, and values.

Nigerian theater has its distinct traits, and interestingly, it is a confluence of the traditional and modern. The appropriation of local performance nuances with English that is domesticated to relive the experiences of a people does not in any way overwhelm the variety that is embedded in these dramatic narratives. These lived experiences might be nuanced as metaphysical, yet they resonate as a significant artistic reference to the experiences of the playwrights. When these performance modes are incorporated in the plays, especially by Benin playwrights, they are not ornaments. Rather they help accentuate the context and meaning of the dramatic narrative, provide an impetus for the character, and create a more intimate aesthetic distance between performer and audience. Indeed, these plays are written as performance rather than as closet plays. The dexterity of the playwright is activated in the infusion of such elements as dance, music, proverbs, and parables.

The essays in this special edition critically explore and provide substantial positions on such writers. Victor Osaé Ihidero and Awele Peace Ikem's essay, "Meta-choreographic rituals and subtextualities in directing Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama," highlights the overlapping

layers of meaning of the many movements in Agbonifo-Obaseki's plays and their impetus to elicit concurrent affect and inspiration for director and choreographer. The plays under examination include about sixty songs derived from Edo folk tradition. The writers argue that this reads as meta-choreographic in the sense that these movements convey "veiled or concealed texts or meanings which knowingly or unknowingly governs ... movements...." I align their reference to rituals in the plays with what Leda Martins and Phyllis Peres see as "ritualistic choreography" which is "underscored in the scenic-structural conception for the text and in the metamorphosis of the protagonist" and that "ritualistic-religious configuration operates as a constitutive and delineating intertext of theatrical discourse" (864).

Indeed, the idea of meta-choreographic reads as the element of trace in Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction, which assumes that: "In order to exceed metaphysics, it is necessary that a *trace* be inscribed within the *text* of metaphysics, a *trace* that continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other *text* (Derrida cited in Sharratt 68, *emphases mine*). This element of trace finds resonance in "A De/constructive Analysis of Gendering in Irene Salami's *Idia, the Warrior Queen*" by Adediran Kayode Ademijo-Bepo and Ayobami Afeez Aponmade and "Deconstructing the Proverbial Codes in Ahmed Yerima's '*The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*'" by Kola Eke and Edefe Mukoro. Meanings are signs; they are codes; and they leave behind a trace. A trace is infinite and an interplay of interpretations. It is in this light that these essays contextualise their arguments.

Ademijo-Bepo and Aponmade's appreciation of Salami's play reads succinct and deliberate. They reimagine gender/ing in a historical light and metaphorize the historical *Idia* as a paragon of protest against patriarchy. The writers articulate the virtues of Salami's creatively en/

gendered Idia with the historical Idia and present her as a totem against women's subjugation. The recourse to history by Salami is almost typical of Edo playwrights, hence in another light, Eke and Mukoro critically underscore Edo verbal arts in Ahmed Yerima's historical play, *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen*.

Jacob O. Arowosegbe remarks that "proverbs are vehicles of deep thought that become particularly handy whenever one is short of words" (156), and so the use of proverbs by Yerima (who is of Etsako-(Northern) Edo descent) in the play reflects a critical aspect of Edo cultural aesthetics and signifies the deep-seated meanings that are best conveyed by this verbal art.

Although the preceding essays contrast with Tekena Mark's "Tragic Form, Cultural Facts and Symbolic Representations of Benin History in Ossa Earliece's *Nekighidi*," they converge in situating history as the memorialization of a people's sociocultural reality. Mark looks at Earliece's play through the prism of a mythic rendition with the cultural appreciation of fact and fiction that now takes the form of faction. Mark answers the imperative of this approach through a deliberate analysis of how music, dance, and other Edo performance modes are relived in the play.

The last essay in this special edition, Victor Anaelechi Anyagu's "Irene Salami's *EMOTAN: A Benin Heroine* and the Struggle for women's liberation in Nigeria" argues that the Benin heroine is a myth that can be appropriated as an exemplar of women's liberation in Nigeria. Anyagu provides a cultural basis for his argument that suggests that within the Edo cultural worldview, there exist valid examples to situate the protection of women's rights.

The modern Nigerian playwright identifies as the traditional storyteller in the way that s/ he derives the craft from the local culture. This is why Paula Ben-Amos remarks that "...the

artist at work is viewed as enacting or recreating the original myth” (60). These circumstances bring to the fore another lens to better appreciate these writers as creatives with artistic licence and with some cultural restraints. Dan Ben-Amos observes that:

There are two ways to tell stories in Benin: with and without musical accompaniment. The first manner is common to men and women, the second exclusive to men. The accompanied narration requires special learning, training, and practice, and the storytellers who have mastered any of the musical instruments used for this purpose enjoy the social standing of professionals... [...]

The conception these professional narrators have of their art... has been constructed on the basis of their belief system which is associated with the performance, myths.... (179)

Dan Ben Amos’s statement validates the crosscurrents of positions expressed in the essays as they are presented in the light of their reality. The articles here decenter contemporary theater studies by offering prominence to Edo playwrights and, by association, the representation of Benin by other Nigerian writers. They critically reinforce and thematize the preoccupation of these writers as reflecting their heritage in contemporary hues. I maintain that the tradition, craft, and structure have been succinctly captured to expressly reiterate the dominant characteristics of Edo theater rather than serve as defining features of the playwrights. I state that these writers, despite their individual eclecticism, conform to what I theorize as the model for understanding the Edo theater worldview.

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