



The deployment of music in the performance of Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

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Abstract

This study affirms that music is a core aspect in the collaborative art of dramatic process and not mere aesthetic embellishment as a secondary need to theatrical fulfilment. Consequently, making music and other theatre elements a total theatre. Differently, this is not the case with western theatre however in Africa, music which is an oral process is an essential cultural index in modulating conflict, heightening of suspense and the deepening of mood unlike their western counterpart where folklore or oral tradition is not an essence in the theatre. It is from this stand point we shall x-ray how music is being deployed in the performance of Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* — underlying impulses and reasons for how Femi Osofisan uses Yoruba music in the play. By extension, how music in the play enhances Osofisan's dramaturgy and underscores the concept of total theatre. Eventually reaching the finding that music in theatre productions convey pedagogical messages with didactic facts having complementary art which can be investigated from the prism of performance theory and the methodology of Yoruba oral-music signal system instrumental to the production.

Keywords: drama, music, performance, theatre

Introduction

Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is a post-modern African adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* with a new approach in creativity– the story of a people and a beloved city destroyed by the brutality of war. The play has its origin in history, around 1821, when the combined forces of the armies of Ijebu and Ife in the Yoruba kingdoms in the south west, along with mercenaries recruited from Oyo refugees fleeing downwards from the Nigerian Savannah region, sacked the city of Owu after a seven-year siege. Owu was a model city-state, one of the most prosperous and best organized of those times. The Allied Forces had attacked it with the pretext of liberating the flourishing market of Apomu from Owu's control. Owu closed the gates of its formidable walls, but it soon had to face the problem of drought when the rains stopped during the siege. This was a boom to the Allied Forces. Finally, in the seventh year they entered the city, and subdued it. These Allied Forces determined that the city must never rise again, reduced the place to rubble, and set fire to it. They slaughtered all males, adults and children, and carried away the females into slavery.

Osofisan employs post-modern circumstances, encounters and dispositions to extrapolate the subjects of persecution, savagery, banishment, conflict, manipulation etc. In doing this, traditional African forms of music, oral tradition, poetry and nuances are merged to produce a contemporary situation and its efficacy on the modern society. This underscores Osofisan's belief in collective heroism and the zeal to break from a past to a post-modern phase of heroic collectism, dynamic doabilities and all manner of newness to the theatre through music.

Pre-Performance Phase

Osofisan, was around and available to direct, hence he was contacted. He handled the casting session assisted by a production team supplied by the National Troupe of Nigeria. The troupe called for auditions. There were several reading sessions before Osofisan arrived at a final cast. The National Troupe has a policy of engaging guest artistes to complement the crop of artistes they have in-house. So, there were a couple of guest artistes invited for the production.

Osofisan worked with the artistes and musicians of the National Troupe to realise the music for the production. He usually would tell them what he wanted and they would produce the notes and rhythm.

The National Troupe created new songs for the production, perhaps to reflect contemporary issues. Some of the songs that came with the play that the director considered obsolete were discarded for newer ones. Traditional musical instruments, such as *Dundun*, (Yoruba talking drum) gong, and flute, were considered suitable for the production. It was observed that there was emphasis on acquiring drums that were used to perform the Owu dance that is synonymous with Owu people, such as *Sakara* and *Ogodo* (a semi-rotund calabash played with finger rings).

According to Shaibu Hussein who was the personal assistant to the Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria, Osofisan adopted a liberal style, which also allowed the actors to have input. He did not have a rigid style of blocking the actors on paper and insisting that they keep to the blocking. He was always telling the actors to work around what they were comfortable with. In addition, because the actors and dancers were experienced, he mostly guided them with his notes during the different phases of the production. The schedule was done in such a way that various activities, such as general exercises, reading, blocking, segmented rehearsals, songs rehearsals and run-throughs were incorporated accordingly. The various stages a play passes through from choice to performance were realised as apt and suitable for the production of the play. The rehearsals of the play spanned about eight weeks and then the last week was dedicated to dress and technical rehearsals. As the rehearsal was on, the technical crew was perfecting the mise-en-scene.

The scenes and/or situation motivated the choice of dances in the production. Arnold Udoka choreographed the dance with assistance from some long-standing artistes of the National Troupe who hail from the Yoruba cultural background. They helped in interpreting the dances and instructing the guest artistes as the case may be. The relationships between the director and the troupe members were cordial.

Performance Phase/Music

In this play, Osofisan combines myth, history and contemporary politics, which characterize the Nigerian nation since independence. A chilling atmosphere pervaded the Cinema Hall I, National Arts Theatre, Iganmu Lagos, Nigeria at the presentation of this epic performance of the classic tragic tale of the barbarity and total recklessness that provoked brutal wars. It reminded one of the experiences of the horror of the Nigeria/Biafra War, which deliberately, was a part of the Nigerian history that the play itself alludes to.

