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OF ENGLISH, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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STUDIES, DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY, ABRAKA**

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary, and Cultural Studies (ISSN: 0795-5413) is an interdisciplinary journal that explores topical and generative issues in English linguistics and literary and cultural studies. We recognise that African humanities research is both problem-based and knowledge oriented, and we aim to provide a platform for scholars to analyse and theorise Africa in a way that is generative, conversational, and decolonial. Specifically, the journal focuses on both the analytical and theoretical approaches to knowledge production in the context of Africa and the Global South. We want to curate papers that are hinged on African indigenous paradigms and approaches or that seek to extend, reimagine, or contextualise current theoretical or analytical approaches in English language studies and literary and cultural studies.

We invite papers that dwell on all aspects of English language studies, including phonetics/phonology, semantics, syntax, discourse analysis, pragmatics, stylistics, ESL, ESP, etc. We also welcome papers that theorise literary and cultural texts, including film, still and moving images, music and dance, photographs, cultural objects, spaces and places, society and social formations, and other relevant corpora. While we accept purely analytical essays, we encourage authors to focus on theorising the texts or data they engage with. In particular, we welcome theoretical conversations that implicate postcolonial subjecthood, ecocritical approaches (especially postcolonial ecocriticism), feminism and gender studies, new trends in linguistics, object-oriented criticism and approaches, and other generative approaches to knowledge production. Authors are encouraged to do original theorisation rather than adopt extant theoretical frameworks. They may also extend the scope of extant theories and approaches based on the material they present and discuss.

Furthermore, papers with interdisciplinary approaches are also welcomed. We recognise that knowledge production is an elastic phenomenon, and that bright ideas might implicate various fields. Interesting multi-modal, eclectic, or collaborative research is encouraged in this journal.

JOURNAL POLICY

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary and Cultural Studies is published biennially by the Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria. All papers submitted to this journal will undergo double-blind peer review before publication. Published papers are well-researched, original, and data-driven.

Contributors are to submit an e-copy of their manuscript for assessment and publication to ethiopejournal@delsu.edu.ng or ethiopejournal@gmail.com. Such manuscripts should be original and not under consideration for publication elsewhere and should not have been published in any other journal.

The submitted manuscript which should not exceed 7000 words should be typeset in MS Word Times New Roman Font 12, with double line spacing. The first page should include the title of the manuscript, name(s), and institutional affiliation/address, abstract (not more than 250 words and with not more than six keywords). Manuscripts should conform to the current APA or MLA style sheet. Author(s) of published papers will derive the benefits from peer-review of contributions by seasoned scholars, global visibility, and receipt of hard copies as well as soft copies of their papers.

The papers in this edition of the journal cut across disciplines in cultural, and media studies and sub-disciplines in English and literary studies. The contributors include seasoned and renowned scholars of international repute and young astute scholars with a burning desire to excel in academics. It is pertinent to note that the journal accepts contributions from scholars and researchers across the globe. We believe that articles in this volume will be of immense interest to researchers and students.

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Tel:+234 803 645 1234

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

- 1.Dr. Oding owei M. Kwokwo, Department of English and Literary Studies, Niger Delta University, Nigeria.
- 2.Doutimiye Agunza, Department of English and Literary Studies, Niger Delta University, Nigeria.
3. Prof. Moses O. Ayeomoni, Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State.
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- 6.Ebenezer Oluseun Ogungbe, Department of English, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State.
7. Dr. Emmanuel, Ogheneakpobor Emama, Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka.
8. Anita Erhuvwu Maledo, Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka.
9. Dr. Goodluck, Chinene Kadiri, General Studies Department, Use of English Unit, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- 10.Ejiro Rita Enisire, Department of English and Literary Studies, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba.
11. Aishatu, Abdulsalam, English Department, IBB University, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria.

