Thespis or Ikhanetfet: An Argument for Africa Origins of Theatre Makeup and Costume

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Abstract

Makeup and costume in Nigeria have been practiced from the traditional festival theatres, for as long as African villages have existed because theatre. The European-originated world view of theatre having its origin in 6th century B. C. Greece, appears to be a form of misinformation that leaves much room for contention, in view of more recent facts that suggest Egypt as the origin of theatre and Ikhanetfet as the first actor, rather than Thespis. Arguing along this line, this study also opines that makeup was not first introduced by the theatre of ancient Rome. The methodology is primarily literature review. The findings strongly suggest that Ancient Egyptian theatre outdates Ancient Greek theatre by twenty thousand years and was more advanced in design and technical practices than the later theatre. The study suggests a need to research into the extent of distortions of ancient theatre history of Nigeria. It also argues for an urgent reversal of teaching the false European origins of theatre and finally advocates further scholarly efforts to help the reposition Africa in world theatre history.

1. Introduction

My first awareness of the existence of the "Abydos Passion plays" was in the year 1984 from my lecturer; Amatu Braide whiles a

student of the certificate programme in theatre arts, at the University of Port Harcourt. Three years later, Professor Emmanuel Olawale Gladstone Rotimi (popularly called Ola Rotimi), in a dramatic literature class, in the month of March 1987, at same university, opined that,"...their European theatre began in 6th century BC Greece, two thousand years after the "Abydos passion plays" were recorded to have been performed in Egypt". This was noted and stored for further research as now manifested in this research. Archaeological records have been found, studied and published which show that theatrical use of makeup, costumes and even special effects were extensively documented in the tombs of pharaoh Amenhothep II and most other pharaohs in ancient Egypt. Bello (2012, p.421), affirms that,

> Generally, traditional African culture is characterised by symbolic representation of history, events, experiences and beliefs with the use of natural elements or man-made objectives in visual and performance arts which include contextual festival theatre, dance, music and drama. The import or relevance of such symbolic elements lies in the values that are attached to them as a result of significant happenings and experiences that are later moulded into philosophies, ideologies, myths and believes.

The first recorded performance in Africa was in 2,600 BC. Egypt, (it is twenty thousand years older than the Greek rural Dionysian festival; said documented origin of theatre in Europe). Known as the "Abidos Passion plays" as found in the tomb of Pharaoh Amenhothep II. Records inform that it was written for him by his chief priest Ikhanetfet and strongly suggests that the passion plays were performed as evident in the murals adorning the walls of the pharaohs' tomb. This is the story of the Egyptian creation myth

involving the gods of Egypt; Osiris, Horus, Anubis, etc. it tells the Egyptian myth about the origins of evil on earth (the god Seth) and the origins of the four hundred and one pantheon of ancient Egyptian gods, incidentally similar to those of ancient Greece.

2. History of theatre and its design arts: The known facts

Acting in Greek theatre evolved from the recitation and songs from the poetics text, as well as the ritual dance movements for Dionysus. The first actor is said to have been Thespis, who, at about 560B.C, originated the act of impersonation or mimesis, in Athens. The actor lined up to stage, like contemporary political orators, chanting or singing the dithyrambic and iambic choruses of Dionysian worship (poems), they wore huge masks and heeled shoes, for characterization and prominence on stage.

But these foot wears imperilled their movement around the stage. A goat: the sacred animal to Dionysian worship (that may be why the chorus were dressed in goat skins), was the prize awarded the best players. With their masks, it was possible for the early Greek actors to portray several characters in a play. A major innovation was introduced into Greek acting however when Aeschylus , who began competing at the Dionysian festival about 445B.C.,brought in the second actor .Although no fixed date has been ascribed to this event, Brocket (1982, p.20) opines that "it is usually assumed that it occurred early in his career". This enabled the actor hold face-to-face interaction, thus giving birth to the concept of conflict, a major ingredient of drama. About 468B.C. Sophocles added the third actor, another character without speaking role, in the bid to give effective expression to his well developed plot.

In the Roman theatre the sociologically base and style were different, but the art was fundamentally the same as that of Greece.

The Roman theatre rejected the thrust stage structure of Greece and in its place introduced the proscenium and arena theatre structures. The actors wore masks and had to do loud projections to be heard, even with the innovation of large verses filled partly with stones, which were put in the theatre to act as resonators and enhance acoustics.

There was, however, an attempt by an actor, named Roscius, to change the mechanical and exaggerated acting style, and this made him very popular. He established an acting school and introduced a more skilful and refined approach to acting. One of the most significant contributions of Rome to the Theatre Arts was the development of the pantomime. This was at about 240 B.C. Livius Adronicus had a problem with his voice during a public performance resulting in another actor reading his lines from the stage wing, while he (Livius) danced and acted out the lines on the stage. The pantomime soon became the most popular form of theatrical presentation in Rome, and later modern musical plays, are said to have evolved from it as a form having elements of both opera and ballet, the entire performance rested on music, as singers told the story while the dancer interpreted the actions. Since the Romans enjoyed nude displays and circus shows, nude and semi-nude outings were commonplace. The mask was eventually disposed of by the later Roman theatre and substituted with makeup.

