



ISSN Print: 2664-7699
ISSN Online: 2664-7702
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJHA 2024; 6(1): 106-110
www.humanitiesjournals.net
Received: 04-02-2024
Accepted: 09-03-2024

Asit Panda
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Belda
College, Vidyasagar
University, West Bengal, India

Navigating the evolution of African Drama: Yoruba folk theatre and Wole Soyinka

Asit Panda

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2024.v6.i1b.79>

Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the evolution of African drama, examining its shift from oral tradition to written literature. This research article delves into the origin and evolution of contemporary Nigerian literary drama, exploring its development in the context of colonialism. It also examines the progression of African writing, tracing a line of development from D. O. Fagunwa, through Amos Tutuola, to Wole Soyinka. This research article explores the connection between the Yoruba folk opera and the Yoruba masquerade tradition. This study highlights Soyinka's deep appreciation for the Yoruba folk opera playwrights, both in terms of dramatic form and the incorporation of indigenous performance idioms. This study suggests that Wole Soyinka's incorporation of music, dance, Yoruba myths, allusions, rituals, mime, and festivals in his dramas reflects a desire to blend traditional folk opera with more sophisticated forms of drama.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka, Yoruba folk opera, African drama, *egungun* masquerade, Fagunwa

Introduction

In Africa, before the arrival of the colonizers, there was no presence of written literature or written forms of drama. What prevailed were primarily oral performance forms that, in addition to entertaining indigenous people, aimed to impart moral and social teachings. Occasionally, they would enlighten individuals about certain historical facts. There was a widely debated notion that Africa lacked pre-colonial theatre due to the absence of a literary drama form. Some argue that due to the religious origins of pre-colonial African performance, it may not fit the traditional definition of theatre, as theatre is often seen as a secular form of entertainment. However, it is extensively acknowledged that pre-colonial Africa had significant secular performance forms. It is also widely recognised that ritual, in addition to its religious significance, can incorporate theatrical elements and offer a source of entertainment. Furthermore, the idea that a form of performance must adhere to the Western dramatic model in order to be considered drama is a perspective rooted in Eurocentrism. This viewpoint is now fiercely contested in postcolonial discourse, as it risks disregarding a multitude of innovative and captivating performance styles that originate from non-European cultures. The primary objective of this study is to navigate the evolution of African drama, from indigenous performance idioms to literary drama under the colonial influence. In this context, this study would also aim to investigate the origins of Yoruba folk theatre and evaluate Soyinka's indebtedness to the key practitioners of "folk opera" in crafting his dramaturgy.

Upon the Europeans' arrival in Africa, they brought with them the rich tradition of literary drama from Europe. In colonial schools and colleges, British and Greek dramas were incorporated into the syllabus to expose the students to the rich tradition of European dramas. This was done with the intention of familiarising the students with Western culture and ideas, as part of the broader objective of producing individuals who were well-versed in the ways of the world. At the same time, traditional African forms of drama were deliberately left out of the syllabus due to their perceived lack of refinement and cultural value. As a result, the colonised people of Africa became familiar with the dramatic traditions of Europe. However, as nationalism gained momentum, educated Africans began to shift their focus towards indigenous performance forms.

Corresponding Author:
Asit Panda
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Belda
College, Vidyasagar
University, West Bengal, India

The development of African literary drama in its early stages was influenced by the introduction of Christianity, which was brought about by the presence of missionaries. Dramas written during the colonial period were frequently influenced by Western models and served as a means for the colonial authority to convey their desired message. However, the literary drama that emerged during the 1960s post-colonial period, led by Ama Ata Aidoo, Efna Sutherland, Wole Soyinka, and other notable figures, aimed to blend traditional African theatrical styles with well-established European dramatic forms. J. P. Clark's major dramatic work *Ojidi*, inspired by an Ijaw epic, beautifully exemplifies the harmonious blending of traditional and modern elements, as described by Banham (141) [1].