12. Dr. 'Abinye Titus-Green, Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt
13. Tamunoiyowuna Andrew-Jaja, Department of English and Literary Studies, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt
14. Aghogho Agbamu, Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka

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THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SATIRE IN YORUBA THEATRE IN THE WORKS OF HUBERT OGUNDE AND FEMI OSOFISAN

Abinye Titus-Green PhD & Tamunoiyowuna A. Jaja PhD

Abstract

The vocal nature of the Yoruba popular theatre regarding sociocultural matters has been significant throughout Nigeria's history. Beginning from the traveling troupes during the precolonial period to the contemporary theatrical performances, the Yoruba theatre has continued to etch itself into every significant sociocultural and sociopolitical phase in the country's timeline. Since Nigeria's colonial period, it has grown in form and content, using and adopting other theatrical styles to establish its message. It has also faced hostile opposition from high-ranking government officials due to its effectiveness in addressing the excesses of power and leadership. Using the Instrumentalism theory, this article explores the production of dramas among the people of this region with the intent to ensure that they serve key functions in the growth and development of society. Findings reveal that the continued relevance of Yoruba popular theatre gains its roots from the historical premise upon which it was largely founded which is the element of satire. The introduction of modern theatre created another dimension of audio-visual learning among its audiences, especially with the addition of major satirical elements to the actions performed on stage. This study concludes that satire is one of the most effective ways through which drama can be used to effect change. It recommends that liberal investments from Nigeria's cultural institutions be made towards further infrastructural development of the theatre and its freedom from external influence as it has become a key factor in addressing the conscience of the society.

Keywords: Popular Theatre, Satire, Society, Yoruba, Audience.

Introduction

There is a binding characteristic of the many literatures produced in various African languages, which is the fact that they do not focus as much on form as they do on content. The functional approach among Africans to literature is more popular because it is a characteristic of Africans not to take any action without finding a significant meaning attached to it. Hence, if there is any focus on form, the ultimate aim is to enhance the content of the literature. In Richard Taylor's 1983 BBC documentary titled "Ogunde Man of the Theatre", Hubert Ogunde, the father of modern Nigerian theatre has this to say about his plays:

I write the story of what is happening in the society. That's how I believe it. It may be social, it may be religious, may be folkloric and may be political if you like. But to me, the theatre is to reflect the image of the society in which we live (2:01).

Between the colonial and contemporary African literary periods, a significant amount of academic and literary publications in Nigeria and Africa have been significantly inclined towards every major sociopolitical and geopolitical happening per time. Glenn Odom says:

When dealing with a system like Nigeria, however, arguments about theatre's political thrust tend to focus on content. In addition to its content, Nigerian theatre also intervenes in politics by suggesting alternatives to the political formulations of the basic structures of Yoruba discourse (3).

Performances in traditional Yoruba culture have always portrayed its indigenous activities which cut across spiritual, philosophical, and socio-economic phenomena. According to Biodun Jeyifo:

A cultural institution, like any other institution, will thrive and endure only to the extent that it is not marginal, but central to the lives and needs of

the vast majority of people, a composite majority that embraces most of the groups and classes making up a given society (125).

The performances at each point in time have always been fashioned after the collective behaviours of its people with its actors and scriptwriters aiming to cause a desired effect on viewers. The intent of these actions has always been to teach lessons and to condemn terrible happenings in society at large, causing its audiences to make adequate corrections and modifications where necessary.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this article is Instrumentalism. This theory operates under the belief that art should be used to influence society. Art under Instrumentalism is seen as educational and instructive. It is created with a purpose and message in mind but since this message is expressed in an art form, it will therefore elicit the emotional responses that art evokes under aesthetic appreciation. T.J Diffey's "Aesthetic Instrumentalism" explains the fact that the benefit and significance of art are seen in its ability to fulfill a function or several functions, especially in daily life. As Karen Hamblen states, "Instrumentalists suggest that the study of art promotes creative behaviours, critical thinking, self-awareness, social relations, lower absenteeism, and increased test scores in other subject areas" (191). Instrumentalism is generally wary of concepts or beliefs that have not been consistently observed or proven. They are rather more concerned about the utility of these entities in generating predictable outcomes. Based on the fact that the Yoruba popular theatre functions with an intent to reflect the happenings of society and to cause a predictable change where necessary, this theory has been deemed appropriate for this study.

