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Essays on African Literature in

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to write the Foreword to this collection of twenty-two essays, *IBA: Essays on African Literature in Honour of Oyin Ogunba*, ably put together and edited by Dr. Wole Ogundele and Dr. Gbemisola Adeoti of the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

Oyin Ogunba, who, in recent years, I fondly greet anywhere I see him as **Ogun – Omo – Iba**, was a colleague at the University College Ibadan English Honours School, although I completed my programme (1962) a year before he completed his (1963). He was a highly intelligent, discerning and humorous person in those years, and I am glad that he has kept his jolly laughter and his genial disposition up till now. He was not only academically brilliant; he also took part in sports and in dramatic, cultural and chapel activities.

After completing his Ph. D thesis in drama in 1966 in the School of Drama, University of Ibadan under the supervision of Geoffrey Axworthy (Associate Professor) and Professor Bolaji Idowu, Head of the Department of Religious Studies, he served as a Graduate Fellow at Ibadan briefly before securing a lectureship position at the University of Lagos, Department of English (1966-1969) in the Wole Soyinka / J.P. Clark years. He returned in 1969 to the University of Ibadan where he was appointed Lecturer and later Senior Lecturer in the Department of English. He left the University of Ibadan for the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife) in 1975, having acceded to the Chair of English at Ife.

Considering the excellent work he was doing at the University of Ibadan Department of English both in African Oral Literature / Orature and in the Shakespeare courses, many of us felt upset that he took the decision to cross over to Ife at that time. But the incomparable pioneer work he has done at Obafemi Awolowo University, from 1975 to 2003 more than justifies the initial inconvenience a fresh start at Ife must have meant for our assiduous scholar and humanist.

The reference made to the public presentation of Ogunba's first book, *The Movement of Transition: A Study of Wole Soyinka's Plays*, published by Ibadan University Press in 1975, by the first contributor to this volume makes it necessary for us to recall that incident at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre, which was presided over by the then Head of our Department of Theatre Arts, Professor Joel Adeyinka Adedeji (God rest him). Neither Femi Osofisan nor any of the other discussants of Ogunba's maiden book (Biodun Jeyifo, Omolara Ogundipe – Leslie, Dapo Adelugba, Kole Omotoso) did anything wrong. The only problem was that the author was not priorly briefed that the event would be in two parts –

the book launch and the critique session. Neither, indeed, was the Editor of Ibadan University Press, Mr. Udoeyop, briefed, as far as I remember.

Oyin Ogunba and his wife were dressed to the nines in resplendent white lace outfit, and I still very clearly remember how they both sat calmly through the critique session (which quickly followed the book launch) at which youthful Marxian bricks were thrown both at the book and (inevitably at the author). The embarrassment for the Editor of Ibadan University Press and for those of us who were sympathetic to Ogunba's innovative book was great that late afternoon.

The incident bears recalling because it showed the strength of mind, the even temper and the accommodating spirit of the man we are celebrating almost thirty years after that incident. The panel of critics did nothing wrong, I will continue to insist. What was undeniably unfair was the failure to give the author and his publishers prior warning as to how the launching or presentation event was to be conducted.

Oyin Ogunba was the first scholar to complete the Ph. D. degree in drama at the University of Ibadan School of Drama / Department of Theatre Arts. J.A. Adedéji ably followed him in 1969. The pioneer work these scholars and others did has put Ibadan in the lead since then, and Ogunba has kept up his interest in the growth of young scholars – not only those at Ife and Ibadan but also those in other Universities in Nigeria and abroad. He has been External Examiner for a large number of Ph. D. and M.A. candidates in Literature and in Drama / Theatre Arts in many Universities.

Twenty-two essays in this volume are neither fortuitous nor accidental; rather, they constitute a most worthy tribute to a scholar who has worked in all the sub-fields covered. As one moves from one chapter to the next, one comes to realise that these essays add up to a compendium of original research and thinking in the field of African oral and written literature, performing arts and culture. The essays in their totality emerge, to use a visual arts simile, like a well-woven *adire* cloth with complementary colours and motifs. I sincerely believe that, as Oyin Ogunba reads this book from Chapter to Chapter, he would feel satisfied that the future of scholarship in African oral / written literature, drama / theatre arts and culture is secure. I commend you all, then, dear readers, to the enjoyment of the twenty-two essays in one volume.