According to Abiola x, modern African writing has consistently been aligned with the pursuit of preserving and upholding a sense of 'tradition', as defined by Eliot (4). Eliot pondered the connection between European writers and the rich literary heritage of European civilization. He believed that new writers should honour this tradition while also forging their own unique path, infusing their work with fresh perspectives, and leaving their own distinct imprint. Therefore, the work will align with the ongoing literary tradition while also showcasing a unique and fresh perspective. Irele chooses Fagunwa, Tutuola, and Soyinka as examples of prominent Yoruba writers who draw inspiration from the rich tradition of Yoruba cosmology and its unique forms of literary expression. Despite this shared foundation, each writer adds their own distinct touch, thereby enhancing the overall tradition. In addition, there is a clear line of development that can be observed from Fagunwa to Tutuola and finally to Soyinka, evident in their respective works. Tutuola can be viewed as "a kind of link between Fagunwa and Soyinka, who can be considered the spiritual heir of Fagunwa, and spiritual brother of Tutuola" (Irele 19) [5].

The Yoruba language was initially documented by Christian missionaries during the nineteenth century. Prior to that, all literary activities were conducted orally, referred to as 'orature' or oral literature. The Yoruba language was the foundation for artistic works that came before the emergence of English in the twentieth century. According to Afolabi Olabimtan, Denrele Adetimkon Obasa (1878-1948) can be credited as the first published literary artist. Obasa's three volumes of poems, which were published between 1927 and 1945, showcased a valuable collection of traditional sayings (cited in Dugga 74). However, Fagunwa, driven by a desire to meet the needs of a shifting cultural landscape, embraced the role of a novelist and utilized the Yoruba language as a powerful tool for literary expression. He skillfully transformed the oral tradition into a refined literary form. However, Fagunwa's contributions to literature in Yorubaland went beyond mere initiation of a movement. In addition to showcasing his originality, he breathed new life and vigour into the rich oral tradition of Yoruba culture. He enhanced the narrative structure of the folktale while preserving its inherent allegorical and symbolic nature. His narrative technique "flows directly out of the oral tradition" (Irele 8) [5]. Indeed, Soyinka was deeply captivated by Fagunwa's work, leading him to undertake the translation of Fagunwa's *Forests of a Ten Thousand Daemons* into English. Fagunwa's command of the Yoruba language shines through in his exceptional utilisation of vivid imagery. Fagunwa's writing is also

marked by his exceptional sense of humour, which prevents the atmosphere of his novel from becoming gloomy, even with its "ghostly" characters. In addition, the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, the physical and spiritual realms in the universe of his novel tend to blur. The identical dissolution of the boundaries between the natural and supernatural, the physical and spiritual domains, can be observed in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. Fagunwa's perspective, like Soyinka's, aligns with the ontological conception found in Yoruba cosmology, acknowledging the coexistence of the living, the unborn, and the dead. "His achievement resides in his creation of a form in which the Yoruba imaginative tradition can be given a translation in modern terms" (Irele 12) [5].

Amos Tutuola drew significant inspiration from Fagunwa in his literary ingenuity. Tutuola's most notable work is *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. Despite being more influenced by the Yoruba language in terms of his emotions and creativity, he chose to use the language of the colonizer for his artistic expression. However, Tutuola's English was not in accordance with mainstream English. Fagunwa served as the source of both the inspiration and raw materials for Tutuola's literary works. Without a doubt, Tutuola built upon the literary structure established by Fagunwa. Imitating the form created by previous artists is a crucial method for individual artists to uphold the literary tradition. However, it is not the physical structure itself, but rather the alterations made to this structure, that reveal the unique characteristics of the original artist. Tutuola has exceptional ingenuity in utilizing the inherited form. Tutuola aimed to preserve the communal essence portrayed in Fagunwa's works and uphold the literary legacy that Fagunwa established in Yorubaland. Both Fagunwa and Tutuola's works utilize shared symbols, draw from the Yoruba narrative tradition, and are influenced by the same worldview. Tutuola is renowned for his vivid imagination and his ability to create striking visual imagery. Tutuola's work is more dynamically connected to the Yoruba narrative tradition than that of Fagunwa. Tutuola's work has a greater level of dynamism in its connection to the Yoruba narrative tradition compared to Fagunwa's.