Historical Background

During the time of the old Oyo empire, the Yoruba theatre addressed the socio-cultural issues of the immediate Yoruba society. It majorly dealt with the traditional systems surrounding religion and ideology and the travelling theatre called the *Alarinjo* was founded based on a

satirical intent. According to Joel Adedeji, the Alaafin Ogbolu, the last of the kings in exile, had resolved to move back to Katunga, the original capital of the old Oyo Empire. The Oyo-Mesi and the *Egungun* cult of the empire were against this plan and when all efforts to persuade him to the contrary failed, they conspired to trick him (221). To do this, they hired a company of ghost mummers to play the role of ghosts and to frighten the emissaries whom the king had sent to explore Katunga before his return. The plan seemed to work at first, as the king was initially distressed by the news but having been privy to the secret, Ologbo, the king's royal cymbalist, exposed the secret to the king and advised him to send hunters against the supposed ghosts. The ghosts were soon rounded up without the knowledge of the Oyo-Mesi and the *Egungun*. They were then kept in secret for a few days till the king's weekly council meeting which the Oyo-Mesi would attend. After the meeting, the king under the pretext of entertainment brought the actors to perform and the Oyo-Mesi received a rude shock when they saw their conspiracy being acted out and also being thwarted by the king. This particular play satirized the involvement of the Oyo-Mesi and the *Egungun* cult in the politics of the Oyo Empire at that time (222). Angered by Ologbo exposing their secret in conjunction with his other actions which embarrassed them, the *Egungun* killed Ologbo and the king in his honour, and instituted the re-enactment of this play three times a year at different festivals (223). The other socio-cultural issues acted out by the performers were myths and popular stories which taught people valuable and moral lessons. According to Kacke Gotrick:

In the relation to the audience, each sketch and drama of an Apidan performance takes on a social function, or usually more than one... In a few cases, all the social functions – religious, aesthetic, didactic and therapeutic – exist in the same entity (131).

This further reflects the purposeful artistic creations of the cultural and performative institutions of the Yoruba society. Jeyifo (114) notes that the travelling theatre had no option but to derive its relevance from the popular actions and interests of the people. In

essence “the functions and ultimate relevance of the movement are rooted in its perceived social impact on the popular masses” (114). In concurrence with this, Gotrick believes:

... one of the most remarkable aspects of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre movement is the high degree of articulateness and clarity of troupe leaders and members alike on the uses and social relevance of the movement, both in contemporary Yoruba society and in the wider Nigerian pluralistic context... the functions and social relevance of the Travelling Theatre movement cannot but derive from the experiences and life circumstances of the popular masses to whom its productions are directed. (115)

Because theatre performances reflect the happenings in societies, the performances tend to evolve even as societies change over time. From the colonial period, the scope of the performances began to widen and to address issues outside the immediate Yoruba society. Not only did they address these issues, but they also began to travel outside the immediate Yoruba society for theatrical performances. The rise of the Yoruba popular theatre would predominantly gain nationwide recognition with the beginning of the resistance to colonial rule in Nigeria.

The Evolution of Yoruba Theatre and Satire

The travelling theatre of Hubert Ogunde was the first of its kind and was founded in 1946. Ebun Clark notes that as Nigeria was under colonial rule during this period, some of Ogunde's scripts such as *Tiger's Empire* and *Darkness and Light* were direct attacks against colonialism (296). This widened the scope of performances of the theatre as colonialism did not only affect the Yoruba people but all the other ethnicities and cultures within the geographical boundaries of the country Nigeria. According to the online *Britannica*:

Many of Ogunde's early plays were attacks on colonialism, while those of his later works with

political themes deplored interparty strife and government corruption within Nigeria. Yoruba theatre became secularized through his careful blending of astute political or social satire with elements of music hall routines and slapstick.

One of the notable plays he produced during this period is titled *Bread and Bullet* which premiered in 1950. This play spoke of a terrible situation that had taken place in Nigeria the year before when twenty-one (21) miners were shot by the British colonial government in Enugu. This became known as the Iva Valley Massacre (304). He also wrote comic satires that portrayed societal misconceptions, misplaced priorities, and moral deficiencies. His play *Human Parasites* spoke about a new social vice called the “Aso Ebi Craze” where people spent large amounts of money to buy dresses for every societal function. Every attendant was expected to wear the same matching dress as the host and the popularity of the host depended on the number of people who wore matching clothes. Clark notes that it was with this play that “Ogunde decided to make his first social satirical comment by writing a play designed to expose the vulgarity and ostentatiousness of the craze” (298). Another play titled *Londoners Return* encapsulates the loss of traditions and cultures when young people travel abroad. In this play, the children of a rich man return from London and fail to greet their parents culturally, speaking to them in a foreign manner. With his theatre appealing to wider audiences at this time, Ogunde began to include English in his plays to accommodate his growing non-Yoruba speaking audiences.