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Preface

When we called for papers for this book, we were not expecting more than ten, twelve, or at most fifteen responses, all of which we would publish in a not-too-slim volume. The trickle of responses became a flood, and we began to realise that it was all due, mainly, to Professor Oyin Ogunba's reputation as a scholar and critic of African literature, but most of all as a teacher. We therefore had to accommodate many more papers than we had planned for, and turn down yet many more good papers that we would have loved to include.

Since Ogunba made his mark in two major fields, Literary and Dramatic Criticism and Oral African Literature, our call for papers was not restricted to any narrow area but to all fields of oral African literature, theatre and drama, and literature and literary criticism—in short all aspects of both old and new African cultural productions and practices. We thus have, within the covers of this book, essays on a wide variety of subjects: drama, the novel, poetry, dance, popular music, traditional festivals, literature, the politics of colonial languages in Africa, the economics of cultural production and distribution, cultural nationalism, and so on. The approaches are also as varied as the subjects, from the purely theoretical to the good old practical approaches. There are also the very personal approaches. This is why we have divided the essays into five categories, with each category sharing a more or less common subject.

We do not feel that there is a need to summarise the argument(s) of each essay, or to pass judgement on them. However, we would like to comment briefly on the four essays in Part I. The first of them, by Femi Osofisan, relives the 'bruising' encounter he and his fellow young radicals had with Ogunba, almost three decades ago, upon the presentation of his landmark book on the plays of Wole Soyinka, *The Movement of Transition*. The encounter itself reveals the heady political and intellectual idealism that suffused the Nigerian academia of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, while his present reflections on it betray, well, the dissipation of that idealism. Osofisan then was a young lecturer and budding playwright; he has now made his mark in both fields. The combination of age and experience has made him to appreciate the value of not only what Ogunba was saying in that book, but also its continuing relevance. Ahmed Yerima reminisces on his days as a student in Oyin Ogunba's oral literature class at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife) in the very early 1980s. The reminiscences emphasise his teacher's humaneness, showing, in some details, why Oyin Ogunba's reputation as a scholar and teacher of oral literature is so huge. Oral literature is notoriously difficult to teach, for what you have on the

page is a pale and even distorted shadow of the real thing, all made worse by its having to be taught *in translation*. How to make it come alive, to make the students first have an idea of it as a complete aesthetic experience before meaning and significance can come, remains a perennial hurdle many a teacher has not been able to overcome. Especially in the postcolonial African cultural experience where performances of the various oral genres are becoming a rarity, and where a student would probably have never witnessed a performance, live or recorded. What Yerima conveys in his short piece is how his teacher made it come alive; he sang the songs and recited the oral poems he was teaching in a sonorous voice as if he composed them. He could do this because he collected most of the songs and poems himself. If he had not gone to school, Yerima is sure, Ogunba would have been an oral performer—and a great and successful one too.

It is not often that an examiner of a doctoral dissertation makes such a lasting impression on the candidate for him or her to write on both the examiner and subsequent encounters years later. This is what Mabel Evwierhoma has done in her essay presented here. Oyin Ogunba has examined several Masters and Doctoral dissertations in both Nigeria and abroad, and we are sure that Mabel Evwierhoma is here speaking on behalf of all of them when she says that the examiner, upon seeing how nervous she was, made her feel relaxed by telling her that what they were about to do was not an inquisition but a free exchange of ideas—that he and the other examiners were there to be informed! Quite interesting too is her linking of Ogunba the cultural critic with radical Afrocentric politico-cultural critics like Cabral, Molefe Asante, and Chinweizu. The fourth essay, Oladitan's "Literature, Collective Administration of Rights, and the Development of A Systematic Cultural Economy in Africa," stands on its own as a complete essay on that subject, but he has also included Oyin Ogunba's crucial role and sterling contributions to the Nigerian organisations that seek to ensure that not only literary but also oral artists get due credit and rewards for their productions. In the process of detailing Oyin Ogunba's role in this seemingly unacademic endeavour, Oladitan also notes his kindness, generosity of heart, as well as the breadth and depth of his knowledge of Yoruba culture. The four essays, then, span the beginning, the middle, and the end of an almost forty-year career of university teaching and research. They also stress Oyin Ogunba's role as a pioneering scholar and teacher of African theatre, traditional and modern. Even though the four essayists had not planned it so, and obviously did not intend it, they are all agreed about the personality of Oyin Ogunba. This personality, Osofisan says, is that of "the most benign and the most compassionate teacher of literature in the Nigerian university system."

