

YORUBA:

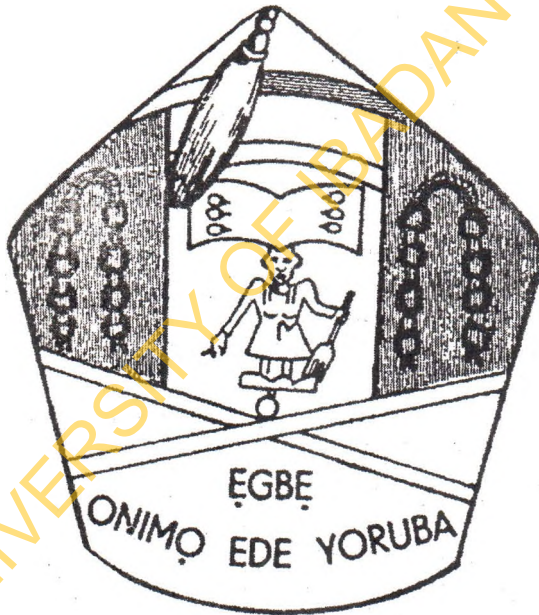
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GLOBALIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF YORUBA THEATRE TRADITIONS: AN ASSESSMENT

Dele Layiwola*

The task of inviting me to speak on Globalisation and Yoruba Studies is a daunting as well as a complex one. Daunting because the particular specie of the Nigerian public constantly referred to by the name 'Yoruba' has become a complex and intriguing website for genuine historians and scholars; orators and politicians as well as for charlatans and speculators. It therefore becomes imperative that to have been so privileged and topical, the same group of people who are often referred to as 'the Greeks of West Africa' must have had an intriguing history and a Byzantine civilization. Consequently, it is the rump of this civilization that is responsible for the enormous creative and intellectual output that, I believe, is largely responsible for the fame and credit that have fallen on this stock during the last and one quarter centuries that internecine wars have stopped and a new phase of nationalism instigated and re-invented by colonialism.

But the point must be made outright that the Yoruba have been either famous or notorious because they have never been kept apart from controversy. From the viewpoint of cultural enthusiasts, they either talk too much or they are talked about too much! Whichever is the case, they must keep talking to constantly stoke the fire of creativity and controversy and to keep their place in history from being discounted as newfangled historians have attempted. I believe that this is the singular reason why Yoruba language dramas of the 70s exploit crowd aesthetics and rowdiness and allow too many persons to express themselves all at the same time!

But who are the Yoruba? Are they merely a stock or a linguistic group? Does the etymology of the name come from outside or is it an autochthonous derivative? Perhaps if we try to situate the name in virtual space, we can reasonably navigate the localization and auto-globalization of the intellectual and cultural industry of the same people. But the easiest thing to do, not being a philologist or a philosopher, is to simply ignore the provenance of the name-script and go on to the business of the day. However, I

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am afraid I cannot, given the caliber of those whose privilege audience the present podium has afforded me.

Precisely on Tuesday, 17th April, 2001, Dr Yusufu Bala Usman of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaira in a symposium in Mambayya House, Bayero University, Kano which was subsequently published on the website of the Centre for Democratic Development and Training averred as follows:

The fact is that, the earliest record we have of the use of very name "Yoruba" was in the Hausa language and it seems to have applied to the people of the Alafinate of Oyo. This came from the writings of the seventeenth century Kastina scholar, Dan Masani (1595-1667), who wrote a book on the Muslim scholars of the 'Yarriba'. But it was from a book of the Sarkin Muslim Bello, written in the early nineteenth century, that the name became more widely used. The Bishop Ajayi Crowther, the Reverend Samuel Johnson, and his brother Obadiah Johnson, among others, came, in the nineteenth century, to widely spread this Hausa name to the people who now bear it, in their writings. [p.26]

Now, the claim of Dr Bala Usman is that the Hausa people 'invented' the identity of the Yoruba, or perhaps worse still, invented the Yoruba themselves and named them into being! An even worse scenario is that I have myself heard it from some Yoruba scholars that the name of their ethnic nationality probably derived from the Hausa word 'Yarriba', meaning a slippery terrain; an intractable phenomenon. The real danger of this is that if the real owners of the name and the culture peddle a false premise, everyone else will believe it to be so because it is natural to believe that they should know better. The truth is also unassailable that when an ethnocentric or primordialist scholar invents a wheel, he/she tends to do so through the monocle of his own image. In other words, either large or small, human being tends to create others from, and in, their own image. In such instances, the rest of the world is the inadvertent loser.

