

From Nativist Performance to the Stage Popular Theatre: The New Cosmopolitan Outlook of the Kwagh-hir Dramaturgy Among the Tiv People of Nigeria

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Abstract

For a long time, theatre scholarship in Africa has associated the Kwagh-hir and other traditional theatre with ritual practice. But as recent research findings by Iorwuese Hagher have proved, the ritual theory is not as pronounced as the folktale which is said to metamorphose into an elaborate Kwagh-hir performance. While this paper disagrees with both paradigms, it argues that the Kwagh-hir has no fixed primordial essence as it merely adopts and adapts to major cultural trends in the Tiv society. By using the historicist theoretical approach however, the paper discovers that dance and song have been the only constant elements of the Kwagh-hir performance that gives it life, and as such, draws it closer to Western stage drama and its current cosmopolitan orientation. This paper is inspired by the various stage performances this writer has watched both in Nigeria and Europe. He was a member of the Nigerian delegation that watched the Kende Kaase group and the Benue State Council for Arts and Culture at the Pan-African Festival of Arts and Culture (PANAFEST) at Cape Coast, Ghana in August 1999 as well as the Kwagh-hir performance at the Festival De L'imaginaire organized by Mason Des Cultures Du Moude in Paris, France, February 2001.

A. Introduction

The art form known as the Kwagh-hir among the Tiv people of Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba and Plateau States is at present well publicized both nationally and internationally. The art-form is regularly performed at social occasions in Tivland as well as at various cities and villages in Nigeria and other countries abroad. But first, it was conceptualized as traditional performance which as Doki (128) puts it, has no specific author but arises naturally from the community:

On the question of origin and authorship, it is advisable to uphold the view that, like any other traditional performance, Kwagh-hir is a deliberate creation of the mass populace of a community who come together to share experiences which in their rich method of narration, graduate into a performance tradition like what we are witnessing today in the Kwagh-hir theatre.

In the same manner, the structuralist-functional school of British Anthropologist as indicated by Finnegan (27) saw nothing significant in studying the complex structure of African literary art, but believed that African society was an organic whole and that every activity was communally-produced for its utilitarian purpose and not for aesthetic pleasure.

Thus, the normal questions that were asked in the western written literature were not asked on distinct literary formations in the oral mode of expression in Africa. Nor were artists thought of as individual authors of their works, hence art was communally composed and owned. This then lays the basis for the imperialist idea that Africans had no distinct idea of the art from their religion or that African drama was ritual theatre. Charles Keil, for instance, says in his book about the Tiv people that “the Tiv have no pan-Tiv polity, no laws, no myths, no religion, no art.” He opines that this is the case because works like “art”, “beauty,” “symbol”, “aesthetics”, “creation” and “music” are not concepts that translate easily in Tiv language. (7)

This argument is obviously faulty and not a correct parameter for ascertaining the existence of the concept of art in Tiv language. It must be pointed out that the Hellenic tradition upon which the English literary tradition is built, conceptualizes its art forms differently. The Greeks called the poet a “maker” while the Romans called him a “prophet.” Most African societies call the poet as singer or groit or whatever indigenous names they deem fit. It is difficult to see how this tradition distracts fundamentally from the idea of poetry in Africa comparing favourably with the one produced in Europe.

But be that as it may, it is the reluctance of African scholars to distinguish literary art forms from the general fabric of traditional society that fuels this imperialist claim. For instance, the concept of theatre in Africa is consistently said to be synonymous with religious ritual performance, an assertion which takes Africa many centuries back to the inception of theatre by Dionysius in the Greek antiquity, when life itself was governed by spiritualism and superstition. This belief is peddled even in contemporary theatre studies, and it is the basis for Amirikpa Oyigbenu's definition of it:

Theatre is presented here as a process that evolved from the traditional community festivals celebration to the literary dramaturgy, culminating in the paradigm that is

commonly referred to as community theatre or theatre for development. In all these transitional phases, theatre has continued to play a significant role in the development of the people and their communities over the ages. In the classical Greek and Roman periods, theatre played an important part in the life of the citizens as it provided the opportunity for the annual worship of Dionysus, Bacchus and the host of other pantheon gods and goddesses that had direct influences on the lives of the people (Xvii).