However, Wole Soyinka was an erudite and self-aware artist in the English language. Soyinka possessed both Fagunwa's extraordinary ability to create dramatic situations and his exceptional mastery of language. Additionally, he shared Fagunwa's distinctive talent for seamlessly combining humour and seriousness, as well as his skill in crafting profound artistic significance through skillful manipulation of words. The setting in Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forest* closely resembles that seen in Fagunwa's works, where the natural and supernatural realms blend together. Tutuola's novel, *The Palm Wine Drinkard*, may have influenced Soyinka's portrayal of the 'Half Child' character. Soyinka used these aspects in his works, thereby adhering to the Yoruba imaginative heritage. Soyinka has effectively maintained his artistic originality by innovatively reinterpreting traditional elements to create a unique and meaningful artistic expression.

JP Clark categorizes Nigerian drama into two distinct groups the traditional and the modern. The dramas of Obatola, Oshagiyani, and masquerades are part of the traditional group of drama, encompassing both the sacred and the secular. Clark categorized folk theatre and literary drama as part of modern Nigerian theatre (Banham 140) [1].

In addition to the works by Soyinka, it is important to acknowledge the significant contributions to Nigerian drama made by James Ene Henshaw, John Pepper Clark, Nkem Nwankwo, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, and other notable playwrights. However, it is impossible to discuss Nigerian drama without acknowledging the significant influence of Yoruba folk operas created by renowned Yoruba dramatists such as Duro Ladipo and Ogunmola.

In one of his interviews, Wole Soyinka elaborates on "Yoruba Folk Opera" and its origin. The "Folk Opera," which originated in the nineteenth century and drew inspiration from the masquerade tradition, began its journey from the churchyard, and its later development bears similarities to mediaeval miracle and mystery plays. The church offered varied special performances known as "cantatas" during Easter and Christmas festivals. These performances used basic songs, seasonal hymns, Christmas carols, and slightly altered versions of some tunes to present the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Nativity, and other religious events on stage for the local populace's religious education and entertainment. The subject matter of such a performance extended its periphery and gradually included secular elements like the history of people, kings, wars, etc. into it. Initially, such plays drew inspiration for dramatic structure and instrumentation from Westernized sources. However, with the advent of playwrights like Hubert Ogunde, one of the most famous folk opera composers, such plays began to employ dramatic motifs, symbols, and metaphors taken from native secular masquerade drama. Consequently, towards the 1930s, an inevitable intrusion of elements of masquerade theatre into Western Biblical drama was discernible. In dramas based on the events of the Crucifixion of Christ or the Temptation of Christ, the devil assumed the form of an ancestral masquerade. Thus, a hybrid form of drama that drew inspiration from two distinct cultural traditions emerged, and it went on to include materials from the Western world in various aspects. For instance, the appearance of Charlie Chaplin's films inspired certain playwrights to introduce scenes of comedy slapstick or characters like Chaplin in their dramas. These modified and more advanced forms of "folk opera," which appropriated Biblical stories, folktales, or social satire as their subject matter, created a tradition of an exciting, flexible, and un-uniform theatre that most of the so-called modern Nigerian dramatists like Soyinka, J.P. Clark, etc. exploited to build up their own dramaturgy (Gibbs 58-60) ^[4].

The themes of Duro Ladipo and EK, Ogunmola, two of the foremost exponents of Yoruba folk theatre, were primarily folktales and Biblical stories. In contrast, Hubert Ogunde, known as "the grand old man of Nigerian theatre," focused on social satire in his plays (Banham 136) ^[1]. There were at least a dozen itinerant folk opera companies in Yorubaland, some of which were professional and popularised theatres that provided high-quality performances. The performances of prominent companies were characterised by exuberant singing and rich drumming, which appealed to the audiences who were passionate about indigenous music and were drawn to the performance by the presence of such props. The folk opera contains a minimal amount of conversation. Talking drums and other indigenous musical instruments are frequently used to accompany the singing of the entire text. The performance frequently transitioned into rhythmic dance. The Yoruba language is intrinsically musical,

possessing its own cadence and melody. The Yoruba talking drums, as Ulli Beier points out, "are capable of speaking poetry, and often add to the text or play poetic refrains" (cited in Banham 137) ^[1]. The Yoruba folk opera skillfully utilised the musical qualities of the Yoruba language and the Yoruba talking drums to make it more appealing to the local community, who have a strong affinity for music and entertainment. Proverbs and allusions are commonly employed by the Yoruba in their everyday conversations with others. Yoruba language is rich with a plethora of proverbs and allusions. Martin Banham sums up the elements of the folk opera in the following way: "a poetic language working through image and allusion, music that talks with and to the performers, dance to express and comment upon characters and events, and themes drawn from the culture and experience of the audience" (137-38).