Being a younger scholar, I cannot afford to bandy words with Bala Usman of blessed memory but I beg to put the records straight. It is proven by other established scholars that the earliest orthography of word 'Yoruba' came neither from the Hausa language nor from the writing of the 17th century Kastina scholar

Dan Masani. Rather a Timbuktu scholar and theologian, Ahmad Baba [1556-1627], who wrote in the Arabic language, reported in a document written about 1622 on the range of ethnic groups in the southern Sudan who are traditionalists and non believers in Islamic doctrines [Baba c.1622: 1937; Ekeh, 2001:4]

Now having been done with the issue of anthropomorphic or conceptual province as well as the location of our primordial or political space in the world, there is still the nagging concept of etymological provenance. That is, we know who the Yoruba are but how did they come to be known by that name and what is the ideological root of the word in regard to their chosen place in the world. I have heard Yoruba ancients in the field say that the present form of the word is a corruption of the phrase *Yi oo ba or Yooba*; that is to say 'it will do, it will be enough or it will certainly meet up'. This in itself has a history behind it. It is connected with the story of migration and sufficiency even in the context of scarce resources.

I have gone into this extended foray because the concept of globalization is that of an imagined world located in collective, pluralized imagination in which we either seek to localize or aggregate our individual as well as perceived spaces. There is the global in the local and vice versa, the local in the conceptually global. Years ago, my communication and media students have always referred to the newfangled terms as '*globalocalization*' or simply '*glocalization*'! This simply confirms what *Arjun Appadurai* refers to when he suggests that owing to the technological changes of the last century, certain conceptual, and paradigmatic, shifts have compelled imagination to becoming a collective, social fact. He affirms that this development 'is the basis of the plurality of imagined worlds' [1996:5].

Yoruba Studies in the 20th century was a field of study that engendered worlds of spectacular imagination and the archaeological imaginary Fagunwa's adventures in the world of alternative beings and elements; the supra-technological world of magical realism in Amos Tutuola's works; the nationalizing stories of T.A.A. Ladele; Adebayo Faleti and Akinwumi Işola; the moral and historical recreation of J.F. Oduńjọ and Lawuyi Ogunniran and the folk stories of Yemiitan and Adegoke Durojaiye; The nationalist dramas of Hubert Ogunde, A.B. Layeni and G.T. Onimole; the folkloric repertoire of Kọla Ogunmọla, Duro Ladipo and Wale Ogunyemi; the contemporary dramas of Wọle Şoyinka, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan and Bode Şowande amongst a myriad constellation

of poets, story tellers and imaginers or imagines. These are artists who imagine and create worlds as much as that world recreates them. On the brow of the 21st century, we can see the frantic efforts of scholars, students and commentators anxiously preserving the corpus both as a body of knowledge and as a method by which that knowledge is apprehended or modified; a mode of activity; a way of doing things with words in a world that is both expansive and convergent. This, I must assert, has become the fate of what anthropologists used to refer to as Area Studies. In today's globalizing world, it behooves every discipline to not merely navigate our place in the world and its potential to determine us in regard to others. After all, the world in which we live is defined by partaking of multitudes. The fundamental of this burden has fallen on the pivotal index of culture- Language.

In our understanding of language as a world, both the phenomenologist Martin Heidegger and the French come to the closest approximation of this ramifying index of culture. Heidegger says that Language constitutes the embryonic world in which we live and express our being:

Language is: language, speech. Language speaks. If we let ourselves fall into the abyss denoted by this sentence, we do not go tumbling into emptiness. We fall upward, to a height. Its loftiness opens up a depth. The two span a realm in which we would like to become at home, so as to find a residence, a dwelling place for the life of man [Martin Heidegger, 1971:191-2].

For Heidegger, globalization represents the expanse as well as the collapse of language in all its ramifications. The French have been able to philosophically delimit language in their attempt to control the world. This is how the denotative and the connotative expression of the term *language* roughly aggregate among French:

<i>Langage-</i>	Manner of speech; use of Language.
<i>Langue-</i>	Tongue; a linguistic system; native tongue; political cant; mother tongue; constructive system.
<i>Parole -</i>	Words, lyric; speech as a faculty.

In the works of all the Yoruba artists I listed above within the broad genre of poetry, narrative and Drama, the subdivisions of the French conception of language is fully represented. It means that the Yoruba conceive of language not only as a linguistic tool but as a way of creating a memory or an internal world that replicate their external environment. Language constitutes both an artistic as well as an historical tool. For Yoruba Studies, therefore, the beauty of language is ancillary to a philosophical system, an ontology; a cosmic system; an incantatory tool that constructs and subverts in the same breath. I believe that most accomplished traditional civilizations such as those of the Greeks and Romans share this inherent attribute. This invariably explains the prolificity of these societies in the urban-based arts of oratory and theatre. It is the instrument of elite formation and empire building in the context of enlightened audiences; cultivators of artistic tastes and consumers of literary production. This is the legacy that Yoruba civilization has brought to the diversity of Nigeria's culture.