The Yoruba theatre has not always been accepted by all its indigenes, majorly because certain individuals, feeling directly criticised, have responded with hostility towards the theatre. After Nigeria's Independence, Ogunde began to write on other issues affecting Nigeria. Concerning this next phase, Clark notes that:

What is of particular interest in the next phase of Ogunde's development as a professional is his increased involvement in the social and political realities of Nigeria between 1945 and 1966. The dangers of such involvement and often near

disaster to his career were played out far too poignantly to be disregarded. Besides, it seems that these same conflicts served ultimately to strengthen Ogunde's reputation and vary the range of subject matter and technique in his plays (303).

The most popular play during this period was titled *Yoruba Ronu* which means “Yorubas Think” and it was a call to the unity of the Yoruba people (314). The predominantly Yoruba political party called the Action Group had been split by Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola after its head, Obafemi Awolowo had been imprisoned on charges of treason. Chief Akintola then decided to form another group called the Nigerian National Democratic Party, and this caused him to be viewed as a betrayer of both Awolowo and the Yoruba people. Unfortunately for Ogunde when the play was first staged in Ibadan on February 28, 1964, Chief Akintola was one of the chief guests invited by the hosts, and by the time the play had gone halfway, he realised that he was the subject of the play. Incensed at this realisation, Akintola had gotten up and walked out with his followers before the play was finished. The repercussion of this performance came a few days later as Ogunde's theatre was banned from performances for two years. This ban was later lifted on February 4 1966 during the new military regime of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi. Ogunde would not be the last to use the Yoruba theatre as contemporary academic scholars like Femi Osofisan had begun to write dramas.

There is an interesting dynamic between the writers of Osofisan's mould. Despite both their Yoruba ethnicity and the inclusion of major Yoruba elements into their writings, their works are not exactly viewed with the same Yoruba identity as the likes of Hubert Ogunde and Kola Ogunmola are viewed. This is a characteristic of several contemporary Yoruba writers, many of whom are also academic scholars such as Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, and the like. There is no doubt about the pervading influence of Yoruba culture in their works as is evidenced in their use of characterisation, setting, diction, and song, but they have however mixed their plots

with other elements of the contemporary Nigerian society which are not inherently Yoruba, such as modern Nigerian sociocultural trends and some aspects of other Nigerian ethnic cultures. Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers* is an example of this fashion of contemporary writing which incorporates both the characteristics of Yoruba culture and the characteristics of Nigerian culture as a whole to pass certain messages to his audience.

Like Ogunde's works, Osofisan's plays are objects of Satire. His play *Once Upon Four Robbers* exposes the corruption in society both among the rich and the poor. On one hand, the rich are exploitative. They own everything, make the laws, establish the courts, and manipulate government processes to work in their favour. The poor on the other hand are angry with the rich but some of their dreams, fantasies, and aspirations at the end of the day, are to become like the rich and to do the same things the rich people do. It exposes the hypocrisy of society at different levels and the actions every class of people takes for survival. The high class is not seen but is described through the mouths of the lower class and they are represented by the tools through which the laws they create are enforced. The lower class starts from the market people with the robbers occupying the lowest position of the lower class and each class is guilty of making money through illegal means. For the Rich, it is through embezzlement and formulated policies. For their extensions such as the sergeant –some of the soldiers belong to the lower class as well- it is through the enforcement of laws that money is stolen. The robbers who try to convince people that they steal money from the rich also steal from the poor as well. Like Ogunde, Osofisan has blended the Yoruba language with the English language to reach wider audiences and these plays apply not only to their immediate Yoruba society but to the much wider Nigerian society as well. The issues addressed in this play are still valid today in Nigeria.