Music, in the performance under review, played a significant and fundamental role. It was employed as a description of action dramatized, pantomimically. Music, in some instances, functioned as a narrative technique, offering vivid actions that words could not describe. One of such instances was the very opening of the play. The play began with a powerful stage description of an atmosphere of unprecedented horror, pain and sorrow. However, the audience only saw this as an aftermath of a scenario, as it had no access to the stage description. Music was then used to fill the gap created by the non-existent oral expression of the situation. The actual stage description reads:

It is the day after the sack of the town of Owu Ipole by the Allied Forces of Ijebu, Oyo, and Ife. The night before, the king, Oba Akinjobi, had fled from the town, with some of his high chiefs and solders, leaving his family behind. The allied forces slaughtered all men left in the town including the male children; and only the female children have been spared and made captives. The scene is an open space close to the city's main gate, which used to serve as the market but has now been demolished. Visible in the background is the city itself in ruins and smouldering. Along the broken wall are the temporary tents of the old market, built of wooden and bamboo stakes, and straw roofs in which the women are being kept. The Chorus of women, still invincible in the dark, is singing the dirge, "Atupa gbepo nle felepo". (1)

As detailed as this stage direction is, the audience did not have access to it and thus did not know what happened the day before. There was no narrator to tell the audience what had happened in order to capture the magnitude of the precarious and tragic situation. But the introduction of “Atupa gbepo nle felepo” (Lamp yield your oil to the bearer) did not only articulate the gory situation, but also captured the mood and greatly involved the audience in the emotional, physical and psychological trauma of the situation:

Atupa gb ‘epo nle f’elepo

Atupa gb ‘epo nle f’elepo
to the oil seller

-Refrain:

Irawo wo, orun o ran,
down, the sun retired

Osupa o tan mo o,
light

Ale le le

Alejo lode loganjo oru
the dead of night

-Refrain:

Irawo wo, etc...
down, etc.

Oja oro lomako de o:
merchandise of pain

Refrain:

Irawo wo
etc.

Oro iku de ni t Alagangan!
what he sells

-Refrain:

Irawo wo
etc.

Lamp yield your oil

Lamp yield your oil

-Refrain

The stars are

The moon refuses to

The night

A stranger comes in

-Refrain:

The stars are

Has brought his

-Refrain:

The stars are down,

Death of course is

-Refrain:

The stars are down,

Ko ma seni to le yee bo o!
refuse to buy!

-Refrain:

Irawo wo etc...
down, etc.

Atupa gbeponle felepo:
your oil to the oil seller

- Refrain:

Irawo wo etc...
down, etc...

And none of us can

-Refrain:

The stars are

Lamp yield

-Refrain:

The stars are

ATUPA GBEPO NLE FELEPO

Call

A-tu-pa gbe-po n-le fe-le - poc

Refrain

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-

4

A-tu-pa gbe-po n-le fe-le - poc

A-le-jo lo-de lo-gan-jo o-

le.

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

8

ru

A-la-gan-gan lo k'o-ja re de o

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

12

O-ja o-ro re lo ma-ko-de o:

ram, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le

16

O-ro i-ku de ni ta la-gan-gan!

Ko ma se-ni to le ye-e bo

le.

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

20

ol

A-tu-pa gbe-po n-le fe-le - poc

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le

I-ra-wo wo run o o-

24

A-tu-pa gbe-po n-le fe-le -

ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

26

poc

I-ra-wo wo run o o-ran, O-su-pa o tan mo o a-le-le-le.

felepo"

This elegy is a lamentation not from the backstage sang by an orchestra but rendered by the people on stage, which made it a musical externalisation of the pain, sorrow and agony of the villagers. It therefore solicited the empathy of the audience.

Osofisan's social concern is particularly pungent in this play, which recalls his focus in *Reel, Rwanda*, another of his play that centres on the brutality of war in the East African country, Rwanda. In this play, Osofisan's style of dramaturgy of "expository speeches that detail the genocide" (Dunton, 1992: 140), is also adopted in the case of the pitiable women of Owu who recall the peace and bounty that the once powerful kingdom enjoyed before the invasion by the Allied Forces. It also helps to highlight the significance of what he also considers the need to "establish an adequate record of historical process and our ability to reach a consensual acknowledgement of this" (140). That seems to be, among other things, the thrust of *Women of Owu*, especially if the encounter between Anlugbua, the ancestral god of the people and his grandmother, Lawumi, is anything to go by. Such knowledge serves to connect the import of the music rendered when the two ancestral beings (Anlugbua and Lawumi) meet. Gesinde, the Army General's message bearer, comes in to address the battered women, including the Erelu.

It is understandable then when silence seemed to envelope the theatre when the play began and the song of tragic immolation from the recklessly battered women of Owu, led by Erelu, who could not even sing at the top of their voices in lamentation, but resignation to fate. Equally fitting was the choice of music by the performers, which was a combination of dancers of the National Troupe and a number of professional performers drawn from the Lagos metropolis. The state of decay, horrible smell and squalor was synonymous with nightfall, darkness, sudden dawn or eclipse at noon that the import of the music carries with it. "Alele ti le" thus became a kind of funeral music to say farewell to the dead and remind the living that danger is not yet over.