The remaining essays, as said earlier, are very wide in subjects as well as approaches. This is perhaps as it should be, for Ogunba himself has a very broad personality: he is a great academic and an even greater teacher at whose feet many young students and younger colleagues now sit to learn about law, Yoruba religion and medicine, traditional African dance, Shakespeare, Akan or Benin festivals, and so on. Oyin Ogunba has one foot firmly in the old Yoruba intellectual tradition, and the other in the now not-so-new (in Africa) Western tradition. A proper grounding in the one helped him to plant his feet in the other; the one was the compass he used to find his direction in the bewildering landscape of the other. The pity now is that, while the one has almost been totally eroded, the other is yet to become fully internalized so as to completely shape our cultural personalities and intellectual outlook on life.

Books of this nature, called *festschrift*, usually say nothing about the persons in whose honour they are put together; but that is in another tradition. In the Yoruba tradition of *ijuba* (homage), it is, first the person, then the deeds, and lastly the person. '*Iwalewa*' (character is beauty), say the Yoruba. Truly, Oyin Ogunba's character and personality constitute his beauty—and his deeds.

Wole Ogundele

Gbemisola Remi Adeoti

WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN DANCE?

Sola Olorunyomi

The dance history of Africa is, irrevocably, equally entwined in the general inquiry of what constitutes an African identity. This is both an ideological and technical problematic. The point of divergence is not however easily delineated by a dichotomy between observances of the Western scholar and those of his African counterpart.

Nonetheless, a safe starting point can be captured by a simple phrase: that between the universal—which emphasizes unanimity of forms—and, on the other hand, that which seeks a reading based on the particular and divergent. By this is meant an attitude to dance analysis that predicates observation on African dance forms as nondescript or at best, homogenous and, on the other, one that identifies and names observable nuances in the corpus of African dances.

No doubt these are two extreme positions and most analysts, while generally emphasizing one over the other, acknowledge the potential inclusiveness of each. Although identifying varied dance types, Zimba Oyorotey, for instance, seems more at ease using the generic label “African people’s dance,” noting that in spite of the continent’s diversities, “historians have traced broad migratory patterns showing common origins and destinations.” He uses this term to describe sub-Saharan and diasporan cultures. And in the context of Britain, he notes that diasporan Africans would refer to “those African/Caribbean artists who first created spaces for African and Caribbean dance in Britain.” North Africa is excluded primarily because that part of the continent is largely “inhabited by Berbers and Arabs who have more cultural affinity with Middle Eastern and Oriental cultures.”¹

And even though Zimba identifies recent recreational dances on the continent—such as Kolomashi, Tumbé, and Okpe (in Ghana), and “the gumboot dance of South Africa which came out of the migration of Africans into urban areas for work”—he consciously avoids describing them as ‘contemporary African dance.’ Felix Begho attempts to name this broad subgenre as such, but the distinction he makes between ‘contemporary dance’ and ‘neo-traditional creative dance’ is somewhat suspect and inadequate. According to Begho, the “salient” difference between the two is that “the former is a tendency toward avant-gardism, whereas the latter leans toward conformism.”² It must be noted in response, however, that while it is correct to say that the general context of oral tradition tends to foist acquiescence, counter-discourses and avant-garde forms have nonetheless always existed within traditional cultures. The advantage of the current

electronic, multimedia age over traditional societies is that there are more channels for (cultural) dissent and plural narration beyond the capacity of one dominant discourse to block the emergence of other discourses. Beyond this, Begho's account of contemporary African dance forms is comprehensive and sensitive to its nuances. At the heart of Zagba's reluctance to name some forms as 'contemporary' is the fear that such ideological misrepresentation could pigeonhole African dances along some evolutionist discourse, wherein "there was the assumption, therefore, that these were transitory cultures that would in due course follow Europe into an industrialized and 'scientific' culture."⁴

In this sense, though, Africa has come to be differently read by different people. To the colonial Other, the continent had to be a tabula rasa in order to justify the morality of its enterprise; to the African in the Diaspora, the continent testifies to an ebullient cultural heritage before the middle passage—and the preservation, or even showcasing of it, would aid this 'heritage project'⁵; and, yet, while the African on the continent seeks to acknowledge the values of past forms, the least of his aspirations is the retention of staid forms and non-transcendence into renewing contemporary dance and other cultural practices.