Osofisan examines society from the perspective of the robbers. The robbers feel that it is legitimate for them to steal because the government in collaboration with the rich has taken away any source of reasonable livelihood from them. They also see no difference

between their crimes and the actions of the government. The difference between their fate and the fate of the rich lies in the power of wealth and not in the power of the law. The robbers try to rob an Aafa (an Islamic religious leader) but he catches them and forces them to pray with him as it is time for prayers. Major then entreats the Aafa, blaming their actions on hunger. The four robbers and the Aafa then give a breakdown of the different sectors of the society that the rich control. The Aafa tries to convince them against robbery at first and the conversation between them goes thus:

MAJOR: Forgive us. It's hunger that drives us.

AAFA: As it drives other people. But not into crime.

ALHAJA: (angrily) You mean, not publicly.

MAJOR: We are honest. We only steal from the rich.

AAFA: Foolish! (Gestures) Get up you two, Allah is not likely to hear your prayers. Fools, all of you. You steal from the rich, so where will you hide? The rich are powerful.

MAJOR: Yes, we know

AAFA: Where will you run? They make the laws.

MAJOR: Yes, and they build the law courts.

HASAN: Train the lawyers

ANGOLA: They own the firing squads. (*sings*) O se kere-e-e-e... (12)

The Aafa then encourages them to give up their evil practices. He informs them that there is enough employment in the country but Major quickly replies that the rich also own the servants. Interestingly, the robbers refuse to consider the lower-class jobs available in society as it makes them look like servants of the rich. Because the pay earned from these jobs seems too meagre for them, they downplay the possibility of working for an honest living. The Aafa realizes this and tells them:

“Your pride! Is that it? The eloquent pride of the masses! Will that feed you? Clothe you? Shelter your Children? Will it halt the bullets when your backs are tied to the stake?” (13)

The conversation between the robbers and the Aafa reveals two major problems in the psyche of the people. The first is that the act of goodwill is not determined by circumstance but by the individual.

The second is that pride is not exclusively practised by the rich. The robbers accuse the government and the rich of injustice which stems from wealth and power. The rich steal money that belongs to the citizens and impoverish them, using the wealth acquired to gain immunity from the law. The robbers however also steal and cut people's throats just like the rich own the firing squads and have the power to execute people. There is no difference at this point between the robbers and the rich because each party with its "legitimate reason" has committed acts of societal injustice. The lament of the robbers therefore is neither honest concerning injustice in the society, nor is it truly about the oppressive power of the rich. Their lament is based on the fact that they are not immune to the repercussions of their actions. The difference between the rich and the poor in this case is not the fact that a crime is being committed but, in the ability, to commit a crime without facing the consequences. The conversation again continues;

ANGOLA: Right, Aafa, so the journey ends. At the Bar Beach, in some market place, at the outskirts of town. What does it matter? For those not in the privileged position to steal government files, award contracts-

HASAN: Alter accounts-

ANGOLA: Swear affidavits-

ALHAJA: Grant sick leaves-

HASAN: Sell contraband-

MAJOR: Collude with aliens-

ANGOLA: And buy chieftaincy titles as life insurance! No, let our obituaries litter the public places, and one day- (16)

Osofisan uses a lot of plot twists and revelations in this drama. The truth is that almost no one seems completely free from the corruption in the society. No one is free from greed or the influence of money by the end of the play. The Aafa surprisingly decides to help the robbers steal more by giving them magic powers. This is the same Aafa who has just advised them to seek an honest living. He persuades them to make promises that they will not steal from the poor, they will not rob public places and they will never take a human life. The Aafa however, warns them of greed, a warning which will be significant

soon.

In part two of the drama, the rest of the robbers are so happy with their booty that they do not realize that Major is not among them. When they finally realize it, Major is standing with a gun in front of them, asking for all the money. Horrified, Alhaja reminds Major of how her late husband who was once their leader picked him from the dump, and Major in reply, tells them that each man is for himself and that life is all about survival. Major tells them that he is leaving forever. He is leaving the filth and is tired of the kind of life he has been living since. This money he is about to collect from them will give him everything that he ever wanted. He says:

This is money! Money! A new life. No more scurrying in the smell of back streets. A house the size of a palace! The law, tamed with my bank account! And children! Listen, I am going to be a daddy! I'll own the main streets, six, no, ... ten Mercedes, the neon lights, the supermarkets... (19)

He tells them that the people of the land are forever of the race of victims and that he is about to join the winning side. This excitement, however, does not last long. The soldiers come back and shoot at Major while the others run away without the money. The soldiers discover the money there and the sergeant warns the other soldiers not to speak of this discovery. As far as they know, all the money has been taken by the other robbers.