Alele ti le e, oja yi ma poju re de o
the market tumbles

Night falls suddenly and

Alele ti le e, oja yi ma poju re de o
and the market tumbles

Night falls suddenly

Iran okunkun ko ba mi loja o dile o
Okunrin lada, eyi ti mo se ni be loju
fate

spread everywhere
Fed up I am with this

Akii je lori moyo o,
Ara oja o dile o

Enough, our soul cry
Enough of this fate



Musical Notation 19: Alele ti le e, oja yi ma poju re de o

Osofisan's most important concern expressed in the play has to do with the condition and situation of the most vulnerable members of the society—women and children, as well as the extent of the toll of brutality on them as a collective. Budelmann recalls the opinion of Osofisan in his article entitled "*Trojan Women* in Yoruba Land: Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*". According to him drawing on Osofisan: women and children are the ones who suffer most from the effects of war - brutalized, raped, disfigured - and are then left alive to face the consequences. In a way, therefore, it is easier for the men; they are gone from the scene and so beyond pain. But think of the widows and orphans, the mutilated women left with their wounds and memories. Euripides must have chosen in his play to concentrate on these victims in order to further highlight

the horror and brutality of war. This is a message, which is particularly pertinent today, with Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, Libya etc. (Buldemann, 2006).

It is thus appropriate to hear the women sing and lament their tragedy with the music “Oju Ogun le”, as if to further emphasise their apparent tragic reality.

Oju ogun le
Oju ogun le, igbe igbe ibosi o
indeed, and bloody
Won pa’run, won pa’gba pa ‘rinwo
our strength not a match
Ati raka apa o ka won
and horror we bear

The battle is fierce
The battle is fierce,
We fell in batches,
Confusion

The musical notation is presented in three systems. The first system, labeled 'CALL', features a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a 12/8 time signature. The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes, with lyrics 'O - ju oo - gun le' and 'won' written below. The second system, labeled 'CHORUS', continues the melody with lyrics 'I - gbe i - gbe i - bo - si o i - gbe'. The third system shows a triplet of eighth notes with lyrics 'p' - orun won pa - gba won pa - rin - wo' followed by another line of the chorus melody with lyrics 'I - gbe i - gbe i - bo - si o i - gbe'.

Musical Notation 20: “Oju Ogun le”

The brutal murder of Erelu Afin’s grandchild, which represented the future of the people smashed against the wall, concluded the bitter and complete annihilation of the people. The description of how the child’s skull is smashed against the trunk of a tree, the meanness of the act and the totality of the bloodshed in relation to the cost of Iyunloye’s betrayal of Maye Okunade, who swore vengeance on Owu and the irrationality of Iyunade’s betrayal were

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wrapped up in the song. It can best be seen as an elegy for a people who once stood together in peace. But are now engulfed in a brutal and painful bloodletting, looting and rape. The tragic fate is likened to a heavy whirlwind, which swoops down and sweep the entire kingdom from the ground and smashes it against a boulder, turning it into bits and pieces that are extremely difficult to piece together. Music is able to convey mood: anger, resignation and distress in a way dialogue and movement could not have been made to do. It becomes the most important tool of dramaturgy at the last point in the performance, which is the materials of an epic narrative very much familiar to the audience's immediate reality.

Aja kubo

Aja kubo

Mee ri me maaa

the child

Me maa mu bo aja gbomo gba

knows

Whirlwind

Whirlwind

Where has it taken

To where nobody



Musical Notation 21: "Aja kubo kubo"

At the end of the tragic play, the god Anlugbua tries to underplay the tragedy by giving the people a ray of hope. Even at that, the hope is not tangible and certainly not desirable. At the height of the people's confusion and being totally forlorn, Anlugbua consoles them in the following words:

Anlugbua: Poor human beings! War is what will destroy you! As it destroys the gods. But I am moved, and I promise: Owu will rise again! Not here, not as a single city again – Mother will not permit that, I know – but in little communities elsewhere, with our cities of Yorubaland. Those now going into slavery shall start new kingdoms in those places. It is the only atonement a god can make for you against your senseless volition for self-destruction. You human beings are always thirsty for blood, always eager to devour one another! I hope history will teach you. I hope you will learn. (Scene 5)

It is at this point, on hearing that they are doomed to be scattered, that the people begin to lament their plight about the uncertainty of the future. The people see the future as being bleak and cry out pitifully that the whirlwind take them to where they had no clue. Thus, as in the beginning of the play where the “Atupa gbepo nle felepo” song vividly captures the mood and sets the stage for the unfolding catastrophe, the “Ajakubo” song aptly rounds off the play.

Conclusion

Femi Osofisan’s play under study, expectedly, is rich in Yoruba music with a trend in the transition from oral to contemporary application in the theatre. Thus, in the *Women of Owu* music is evaluated as incidental, transitional, narratological and cultural fusion. Music, in this play, sets mood, deepens the conflict and heightens the suspense in the play. Osofisan reconstructs the moribund aspects of African tradition with a musical trend of theatrical dynamism for possible new interpretations. In this sense music reveals Osofisan as an ingenuous radical dramatist who uses music as an agent of contemporary cultural rebirth and change. Music in the play enhances African dramaturgy and underscores the concept of total theatre which sums that Africans should

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construct expressions that could suitably describe their music and
how essential it is to the fashion of the 21st Century.

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