It is generally believed that language developed in East Africa more than 150,000 years ago and thereafter dispersed around the globe in several other variants and dialects. Today we are all of the opinion that these languages have shrunk to a total of about 6,700 and are diminishing in the face of cultural and economic domination of the more powerful nation-states of the world. The threat has been grossly aggravated in recent decades by the onset of globalization and modernization. It is heartwarming to find that UNESCO considers language a significant portion of the world's intangible heritage and believes that since a considerable amount of world culture is trapped in these language system that are lodged in them. It is useful to quote from the Intangible Heritage Messenger:

As humankind's principal means of communication, languages do not merely convey messages; they also express emotions, intentions and values, confirm social relations and transmit cultural and social expressions and practices. In spoken or written form, or through gesture, languages are the vehicle of memories, traditions, knowledge and skills. Consequently, language constitutes a determining factor of identity for individuals and groups. The preservation of the linguistic diversity of the world's

societies contributes to cultural diversity, which UNESCO considers a universal ethical imperative and essential for sustainable development in today's evermore globalizing world.

It then means that for globalization to be a world phenomenon, it must be sufficiently expansive, comprehensive and elastic to accommodate the pluralizing sensibilities of the world's total heritage. As a world shrinks, another sympathetically expands to ensure that there is no vacuum left in its place. If language would truly speak for us and for itself as Heidegger affirms, then its speaking becomes a purposive, performative, programmatic act, a world appropriating and reaffirming cultural phenomenon. In the words of Wittgenstein, the limit of the word is the limit of the world.

II

The origins of the performative arts in most traditional, or emergent societies, are strikingly similar. It is also established that the state, and some ancient monarchies, were very early patrons of drama. The connection between the state and theatrical traditions is usually dated to 534BC when Athens instituted both a prize and a contest for the best tragedy presented in the city Dionysia, a great religious festival. Some early accounts relate that Thespis, being the earliest winner of the contest, is also the inventor of drama whilst other accounts say that he is probably the sixteenth in line of tragic poets [Brockett and Hildy, 2003:13]. Aristotle had averred in his *Poetics* that tragedy emerged from the improvisation of the leaders of the dithyramb. The Greek God of wine, revelry and fertility. The form of the dithyramb consists of an improvised story sung by the choral leader and a refrain song sung by the chorus. This pattern is equally evident in the *Alarinjo* performances of the Yoruba. Oscar Brockett further relates that Arion [625-585BC] was the first to give literary documentation to the dithyramb in heroic episodes and assigning titles to them and making them into chapters. The fact that the Dorian Greeks considered Arion to be a tragedian would seem to explain why, in their own accounts, they placed Thespis much further down than the first position in the line of tragic poets.

It is difficult to conjecture how long in history it took the dithyrambic song to evolve into tragic plays but the tragic form had always been attributed to Thespis. It is clear that his innovations

were not unconnected with the prologue and spoken lines by an actor who impersonated another character. It is obvious that this has improved the form of an art which was purely narrative and usually laced with dances. That prologue became the salute or *ìjúbà* [also known as the opening glee] in 19th and 20th century Yoruba performances. The fact that Aeschylus added a second actor and, therefore, dialogue to Greek drama around 490BC made performances more robust and of a greater magnitude. This enhanced competition and conflict on stage and on the performance arena; and thereby led to greater development of Athenian drama. On this very foundation Euripides and Sophocles built and improved on the form of dramatic enactments as they have been with us today.

I have traced the development of Greek Drama so that I can elucidate the striking, comparative and parallel element in the development and evolution of Yoruba drama, especially as document by Lawuyi Ogunniran in his classic *Eégún Aláré* [1975]. The very interesting poetic interrogations of this book trace the earliest origins of the performance guild and craft among the Yoruba. The story of Ojẹ Larinnaka corresponds with the period of Thespis among the Greeks when the performer was a lone ranger moving from town to town with his guild and performing to acclamation. Besides a few historical narratives relived through action, his performances were discrete and episodic. The competition between Ojẹlādé and Dúdúyẹmí corresponds to the period when Aeschylus added a second actor to the craft to boost dialogue and competition. This was at the instance of the Aláàfin, the royal Patron and ceremonial impresario, who felt that the craft would benefit from an immense and vibrant competitive spirit. It is this competition that has enabled the theatre historian to establish that in Yorubaland, under the Suzerainty of the Aláàfin, Ojọjowòn owned the mask whilst Ológbojò was the primal mask-dramaturge. They also revealed that Kújénrà provided the fabric and garment that was first used to costume the actor.

There is a sense in the fact that there was a peculiar division of labour in which Ojọjowòn was a carver whilst Ológbojò was the gifted dancer and the third estate of the realm was owned by the scenic designer.

Today the influence of Yoruba drama and popular culture is so well known beyond the shores of Nigeria itself. The forces of globalization will continue to call for the redefinition of this art which

Yoruba Studies has contributed to the cultural development of a postcolonial nation. I do hope that this legacy can be interrogated more closely so as to make it fundamentally relevant to the epigenesis of progress and democracy in the land of our birth.

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