Part three opens with three soldiers discussing and lamenting their state as they prepare a platform for the firing squad. They too have personal ambitions and the supposed epitomes of discipline speak wayward thoughts. Soldier 1 says:

Fool, how can I overthrow the government when I'll be part of it? Let me tell you: all the fine places in Victoria Island and Ikoyi, all the better lands at Ibadan, Kaduna, Pitakwa and so on, I will declare them for government (24).

This conversation not only shows the level of corruption in the sectors of society, it also shows the perception that many Africans

have of each other. Soldier 1 continues:

With these Oyinbos and Koras, the only decent thing to do is to form a company with them. Import and Export Enterprises. Shipping Lines. Engineering Consultants (Nigeria) Limited, etc. For all contracts above five million naira... How many times I must tell you our people are too useless? Look around you. Which black man gets initiative? No, my friend, anything big you must give to expatriates! Expressway for visiting Heads of State. Overhead bridges with shining posters. Docks reclaimed from swamp. Airports for Concordes and discords. Hospitals, mortuaries, what more... (24)

At the end of the story, the sergeant discovers that one of the robbers is Hasan, his brother. He then finds it difficult to execute justice on him like he does to the others. Osofisan then ends the drama in such a way that the soldiers have a chance to round up the robbers but he also gives the robbers a chance to escape. Since he does not want the drama to end in a stalemate, he gives the decision to the audience. It is not very easy to make this decision because either decision leads to some form of evil. The triumph of the soldiers means that the rich people and the government will continue to do injustice. The soldiers will make away with the stolen money recovered while the triumph of the robbers will encourage the theft from the poorer people of the market with betrayal still lurking around the likes of characters such as Major.

Osofisan in writing this drama, makes a statement that the evils in the society are not predominantly created by one class of people. Osofisan satirises every cadre and institution of Nigerian society, using the humorous and embarrassing actions of his characters to ridicule the citizens who commit corrupt actions. From the play, almost no one is innocent of some level of corruption and the playwright makes an important statement about the fact that corruption and moral decadence are not exclusive to only a particular set of people. Even the characters like the Aafa who admonish the

robbers later agree to help them, creating 'moral' rules to guide the success of their operations. The playwright also makes a statement that change in society must begin with every individual as change among a certain class of people is not enough.

Continuity of the Yoruba Theatre

The advent of the film industry has heavily affected theatrical performances. More plays written in Yoruba are being digitised every day and a sizeable number of Yoruba actors have embraced the film industry. Theatre performances are not as popular as they used to be, but this does not mean they do not still take place. Jeyifo concludes that the theatre will "certainly endure" but he also believes that the reach of the theatre troupes will most certainly be affected by the spending power of the different classes of society (125). To ably compete with the growing film industry, theatrical productions have to be at their very best to attract greater audiences and by extension, greater spending power. One of the reasons why Ogunde's theatre rose to popularity in the 1940s was because it told traditional stories through what was at that time, a modern theatrical style. The most popular theatres in the world today are specifically equipped with modern stage technology, ranging from various lighting effects to mobile stage mechanisms to create a maximum impression on the audiences. The older traditional stories and the more contemporary literary works are equipped with content enough to produce an excellent spectacle when performed on modern stages. Hence, there must be a continued effort toward the creation of innovative and modern theatrical infrastructure to maximise the power of theatrical performances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Yoruba Theatre has come to stay. Because it occupies a prime position in speaking out concerning the affairs of the nation, it must neither suffer marginalisation nor compromise as it did in the past, when powerful individuals had attempted to silence its ability to speak as the society's conscience. Instead, it must continue to develop alongside modern trends, while maintaining a strong link

with its traditional roots. With adequate and deliberate measures, the Yoruba Theatre will continue to take the lead in not just creating entertainment for Nigerian audiences but also in fulfilling its role in addressing the sociocultural and socioeconomic issues of Nigerian society.

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