In his essay "Theater in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns" Soyinka, following Yoruba theatre historian Joel Adedeji, traces the origin of Yoruba drama in a form of masquerade theatre that emerged not from the sacral rites but from the secular masquerade of *egungun* associated with burial rituals at the Oyo royal court in the early seventeenth century (191). By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had given birth to the travelling troupes of performing masqueraders like the *Alarinjo* and *Agbegijo*, which, through their resort to pagan dramaturgy, offered resistance to the endeavours of cultural colonialism by the Arab and European colonizers. This indigenous form of ritual theatre "has continued until today to vitalize contemporary theatrical forms both in the tradition of 'folk opera' and in the works of the playwrights and directors commonly regarded as 'Westernized'" (Soyinka 190). Thus, traditional travelling masquerades paved the way for the emergence of Yoruba "modern travelling theatres".

Owomoyela points out that the folk theatre, which originated not from any indigenous product but evolved out of mission school and church drama, gathered its immediate impetus not from any ancestral festival ritual but from the narrative thrust of folklore (cited in Wright 81). At a later stage, it assimilated the dramaturgical traditions of the masquerade. In his youth, Ladipo was an *Alarinjo* masquerader. The assimilation of certain *Alarinjo* contributions, such as robust burlesque, grotesque movements, and acrobatic dance, invigorated Ladipo's Concert Party Theatre. Soyinka opined in a 1975 discussion that folk theatre was not confined to festival dramaturgy, but that it developed out of it. He described his own drama as an endeavour to combine "the festival/folk hybrid with the more technically advanced drama" (cited in Wright 81). Soyinka regarded the incorporation of traditional masquerade idioms like ritual, dance, and mime, etc., into the pattern of modern theatre as an inevitable step.

The isolation of indigenous art forms from the more elite forms of art inspired by Western culture resulted in the preservation of their purity, as some Nigerian critics perceived a "two cultures" situation in independent Nigeria. They perceived both Yoruba folk opera and English literary drama as foreign forms, as neither had emerged in direct response to indigenous art forms (Wright 80). But Derek Wright who finds modern cultural and theatrical situation in Nigeria as "bewilderingly complex" refuses to recognize "total discontinuity between traditional ritual dramaturgy and modern literary theatre, or between popular indigenous and elite Western forms." He identifies shared connections

among folklore, oral narrative, folk theatre, festival masquerades, and myths. In his words, “Myths are made drama in their enactment by ritual and are themselves. Folk drama.” Derek Wright observes the concurrent existence of folk theatre, modern literary drama, and festival ritual in post-independence Nigeria. These elements are intertwined in a relationship of circular influence and hybridization, in which each is influenced, modified, and developed by the other, leaving us perplexed as to which has evolved from which. While scripted drama has introduced dialogic elements into the masquerades of relatively new festivals, stage technology of itinerant theatre has been influenced by the technologically more advanced university theatres (Wright 80-83).