In the end, neither position yields the desired result as the ritual identity is indeed a common origin of all secular theatres across the world. This is perhaps the same dilemma Hagher faces when he seeks to dissociate the Kwagh-hir art form from ritual or festival performances. He says:

Africa with its diversity of cultures ought not try to find a theatrical universal or formulae with which to neatly conceptualize African theatre. I believe that it will be more rewarding to the enrichment of the world theatre if Africa could produce as many different types of theatres as possible. In fact, it will take it that there are theatre traditions in Africa that are narrative in nature and others that are festival inclined. Africa would already be covering the two most powerful directorial concepts propounded by Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. (12)

However, Hagher's major accomplishment here is his fierce argument against the forcible and far-reaching conclusions by African scholars like J.P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, Joel Adedeji and Dapo Adelugba that traditional African theatre was an intricate fusion of religious and secular elements together in ritual or tribal festivals. The implication is that Africans were incapable of independently creating/art works beyond the utilitarian demands of religion and worship. He cautions fellow scholars of the danger of faulty generalization in which researchers fail to recognize essential details of differences among African-ethnic groups. He says: "It is no exaggeration to say the Tiv have no festivals, no deity in the sense of the Yorubas. They don't have yam festivals, or deity festivals, or ancestral festivals, where the sacred and the profane meet together" (10.)

By rescuing the Kwagh-hir theatre from forcible classification as a ritual or festival practices, Hagher argues that African art should be interpreted as emanating from several paradigms beyond the practice of religion. Hagher, therefore identifies the story-telling technique as the defining element in the Tiv Kwagh-hir theatre:

This book is based on the belief that the Kwagh-hir theatre derives from the story-telling performances of Tiv people. Both the theatre and story-telling events are interchangeable and synonymously called Kwagh-hir, the supernatural tales, or Kwagh-alom, things about the have. The Kwagh-hir story-telling event is the focal point of Tiv theatre. The transformation from story telling to theatre is achieved through a subsumed script, where the performers depict a hidden superstructure that is torn away to reveal a rational substructure (12).

B. Nativist and Spiritual Paradigms

The Kwagh-hir theatre is often variously described as "masquerade", "art", "puppet show", "magic" and "story-telling" theatre by such scholars like Yemi Ogunbiyi (3) James Tsaaior (456) and Rose Akaaer (215). Each of these characterizations, taken separately does not adequately represent the genre. Foreign scholars like Harper (210) who linked the Kwagh-hir with ritual practice had capitalized on the compound word, Kwagh-hir which means literally means "a thing of magic" to assume that it has to do with the mystery of spiritualism and metaphysics than the enactment of the mortal world. However, the animal, spirit and human characters depicted in Kwagh-hir live in a fictional cosmos that is tailored on rational human society. Hagher is correct when he says:

The folktale characters can be classified into three categories corresponding to the composition of the Tiv worldview: D 1) Humans 2) Animals 3) Spirits (Adzov, Mbakuv) and other supernatural phenomena like giants, strange animals with strange characteristics like Jongul, whose anus sparkles like a well-made fire...Alom, the have is the protagonist of most Tiv tales, he is everyman in Tiv, acting out impulses, others dare not, or would not use. He is cunning, stubborn, greedy, cruel and sadistic, and extremely arrogant and proud.

There is no liturgical commitment to the spirits recreated in the performance by either the carver or the performer, least of all, the audience. The spirits are so depicted to interact with the humans and animal characters so as to prove the affinity between the spiritual and the material worlds in the African traditional society. In other words, the theatre's non-human characters are taken as realistic participants in the rational world in the same way magical realism sustains the reader's credulity. Nevertheless, we are dealing essentially with secular art when we discuss or watch the Kwagh-hir theatre.