Beyond the ideological underpinnings of interpretation, there is also the technical issue of dance theorists on African forms concentrating more on the sociological circumstance of dance history as opposed to their technical qualities as defined, for example, in dynamics. Can contemporary African dance forms such as Afrobeat and the Ivorian Zouglou⁶ styles, for instance, be discussed in relation to the placement of feet and the basic positions of feet, arms and head—including their design in time and space? Can a notational principle, such as Labanotation, be evolved to capture these emerging forms?

A refreshing effort can be gleaned in Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi's attempt to describe some Yorùbá dances in relation to "set patterns of steps and gestures."⁷ She evolves such concepts as the "walk-step" dance and "fan-step" dance.⁸ While this may also be linked to ideological attitude in certain respects, there is the general technical factor of dance still being, relatively, marginal to critical studies in the arts, as argued by Christy Adair.⁹ Is there such a thing as contemporary African dance as we can talk of ballet, fox trot, or jazz dances? Does a denial of its nomenclature obviate its objective existence? Couldn't the denial of its existence be at least accounted for by what Femi Taiwo has in a similar discourse described as a crisis of knowledge production in Africa?¹⁰ This may be no more than the inability, so far, to codify and canonize dance text based on its movement principle. In spite of his non-usage of the term 'contemporary,' this appears to be the direction of Zagba's work in "Still Dancing Downwards and Talking Back," where he sheds light on the principle of gravity in Guinean 'Leoudiere' dance.¹¹

It is, however, with Funmi Adewole that we get a more frontal approach to theorizing and codifying contemporary African dance forms. Her dance research projects are generally geared in the direction of identifying patterns, movement principles, and origination. She challenges the "idea that 'African dance' consists of a series of immutable classical dances and is therefore static." Adewole argues persuasively that "Western Dance Theater on the other hand is considered dynamic and innovative because the forms and movement vocabulary used in theatrical dance derived from a number of 'techniques'."¹² It is this vision of the dynamic nature of African dance forms that informs her experimentation with contemporary forms such as 'Afrobeat' dance and the possibility of its fusion with theatrical dance in general. It is important to qualify what makes these forms 'contemporary.' In the first place, they are no longer tied to specific aspects of traditional dance either as ritual or as a secularized form in a one-to-one relationship.

Second, the dance subgenres, even when occasionally motivated by communal experiences, usually have identifiable choreographers; African dances have finally become integrated into the dynamics of the international cash nexus and commodity exchange. Additionally, the distinct attribute of Afrobeat dance is evident in its bold fusion of diverse African forms and the reiteration of certain movements formulaic in the continent. This includes a certain earth-bound motion in spatial progression, extensive use of the feet—gyrating generally in a flat-footed position and shuffling on the heel, "posture with knees flexed, (or with) body bent at the waist,"¹³ — pelvic thrusting and shoulder blade movement. The Afrobeat dance is not simply enamoured by these forms for their own sake: they are geared toward telling a story.

Dance as a non-verbal means of communication draws from our everyday motions but it also gives an insight to its own dynamics.¹⁴ In other words, "Each dance genre and, within this, each style, uses some of the humanly possible actions of the body, selected from the gestures, bends, extensions, twists and turns."¹⁵ Some of the movement practices of a society may be carried over and, as in the case of a contemporary form as Afrobeat dance, we can identify such cultural retention. There is a wide range of retention in the Afrobeat dance, which draws from the diverse cultural settings of its dancers and experimental fusion of the general African dance environment.