Soyinka, who considered 'folk opera' to be 'people's theatre,' saw its significant theatrical qualities and incorporated some of its techniques into his dramatic repertoire. Soyinka, who held great respect for the indigenous theatrical heritage, made significant efforts to promote it. As part of his Orisun Repertory Season in Ibadan in 1964, Soyinka featured performances by the Ladipo and Ogunmola companies (Banham 138) ^[1]. Soyinka's indebtedness to the Yoruba folk opera playwrights regarding the form and particular dramatic elements might be perceptible in a number of respects. First, Soyinka, like the dramatists of folk opera, exploited the poetic quality of the Yoruba language and the rich possibility of Yoruba allusion in many of his plays. In his creative works, the playwright has consistently referred back to points of Yoruba folklore and customs (Banham 138) ^[1]. Much of the obscurity of plays like *A Dance of the Forest* or *The Road* emanates from Soyinka's free and purposeful use of Yoruba allusions, which were incomprehensible to an audience coming from a cultural background other than Yoruba. Secondly, the Yoruba playwrights of folk opera influenced Soyinka in his use of music and dance, elements integral to traditional folk opera. Regarding the role of music, dance and poetry in Nigerian drama, J. P. Clark observes that “music, dance and poetry have been the constants of true Nigerian drama from the earliest birth-marriage-and-death-cycle ceremonies and rituals to our own trials by error of today” (cited in Banham 141) ^[1]. Traditional folk opera frequently mimics the dance steps used in certain ceremonies or by the worshippers of an indigenous deity. Thus, the dance elements of such folk opera served a functional rather than a mere decorative role. Plays like Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* acquire an additional dimension due to the playwright's dexterous use of music and dance. Martin Banham rightly observes: “The language is enlivened and enriched by the clarity of movement and the comment of the music, and Soyinka—basically a satirical writer—finds new powers in the theatre” (140). Thirdly, like the exponents of popular folk opera, Soyinka has utilized the culture, beliefs, fantasies, religious experiences, or rituals of indigenous people as the background or theme of his plays. Plays like *The Strong Breed*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *A Dance of the Forests*, *The Road*, *Death and the King's Horseman*, etc. incorporate popular beliefs, festivals, indigenous rituals, and traditional religious experiences and customs.

Soyinka never hesitated to incorporate Yoruba myths, rites and festivals into the structure and theme of his dramas. In one of his interviews, Soyinka revealed his own opinion regarding the viability and usefulness of such usage:

The use of rites? Well, rites, rituals, ceremonials, festivals are such a rich source of material for drama. They are intrinsically dramatic in themselves, because they are formalized. Apart from being visually clarifying, their representation is so precise that even when the meaning is obscure you are left with a form which is so clear that it reifies itself into a very concrete meaning for the viewer. So, for me rites, rituals are inevitable metaphors for the drama of life, for many, many human situations. (Gibbs 98) ^[4].

Soyinka notes that many rituals and ceremonies in West Africa possess inherent theatrical qualities that could potentially lead to theatrical performances. In this context, he highlights the dramatic element present in the launching of a new boat, a common practice in Uganda: “In it the boat is ritually launched, almost in a replay of the severing of a child's umbilical cord. The boat is decorated, there is singing and dancing, the boat is ritually washed and so on and so forth” (Gibbs 57) ^[4]. While such rituals or patterns of enactment retained their original formal structures to a great extent in East Africa, in West Africa they failed to maintain their purity and got modified to serve specific social and communal purposes. The evolution and modification found in the performance of the *egungun* ritual in West Africa is a case in point. For instance, Soyinka refers to one of the historic sources about the origin of the *egungun* ritual:

The Egungun ritual began as a ploy this Egungun masquerade began as a ploy for bringing the dead body of a king into a city. The king had died outside his own domain and kings were not supposed to travel in those days! They were to stay permanently in their palace. This king had sneaked off, probably on some little private affair, and he had died outside. Somehow he had to be got back into the city, and so mummery was invented and under the cover of mummery the body of the king was brought back in. Those who invented this show were later given chieftaincies by the king's heirs and were given the monopoly of annually performing this rite, this masquerade, in town.

But the cult, which at the time of its emergence exhibited serious ritualistic aspects, soon accumulated its secular aspects when masks, instead of being masks for dead ancestors, became masks to be utilized for satirizing stock characters or local situations. Along with the masks for the dead, the new entries into the repertory of masquerade included masks for animals like snakes, crocodiles, etc., or stock characters of daily life like the policemen, the White man, the District officer, the Portuguese traders, the slave trader, etc. (Gibbs 57-58). Modern African satirical plays borrowed some of the artistic techniques or stock characters from this *egungun* masquerade which was originally a mysterious cult. Apart from the *egungun* ritual, Soyinka incorporates other significant rituals into his dramas. Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* uses the purification ritual, based on the theme of self-sacrifice for the community's well-being, as its background.

