

ASPECT OF THEATRICAL CIRCULARITY IN WALE OGUNYEMI'S DRAMATURGY

Dele LAYIWOLA, Ibadan

Theatrical circularity must continually evolve their own rules as occasion demands. The inherent pointer to continuous motion in idea and in production may take on carnival dimensions in idea and in the practice of festival dramas. The response and resolution of this conflict in craft has been tackled in African theatrical traditions as the adoption of the total theatrical technique.

If we agree that much of indigenous African theatre is sophisticated residuums of myth, ritual and folklore, then there is every need to ponder whether this is not the reason that those dramas reach out with such festival appeal and fervor. If a theatre can touch the soul of a people like a ritual moment, it stays in their consciousness like an existential knot. Each recurrence of such a moment evokes at one time a beginning of life and at the same time its end or renewal. This inevitably portends a philosophy that is inherently circular; that mobius strip of existence. This invents a certain similarity with the discussions of August Strindberg on modern drama and modern theatre:

In the new naturalistic drama a striving for the significant motif was felt at once. Therefore, the action was usually centered around life's two poles, life and death, the act of birth and the act of death, the fight for the spouse, for the means of subsistence, for honor, all these struggles – with their battlefields, cries of woe, wounded and dead – during which one heard the new philosophy of life conceived as a struggle...

[Strindberg 1961: 19]

These tendencies which we have aptly described as 'existential' above are copiously illustrated in two life dramas of Wale Ogunyemi: *Langbodo* (1979) and *Eniyan* (1987).

Langbodo is a play of quest, the epic dimensions of which are obtained in the search of a human community for certain age-old ideals. As the king of the fictional town (presently transposed to Nigeria) explained to the hero, Akara Oogun:

Akara Oogun, my son.
I have a mission to request of you,

a most important one. And before I even tell you what it is, I must ask you: Will you perform this task for you? My child, you are aware that there is nothing on earth which surpasses well-being? And do you realise that there is nothing more deserving of honour than serving one's country? These two objectives have greater value than gold and silver, and it is on their account that I have to send you on this errand. Before my father died, he was fond of telling me about the king of a certain land which is approached by the same route as leads to the Forest of a Thousand Daemons. The name of this place is Mount Langbodo. My father said that the king of this place had a singular object which he presented to hunters who visited him there. My father never mentioned the object by name, but he did say that if this object came into the hand of any king, that king's domain would be spared the horrors of war, disease and famine such as we have known for so long and it would win an abundance of peace and well-being; its fame resounding to every corner upon earth.

(pp. 5-6)

The pivot of the play, after the versions of Fagunwa and Soyinka (1982), swings around the phenomenon of nationalism based on multiple herohood. The roll call of questers (represented as hunters) as in Aramanda Okunrin, Kako, Efo-Iye, Elegbede Ode, Olohun Iyo, Imojoye and others, represent the subsumption of certain ideal qualities which work together to make a well-rounded man. The forest of a thousand daemons is none other than the forest of life, and the various encounters are the daily travails of life. The play adopts nationalism as an overriding ideology but it raises the vexed questions of whether society must not first exclude vice to be able to foster that ideology. This seems to be the point of the First Medium, a shadowy antagonist to the venture.

Fools! Fools all! For accepting such a risky assignment. I can understand a duck falling down beside his dead mate and dying in sympathy; that is loyalty to the point of death. I also can understand a viper laying down her life for her children, for assuredly she knows her children will not renounce her in the end and take after lizards – that is honesty and trust. *But if it comes to suffering for a country full of rogues and dishonest people, count me out! I said count me out!*

(my emphasis, pp. 17-18)

Ogunyemi realizes that the conflict of drama thrives on balancing the Manichean halves of the idea of good and ill, or life and death, and resolves it by emphasizing that positive attitudes are supreme. Good must cohabit with vice or evil but it will in time overcome that darker half. Vanity, in all its forms, must cohabit so that life and living may be balanced and complete.