To the Tiv, Aondo is the high God and the "primary cause" for creation. This concept of Aondo, the Supreme Being, is said to have been held by the Tiv, several centuries before the coming of the Europeans...In Tiv world-view, the firmament, earth and rain are

conceived as symbolizing the divine presence of Aondo. For instance, they refer to the sky as Kwav-Aondo literally translated as, skim of God. (7)

With this strong affinity between the physical and spiritual elements in Tiv cosmology, it becomes clearer to understand why Tiv art, especially the Kwagh-hir draws its characters from both human and spiritual elements like Adzov as well as bush animals (believed to be under the control of Adzov) without raising some liturgical concerns. The Tiv people do not engage in formal and periodic worship of God, but regularly consults various akombo shrines in circumstances of mysteries of sicknesses, deaths, famine, infertility and disasters for mitigation. These akombo shrines are not necessarily mediators between them and Aondo but are used to exorcise evil spirits and diseases from people. Rubingh, an expatriate ethnographer explains this case better in his Sons of Tiv that:

The Tiv have no idols and no pantheon of deities, nor do they worship spirits, in fact spirits play strikingly meagre role in their day to day religion. The akombo refer rather to those mysterious forces which may be violated or disturbed by the disregard of certain taboos or the breaking of specific laws. (77).

This description is that of a group of people which is more in control of their destinies than leaving it in the hands of an unseen God. The Tiv people are thus more relatively secular or rational in outlook than most African societies. The Kwagh-hir theatre is certainly not a religious ritual enactment.

The idea of Kwagh-hir theatre deriving its protean status from the practice of folktales in Tiv society has been popularized by Hagher who observes that the folktale is itself called the Kwagh-hir or Kwagh-Alom which, as a common form of recreation may have been developed into a more complex art form dramatizing the plots of the stories. This analogy sounds a plausible as that of Aristotle in which he explains the logical development and consequent metamorphosis of the Epic, a purely narrative form, into Tragedy an art form which encompasses both narration and the dramatization of the plots to produce spectacle. Both the art of narrating folktales and performing the Kwagh-hir are conveyed in Tiv language by the same verb, namely, Ta, which literally means "throw." Sometimes both art forms are referred to as Kwagh-Alom which means "the story of the hare; the hare being the trickster in Tiv folktales. Hagher thus concludes that the Kwagh-hir story performances in Tiv show that indeed the Kwagh-hir theatre is in its present form has close kinship to the folktale performance. (49)

However, the relationship between the two art forms cannot be taken too far because of several reasons. Firstly, the Kwagh-hir theatre does not really have well developed and elaborate plots or dialogue among characters as we have in Tiv folktales. Secondly, the Kwagh-hir draws its themes and episodes mostly from contemporary activities in society while the folktales dwell largely on primal magical stories of human beings, animals and spirits, often sourced from distant past or space. And thirdly, the lack of a trickster as a protagonist that spans across all the episodes of Kwagh-hir in the manner the hare is featured in virtually all Tiv folktales, proves that the two art forms merely share a common world view, but are essentially not related. It is therefore definitely debatable to conclude as Hagher does that Tiv folktales lend to the theatre most of its animal and spiritual characters. These are commonly shared by all genres of Art produced in Tiv traditional society. Moreover, the folktale tradition is shared by virtually all tribes, groups and races of the world. The idea of its metamorphosing into drama could have as well been enacted in as many societies as possible. The fact that the Tiv Kwagh-hir theatre is generally regarded as unique to the Tiv people, and with virtually no comparable art form in Africa, should make us look elsewhere in our search for etymology.

C. Dance and Song in Kwagh-hir

More than either its alleged supernatural orientation or its purported affinity with folktales, it is the prevalence of dance and songs in a Kwagh-hir performance that gives its essence as traditional theatre. The most domineering element of the Kwagh-hir theatre is dance, which makes it comparable more to a dance-drama than a puppet show or a masquerade appearance or a narrative drama. All the human, animal and spiritual characters as well as puppets appearing in all episodes of Kwagh-hir performance put up one form or dance or mime.