The basic primary posture of Afrobeat dance is very much in consonance with the flat-footed initial position that is characteristic of most African dances. The solo dancer is relatively more economical in her use of space than the choreographed dancers, beside also being amenable to improvisatory techniques. Two tendencies are observable here: while the solo dancer is on her individual dais, there is a practical constraint of space which, over the years, has come to yield a definite

movement attitude that could be minimalist in space usage but vigorous in its combination of general body language, especially the creative combination of the heel and sole of the foot, and movement from the waist through the torso. This dance form has also come to characterise female Afrobeat dance gestures, which emphasize a dexterity of footwork, in combination with a creative arm posture and pelvic gyration. The second attitude of the dancer performing her solo on the central stage is one of less space restraint—thereby allowing for an expansion of the earlier contracted form.

It is in this expanded form that the dance's features, dynamics, and movement principles become easier to comprehend. Within the broad category of 'Fire Dance,' for instance, are other distinctive styles such as 'Open and Close', 'Bend'-Bend', and 'Pampa-Lobo', among others. The closest equivalent to 'Open and Close' is the butterfly dance of the Caribbean, wherein the legs and possibly the arms, too, are twisted inward and flexed outward, rhythmically. 'Pampa' is more similar to female initiation motions in the Senegal-Mali-Burkina axis, and the 'One legged skank' of the Caribbean, than any popular dance form in Nigeria. The dance action here is predicated on one leg in second, ballet position, then the second limb is raised—with foot pointing hindward, and then the raised limb effects a swivel in full circle. Meanwhile, the dancer's posture could be erect or bent around the waist, while the arms are also engaged in the dance and, needless to say, the motion is quite fast. The movement origination here, however, is not the leg, which is basically supportive, but the pelvis, based on a principle of contraction and release. While the solo dancer adheres to this general principle, she is constantly improvising with her arms and the degree of swivel. The principle of contraction and release could still be retained while she is in a crouching or flipping position.

Afrobeat choreographic dance, for instance, experiments with the concept of the horizontal and group bonding in movement progression, wherein members may hold on to each other's hands while defining diverse visual shapes on stage and, quite often, they contract into a circle: arms-on-arms, and with heads bent into the circle as if taking a collective vow. With a large ensemble in the background, the image thrown up by the subtext here is evidently the expansion of the concept of the large and extended household, now redefined as an extended musical family, which Fela had replicated in his Kalakuta Republic residence.

Notes

1. Zagba Oyorley in "Still Dancing Downwards and Talking Back" in Helen Thomas (ed.) *Dance, Gender and Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 185.
2. Ibid. p. 191.
3. Felix Begho's, "Traditional African Dance in Context," in Kariamuw Welsh Asante (ed.) *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996), p. 178.
4. Zagba Oyorley in "Still Dancing Downwards and Talking Back," in Helen Thomas (ed.) *Dance, Gender and Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 184.
5. It is important to note that in a city like London, some efforts at experimenting with contemporary African forms are emerging. Apart from Peter Badejo, the Nigerian choreographer, Zagba Oyorley cites Corrine Bougard, artistic director of Union Dance as another example of a contemporary African dance group.
6. According to Funmi Adewole, Zouglou incorporates many theatrical elements in its movement style largely because the form evolved mimicry of encounters between the Ivorian police and protesting students during the reign of Houphuet Boigny.
7. Composition has been part of the concerns of Doris Humphrey's focus on dance theory. See Janet Adshead's "Describing the Components of the Dance." Janet Adshead's, ed., *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice*. (London: Dance Books, 1988), p. 28.
8. Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi in *Yoruba Dance: The Semiotics of Movement and Body Attitude in a Nigerian Culture* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1998), p. 209.
9. See the introduction to Christy Adair's *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens* (London: Macmillan, 1992).
10. See Olufemi Taiwo "Colonialism and its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production." *Callaloo* vol. 1. 16. No 4.
11. See Zagba Oyorley "Still Dancing Downwards and Talking Back," in Helen Thomas (ed.), *Dance, Gender and Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 188.

12. Funmi Adewole's "ETERE Dance Research Project: A Preliminary Study of the Movement Principles inherent in the dances of the Igbo People of Nigeria (November 1998), pp.1-2.
13. See Janet Adshead's "Describing the Components of the Dance" in Janet Adshead (ed.) *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice*. (London: Dance Books, 1988), p. 29.
14. See Zagba Oyorley in "Still Dancing Downwards and Talking Back," in Helen Thomas (ed.) *Dance, Gender and Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1983) and Janet Adshead's *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice* (London: Dance Books 1988.)
15. Ibid, Jane Adshead. pp. 2.