This moral insistence in the content of the play is balanced by an even conception of form as circularity. The cosmos is conceived as moments of circular motions which resolve tilting polarities of conflict. It is for this reason that this play is conceived as a dance event, at other times, brothing into the dimensions of a carnival. For though *Langbodo*, and another morality play of Ogunyemi, *Eniyan* (1987) are linear quests, and take into consideration the concept of straight, two-dimensional time, they attain the level of mythical, cyclic, atemporal constructs. The Dance thereby becomes an image for conscious and superconscious explorations of political as well as cosmic boundaries. Therein men dance, birds dance and time dances. The cyclicity with which it presents its motif is reflected in the prefatory note of the author as he takes the play round and round the geographical diversity as well as boundaries of Nigeria:

I wrote this play drawing much from the diverse cultures of Nigeria. It starts with Oyo State as a springboard catapulting the sojourners to Anambra State and from there to the North, Coming down to the Rivers, leading them to Bendel via Cross Rivers only to be super-imposed upon by Oyo, the initial starting point.

[Prefatory notes]

And to usher in the dream and dance sequences music, the interpretive medium and prompter of the Dance, is brought to bear heavily on the play. This is why in what appears to be the prologue of the play, Old Akara Oogun prepares our mind:

Our story tonight is a veritable Ogidigbo, it is I who will drum it, and you the wise heads who will interpret it. But I do not want you to dance to my drumming as a mosquito to the deep sounding drums, its legs twitching haphazardly, at loggerheads with the drum. For a start, if you want this dance to be a success, here are two things I must request of you...

(p. 1)

Therein is the difference to be observed between *Langbodo* and *Eniyan*. While *Langbodo*, from the passage we have just cited above, reflects the tendency of a communal aspiration towards a goal, *Eniyan* projects the inklings and misapplication of an individual psyche on its goals towards self accomplishment. The tone of Old Akara Oogun is cautious, that of *Eniyan* is full of swagger:

Eniyan is my name,
A man of this world,
A man like yourself,
A man in no way different from others
I am rich, I am wealthy,
I am bountifully blessed
With all the pleasures of this world
I am happy as happy can be
For I have everything at my beck and call
Abundant, and self-sufficient.

(pp. 1-2)

Eniyan, an adaptation of the medieval 'Everyman' indeed has wealth and influence and his retinue consists of such character stock and types as: Wealth, Goods, Knowledge, Beauty, Strength; and in the neutral wings character, Confession, Poverty, and, of course, Death. In his self-centredness, Eniyan attenuates the potentials of the first group of characters, and thereby incurs the sanctions of the second group.

Both *Langbodo* and *Eniyan* have a deeply pervasive measure of Naturalism wherein lies the penchant for a significant motif or an ideal. Here is the scientific evaluation of environment and other natural or incidental factors on the outcome and tendencies of man and event. There is a near-mechanical determinism on the plot and action of the characters, and they act in ways in which the end of the play is almost predictable and fixed. Usually, the cyclicity which we discussed earlier brings the swing of events right round to where they first began. Ogunyemi's plays are character-centred in their emphases and these breed the moral insistence of his art and his adoptive ideologies as we have elsewhere observed (Layiwola, 1985:53).

All the stock characters in *Eniyan* represent moral traits in content and they affect the life of man in one long, linear purview. In technique and characterization each of them, at the first call, exhibits a theme dance characteristic of its nature or intent in the play. The playwright notes, for instance, that Agbara (strength) 'does a muscular dance' (p.3), and Death (iku) 'does a sinister dance movement on the platform.' Equally, Beauty does a leisurely dance (p. 9), and Eniyan, the prodigal and Spendthrift is almost always involved in mindless dances.

Quite apart from the fact that these two plays are among the most lyrical in Ogunyemi's repertory, his plastic medium is that of the dance (Layiwola, 1985:53), and they give his theatre the robust characteristic of festival dramas. For him, the spectacle and the dance constitute the mediums in which the spice of the theatre are most memorably codified; and in this regard, he has been more influenced by the dramaturgy of Duro Ladipo and Wole Soyinka. Even more so by the latter, for Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960, 1973); 1-77) represents symbolically as dance man's existential preoccupation from age to age. Much of indigenous African theatre is laden with an overwhelming surfeit of dance and ritual festivity, and for that reason portrays a

certain inherent circularity as of ebb and flow, life and death, and the lush and dry of the seasons. Whilst Soyinka does an intellectual structuration of this phenomenon, Ogunyemi probes its theatrical potentials whereby his plays ramify as an eternal dance movement around the altar of ideals. A comparison of the stage notes that conclude *A Dance of the Forests* and *Eniyan* will more than illustrate this matter. The protagonist, Demoke, has come to the end of his 'dance':

Demoke gets wearier and wearier, begins to sag. At every falter the jesters move towards him to snatch their quarry but he recovers... Demoke sags to his knees, the Dead Woman runs to him, snatches the falling Half-Child and is swallowed by the forest. Demoke collapses on the ground. It is now fully dawn.