The production team of every Kwagh-hir group must have a drumming team comprising expert drummers, singers, song composers, soloists and a large team of elegantly clad orchestra in either gberwar or anger customs. Actors appearing in the arena in human forms, or as wild beasts or as spirits (Adzov) must be accordingly hidden in dagbera or masks or huge wooden boxes to manipulate the puppets. They must also respond in their dance-steps and body movement correctly to the rhythm of drumming and singing. It may have been the excellence of the Tiv dance that tends to overshadow the other elements of drama like plot, dialogue and spectacle in the art form. Indeed, Charles Keil, while commenting the art of Tiv dance says that:

If prizes were to be awarded for choreographic quality, quantity and inventiveness in Nigeria, perhaps even in Africa as a whole, the Tiv people could justifiably lay claim to all three (28).

Dance itself is a form of drama in Tiv society. Different dance genres arise every now and then to imitate all important social and political developments in the land and vanish as soon as such phenomena fade. Many of the

dances which are currently popular in Tivland arose to parody one topical issue or the other. The ingyough and Agatu dances, for instance, make mockery of disease, death and witchcraft. The ingyough dancers distend their bellies grotesquely, take on idiotic grins, cross their eyes, dangle their arms presenting a picture of complete affliction of “dropsy” a certain disease that had once afflicted Tivland. The carry out all these deformities and body contortions in rhythm with the drumming and singing.

A man watches a squirrel stealing groundnuts, running back and forth from his granary, and the next moment ihinga (squirrel) dance is invented imitating the action. Kwaza dance began in the 1930s when iv miners who were conscripted to work on the Tin mines in Jos returned home. At their spare time they imaginatively recreated the digging motions into a dance and created lyrics to go with it. Dasenda (police) dance mimics the drills of the police force which was introduced by the colonial masters in Tivland. It is performed mainly by women wearing mock police uniforms, clutching batons and swaying lethargically and sometimes smarting to the beating of the drums. Another dance, the Gberchul (knocking of forehead on the ground) is literally a recreation of the worship system of the Moslems. It is done in vigorous dance steps, with dancers occasionally touching their foreheads on the ground and changing their positions rapidly to symbolize the itinerant nature of Muslim worshippers.

Hagher’s description of the dominance of dance and song in the Tiv society as an art form is even more striking. He describes dance as a “mimetic, abstract and metaphorical” art with a multiplicity of functions and varying degrees of applicability to every stage of a man’s rite of passage. He agrees with Keil that every aspect of life in Tiv society is accompanied with dance and singing ranging from cradle songs mothers sing for their infant babies through the satirical songs and dances of gbangi, swange, baka, kpingi and ngigh-ngigh, the young people indulge in to the songs of greatness performed at Iviom, Ibiamegh and girinya rites.

Similarly, in the Kwagh-hir theatre the human, animal and spirit elements are recreated in song and dance. These endeavours require the combined services of skilful carvers, artists, song composers, lead soloist, choristers, dancers, puppet manipulators and raffia weavers. A typical Kwagh-hir episode, for instance could enact the emergence of a huge “beast” dressed in dagbera, with the characteristics of a real beast as it dances to the praise music rendered by the soloist and the chorus describing either its benevolence or monstrosity in exaggerated terms. Such a beast could be named as Ajikoki, or Nyam-avaan, Kugia-ku-ngang-ngan-kua or chilangagu Adogirima, Gaganyam, Kijim-kijum, Daburma Nyam Abyako and the likes. These are not names that necessarily mean anything in Tiv but are suggestive of the aggressiveness or monstrosity of the “beast” through its dances or movements. The following excerpts is a song for a ‘beast’ masquerade with the name, Dabuluma which was recorded, transcribed and translated by Hagher in 1977:

Lead Soloist:	The world isn’t like that Coming with heavy steps Is the wild beast Of the <u>adzov</u> spirit It should stop at the door’s mouth.
Chorus:	Dabuluma!
Lead Soloist:	The beast will attack you.
Chorus:	Dabuluma ieee! The beast is calling Chief Iorember Ikpa Mbatali people have Excelled in the animal show So early at dawn.