Rituals are often associated with festivals. Soyinka was greatly captivated by the profound implications of certain Yoruba festivals, inspiring him to use them as the backdrop for his plays. The *egungun* masquerade is a component of the larger *egungun* festivals, where participants dress in their finest attire. Everywhere, there is feasting in society. Soyinka also mentions the *Oshun* festival, performed annually at *Oshogbo*. It is the celebration of *Oshun*, the river goddess.

The festival, which has some communal function to serve, brings the community together and also purges it of all the evils of the passing year. The festival revolves around a ritual where the chief, embodying virtues such as patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, among others, undergoes a symbolic capture and redemption. The chief, through his actions, teaches the rest of the community a moral lesson. Through his self-sacrificing gesture, he drives away the evils of the old year and prepares the community for a new journey in the New Year. There is also the annual New Yam festival, which is associated with numerous rituals. During this festival, participants symbolically eat a new yam only after performing certain rituals correctly. Such festivals unite everyone in mutual, communal participation (Gibbs 65–66) ^[4]. The New Yam Festival is economically significant to the community, as it encourages producers to cultivate superior crops in order to remain competitive. This type of competition among cultivators is also illustrated in Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*. It appears that Soyinka was enticed to employ the communal aspects of the diverse Yoruba rituals and festivals as the backdrops for his tragedies, as he believed that a great tragedy should involve the community as a whole. In a personal interview by Nancy Marder in 1979, Soyinka reflects on the nature of tragedy: "Great tragedy is a cleansing process for the health of the community. Tragic theatre is a literal development of ritual. It is necessary for balancing the aesthetic sensibilities of the community. Tragedy is a community event. It is the acting out of the neuroses, the recoveries, within a community. It does not just involve a single individual" (quoted in Gates, Jr. 75).

Despite the fact that Soyinka was significantly influenced by Yoruba "folk opera," his dramas are innovative endeavours to synthesize European and indigenous forms and elements. The classical paradigm established for dramatic construction is adhered to in the majority of Soyinka's plays. They also adhere to Western generic patterns, albeit occasionally with modifications in an African context. Nevertheless, the literary appropriation of music, dance, Yoruba mythology, allusions, rituals, mime, and festivals in Soyinka's dramas implies a desire to merge folk opera with more technically advanced drama. This innovative fusion of elements from indigenous and European cultures is a powerful method for challenging colonial influences on the stage. The incorporation of native dramatic techniques not only subverts the dominance of European theatrical conventions, but also breathes new life into marginalised indigenous cultures and artistic traditions by reclaiming and celebrating precolonial theatrical forms and performance styles. Modern African dramas, as crafted by renowned African playwrights like Soyinka, are artistic endeavours that delve into the vast possibilities of a newly developed dramatic style that combines Western techniques with indigenous performance traditions.

References

1. Banham M. Nigerian dramatists in English and the traditional Nigerian theatre. In: Walsh W, editor. *Readings in Commonwealth Literature*. Clarendon Press; 1973. p. 135-41.
2. Dugga VS. The Yoruba roots of *A Dance of the Forests and Death and the King's Horseman*. In: Roy AG, editor. *Wole Soyinka: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Pencraft International; 2006. p. 71-84.
3. Gates HL Jr. Being, the will, and the semantics of death. In: Jeyifo B, editor. *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*. University Press of Mississippi; 2001. p. 62-76.
4. Gibbs J. Soyinka in Zimbabwe: a question and answer session. *Wole Soyinka, Special Issue of The Literary Half-Yearly*. 1987 Jul;28(2):50-110.
5. Irele A. Tradition and the Yoruba writer: D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka. In: Jeyifo B, editor. *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*. University Press of Mississippi; 2001. p. 3-26.
6. Soyinka W. Theatre in African traditional cultures: survival patterns. In: *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. New Horn Press; 1988. p. 190-203.
7. Wright D. Drama and the Yoruba worldview: Soyinka's ritual metaphysics and the cultural cross-currents on Yoruba theatre history. In: Agarwalla SS, editor. *African Poetry and Drama*. Prestige Books; 2000. p. 76-85.