(1973: 76-77)

And *Eniyan*:

'Iku' and 'Iwa' support *Eniyan* on either side and bring him onto the platform. The high seat screen opens shortly. *Eniyan* breaks into a song of pity... Crash of cymbals and immediately the expanse screen closes and the high seat screen follows to another crash of cymbals. The gateway slowly swallows *Eniyan* beneath all. The dirge is taken over by the drummers as lights slowly go out.

(pp. 45-47)

The preoccupation with the principle of circularity as we have described above is therefore a preoccupation with the very basic of motion and kinetic interchange in all that constitutes the art of the theatre. And what constitutes the art of the theatre? If we are to go by the outline of Gordon Craig, these consists of action as the spirit of acting; words as the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; and rhythm, which is the essence of dance and movement (Cole and Chinoy, 1963: 147-8). Outside of Craig's nomenclature we can only remember to add music or tone which he possibly subsumes under rhythm.

The implication of technique on the production of African festival dramas in the bouyant arena of play brings to our discussions the production theory of George II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. It will be recalled that we have in the foregoing discussions implied that there is a general tendency for certain African plays to make do with crowd scenes and groups in the same style as festivals do. We also implied that there is the tendency, in this regard, for a certain measure of circular or recurrent motion in general and specific movements. Even an insistent leitmotif is a national adaptation of this circular tendency. The advantage of this technique, when movement is mastered, is legion. But when it is mishandled, it could lead to stiff, boring effects where 'circular' motion could degenerate into monotony and rowdiness. The characters become shiftless and undefined, lost in the crowd and flat.

George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen has written thus:

In composing a stage effect, it is important to keep the middle of the picture from being congruent with the middle of the stage. If one follows the geometric principle of the golden mean, the stage divides into two even parts, which is likely to lead to monotony in the distribution and grouping. Assimilation in the total picture becomes more or less symmetrical, creating a wooden, stiff and boring impression...

The exception proves the rule; the grouping of the principal figure – or the principal mass of figures – in the center can work out if the neighbouring figures or groups are placed on the side at more or less regular intervals. It can create a happy artistic effect, particularly if a powerfully exalted mood is desired. But the stage must always depict movement, the continuous unfolding of a story. That is why this method is to be generally avoided, as it creates a lifeless effect and holds up the action.

(Cole and Chinoy 1963: 81).

The general admonition of George II is to avoid any kind of uniformity or recurrence that would indulge monotony or symmetry. In other words, group presentation on stage must always 'divide up' the space or deconstruct the space of which it forms a part. In such plays as *Langbodo* or *Eniyan* with large groups and scenes of circular motion in projection, movement and dance, the circularity must be re-defined or systematically broken to avoid symmetry and monotony. There is no gain saying the fact that Saxe-Meiningen's rule is of great import to the festival dramas and dances of African playwrights of Ogunyemi's plays are a veritable part (cf. Layiwola 1985, 1988)

By way of conclusion, we can thereby affirm that theatrical circularity, as a method, must continually evolve their own rules as occasion demands. The inherent pointer to continuous motion in idea and in production sometimes takes on carnival dimensions in idea and in the practice of festival dramas. The response and resolution of this conflict in craft has been tackled in African theatrical traditions as the adoption of the total theatre technique. The stage or arena is charged with the total arsenal of forms in dance, mime, procession, music, tone, colour (or costume), and at times the plastic medium of masks.

On the modern stage, African ritual and festival plays cannot go on for days on end as in the folk arena, but when it curtails itself to an idle hour or two in the confines of an auditorium, those variety of forms in the total theatre technique are discharged against the consciousness of its receptive audience. And like all true theatre experiences, the inculcation is full and the awareness is total. The audience has been taken through a ritual, and it is never the same again. Neither is one production in space or time the same as another in the same or a different location or season.

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