(70)

Very often at the emergence of a beast masquerade, an agile lone dancer jumps into an arena jostling two spears to herald its arrival. His costumes mostly made of raffia around his waist and biceps, a pair of rattling shells on his ankles, he most times dances his way round the arena as he guides the path of the beast. As a participant in the show, he may sometimes not be a benevolent host but a skilful hunter whose role would be to shoot the beast with his dane-gun midway into the dance in order to the audience watch how violent a spirit-beast react in throes of death. Sometimes the beast may be an animal as familiar as either a monkey or a chimpanzee doing its hopping-dance in the arena. It may even hop and sit on top of an improvised tree and it would the duty of the lone dancer to prove his dexterity in marksmanship. He would shoot the animal dead and drag its carcass off the arena to the Mbakuv (the land of the dead) to demonstrate that the humans indeed have the tact to even up with the animal and spirit world. All these actions are choreographed in dance moments to synchronize with the drums and the songs accompanying.

Beside these, other human characters that come into the arena are those individuals that hold the burning torch light to illuminate the way for the beasts, the spirits and the wooden boxes that bear the puppets. The torch-

bearer too has to be a good dancer, an audacious youth who must prove his dexterity in pacifying rage of the animal characters as he dances his way sporadically around the arena. He directs other human dancers in the 'beast' and 'spirit' masks on how long to stay in the arena and finally leads them into Mbakur.

D. Other Contemporary Motifs in Kwagh-hir

While tracing the growth and development of the Kwagh-hir theatre since 1973, Doki (132) has listed at least 15 major international public occasions the Kwagh-hir drama has been staged on modern theatre both within and outside the country. It has also been serialized as a television drama by the Nigerian Television in 1985 as well as captured in film presentations by the Congress and World Puppetry Festival in Washington DC in 1980 and the Raduga World Television Folklore in Moscow, USSR in 1987. The most globalized display of the Kwagh-hir was the February 2001 joint performance of Kende Kaase and the Benue State Council for Arts & Culture at the National Theatre of Paris of which this writer was in attendance. The event was widely advertised on the internet and equally given favourable reviews in major Newspapers and Television Stations in France.

With this global outlook, the Kwagh-hir artistes have also tailored their art to encompass various contemporary issues to make it more relevant to their audience. Their first approach is to introduce satire in their craft since they are concerned with moral issues like sexual immorality, prostitution, drug abuse, drunkenness and HIV/AIDS epidemics etc. which transcend borders. These are the same issues that concern literary scripts written for either stage, television or radio.

Hagher, however, misses the point when he gives an impression that the Kwagh-hir artistes parody technological innovations merely as objects of curiosity. He says:

These technological innovations like motor cars, aeroplanes, motorcycles as well as other very natural phenomenon like some wild animals, rare birds or places are problems of Tiv thought. Accordingly the presentation of these items in puppet form seems to do what vegetative rituals did to the primitive man of the hunting gathering society. By presenting the object of curiosity, the Kwagh-hir hopes to make it comprehensive and therefore perhaps more readily domesticated. (221)

A theatre that robustly engages its audience in the theme of the HIV/AIDS scourge (wanakande) or parodies acts of prostitution (shaba and Ashawo) or depicts scenes of firing range of armed robbers cannot be flimsily described as dwelling on curiosity. It is indeed preoccupied with criticizing and finding solutions to the day to day issues of the Nigerian society. The Kwagh-hir puppets are fashioned to re-enact contemporary events such as recent developments in fashion, political behaviour, technological breakthroughs and social conduct like any other staged play. Kwagh-hir presentations are increasingly taking the composite outlook of popular comedy, dance choreography and puppet displays satirizing topical events in society, and as such expanding its creativity and scope at each innovation in Tivland. The 21st century, for instance is known for its globalized form of sexual perversity stretching to sex slavery in Europe and human trafficking across the Sahara deserts. It is also known for its hip-hop culture in which catch words like Shaba infiltrate our vocabulary. Doki notices a classic scene in the Kwagh-hir in which both ideas are conceptualized with just two masks characters:

The concept of beauty and sexual perversity and promiscuity is given expression through puppets – Ashawo and Shaba respectively. The Ashawo is constructed with well endowed buttocks, full and coiled hair, protruding boobs and snow-white teeth, elegantly dancing around. All these are attributes of beauty in Tivland that has found expression through the art of Kwagh-hir dramatization. The negative use to which these natural qualities are put, is what Shaba puppet comes out to display. The Shaha comes out beautifully dressed in her gaiety of natural endowment, she is chased around by a Youngman; spectacularly ugly in appearance...This is thus a form of ridicule on young ladies who have turned their bodies into items of trade where money can be gotten in exchange for sex. (155-156)

Other than giving abstract ideas concerning social behaviour in society as indicated above, the Kwagh-hir theatre brings to the stage displays of real issues, events and inventions. There are scenes in which a football match is enacted through puppetry and christened "BCC Lions Football Club." This is a re-enactment of the familiar soccer events in Gboko which attracts large audience participation. There are scenes in which a giant toy motorcar is driven into the arena, and its masked owner/driver, emerges from it, walks round the arena mimicking the arrogance of the moneyed class and then gets back into the "car" and drives out. Such toy vehicles could be as many as three or four in number, driven into the arena in a convoy to mimic the official convoy of the Governor or First Lady of the State. The manner the masked-occupants of these vehicles move around and get back to them shows the pride of those in power and their belief in material things of life. There are also scenes of puppets depicting heavy earth moving automobile like a bulldozer, a grader or a lorry tipper being manipulated to work under the supervision of a government contractor. These scenes are not merely dramatized for the fun of it, but their meanings are codified in the local beliefs of contemporary society. The

Kwagh-hir artists engage the talents of skilful sculptors, dancers, composers, singers and manipulators to enact performances of topical events and in the process elicit pleasure by ridiculing anti-social behaviours.

E. Conclusion

In summary, rather than portray the Kwagh-hir theatre as a rigid traditional theatre of the Tiv people nourished on Tiv spiritual, folklorist and puppetry elements, we have discovered that this theatre, in its composite nature, is very dynamic and adaptive to the Western styled drama. It has neither a singular motivation for its existence nor does it operate on a fixed setting, the way other African traditional dramas do. The Kwagh-hir theatre today is by many standards comparable to Western staged drama especially given its flexibility of essence and the itinerant nature of its stage.

While its ritual motif is often overstated by scholars and is in fact discovered to be essentially a secular event, the Kwagh-hir at present operates more like a contemporary dance-drama satirizing contemporary issues with the view to mixing or even replacing traditional elements with Western European theatre practices. It is not surprising that Hagher who as its chief exponent of the folklorist origin today describes it as an art form with a universalist, rather than an essentialist outlook:

The Kwagh-hir is an event which provides secular entertainment education and socialization...The enactment of past and contemporary events by human performances using puppets and masquerades...the Kwagh-hir has great appeal among all classes in Nigeria. It has offered entertainment to over 30 million Tiv viewers, been performed live in the 36 States of Nigeria and has toured Burkina Faso, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Niger Republic. (7)

Those who do not succumb to this assimilationist vision of the Kwagh-hir however argue that the artform is diminishing. Akaer and Iyav (215) remark that the Kwagh-hir theatre “in recent times, (has) been fading away and dying out.” This line of thinking is that of scholars who are still beholden to the ritualist and story-telling motifs that were identified with the rise of the Kwagh-hir, who are possibly oblivious of the fact that our world is constantly shifting and our cultures mingling with others as we move from one generation to the other. The Kwagh-hir theatre as we have today, is an itinerant theatre enacted at modernized stages across in the world with modifications and with participants drawn from the animal, human and spiritual realms of Tiv cosmology, characters who are not necessarily fixed to specific plots and settings but might find their equivalents in other dramas elsewhere in the world.

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