The Ancient Egyptian theatre which dates back to 2600B.C., (two millenniums before the theatre of Greece and Europe in general originated), was also based on religious practices and was performed in a manmade theatre known as the temple of Osiris, which was a curve shaped Am phi-theatre and raises one hundred steps sitting levels in height, built around a natural open cave with a raised apron extension on which performance took place as a religious ritual every two years. This was located in the ancient city of Thebes. The

mouth of the cave and the ability to drop curtains across it made it arguably the first proscenium arch and takes that credit away from the Theatre of Ancient Rome. The theatre of ancient Egypt did not include any blood sacrifice, despite the presence of an Alter at the centre of the apron/stage. Smith (1994, p.69), informs that,

> ...only once before had a Pharaoh made human sacrifice; when Menotep (a pharaoh) had slit the throats of seven rebel princes in the temple of Seth and quartered their corpses and sent the embalmed fragments to the governors of each of the nomes (districts) as a warning. History still remembered the deed with distaste. Menotep is known to this day as the Bloody king."

He further informs (p. 80) that the story of the passion is in the Egyptian creation belief that,

> Out of the chaos and darkness of Nun rose Ammon-Ra, He-Who-Creates-Himself... Ammon-Ra stroked his generative member, masturbating and spurting out his seminal seed in mighty waves that left the silver smear we know as the Milky Way across the dark void. From this seed were generated Geb and Nut, the earth and the heaven... Geb and Nut coupled and copulated, as man and woman do, and from their dreadful union were born the gods Osiris and Seth and the goddesses Isis and Nephthys.

The Passion plays as referred to by European scholars, is actually a single play in three acts and is the story of creation by Ammon-Ra in the first act, how Seth Killed Osiris and cut him up into fourteen pieces and scattered the parts across Egypt as the second act; a rather striking resemblance to the dismemberment of Dionysus in Greek mythology. The third act tells of the sisters Isis and Nephthys returning in grief to gather up the parts of Osiris for Isis

to revive his spirit in a new body and a new god called Horus, which was achieved by copulating with the dead Osiris and having a son by him. The god Horus with the spirit of Osiris in him is born as an adult and proceeds to fight and subdue Seth. Horus binds Seth to his will and makes him the god of evil.

This study was informed by a much publicised Muslim resisted and prolonged court case (1984-1987) in the city of Alexandria in Egypt, for an excavation under a mosque that eventually took place in 1987. The world court supported excavation revealed the tomb of the ninth and first female Pharaoh, who held the regency for her son to come of age during the Hyksos invasion that killed eight pharaoh of Egypt. She was Queen Lostris, wife of Pharaoh Memose (eight pharaoh), mother of Pharaoh Tamose (tenth pharaoh). She ruled Egypt for twenty one years in exile (which took her to Ethiopia where her husband was entombed), and returned with her son to free Egypt from Hyksos occupation, with the help of the Shilok tribe she abducted in transit near Ethiopia (origin of Negro Egyptians).

Which event is documented by Smith (1994) as haven taken place 900 years after the building of the tomb of Pharaoh Cheap, the first Pharaoh of Egypt. Ejiofor (2012), "It has been argued that the original text of the authentic African primordial world has long been displaced by realities of flux; and consequent upon that displacement, the first world assumes an elusive and evasive ambience in traditional African consciousness" and dares to make claims to the origins of most world developments, even those that have now been debunked; like originating Mathematics, writing and metal weapons. In the tomb of Egypt's ninth Pharaoh were found records of actual performance technical details as recorded by her slave and personal assistant from childhood to death; Taita (reports Wilbur Smith). According to records found in

her tomb, the passion plays were performed every two years at the full flood of the Nile in the city of Thebes, to entertain the Pharaoh and the people as part of religious rights. Elaborate makeup and costume and such special effects as channelling a stream across the rock stage, staining it with colours for rivers of blood effect and using a silhouette in the sex scene between Isis and Osiris; by dropping a veil across the stage and placing torches behind the performers, were used as recorded by Smith (1994),while translating materials given to him from the 1987 excavation into a novel of entertaining details of theatrical quality, and soundly recording his source of materials in his epilogue for academic reference and validity.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion of this overview on theatre history in Africa, it would appear that African theatre has not been properly acknowledged in world theatre history and this needs to be speedily reversed by modern African scholars by undertaking further studies into archaeological findings anthropological researches on Africa that may help illuminate the dark periods of our theatre history. Similarly the Theatre in Nigeria may be much older than indigenous and foreign scholars have given it credit as is visibly implied by the suggested ages of some ancient indigenous theatre artefact, example of which is the mascots and puppets of the Kwag' Hir theatre of the Tiv ethnic nationality. A patriotic bid to look at our country of origin; towards finding out how much distortion western scholars have impacted on our local theatre history should give us pointers to the research awaiting indigenous scholars in this regard. Makeup and costume in Nigeria have been practiced from the traditional festival theatres, for as long as African villages have existed but the earliest historically acclaimed

literary mention of theatre in Nigeria was of the Yoruba theatre and can be found in the writings of Hugh Clapperton; a European. In his journal, Clapperton, (1951, p.265) wrote that,

> ...what strikes me is the strongly satirical purpose of the show, which even made fun of people who at that time were still extremely rare in the hinterland of West Africa, viz. The Europeans...The third act consisted of the white devil. The actors having retired to some distance in the background, one of them was left in the centre, whose sack falling gradually down, exposed a white head, at which the crowed gave a shout that rent the air; they appeared indeed to enjoy this sight, as the perfection of the actor's art. The whole body was at last cleared of the encumbrance of the sack, when it exhibited the appearance of a human figure cast in wax, of the middle size, miserably thin, and starved with cold. It frequently went through the motion of taking snuff, and rubbing its hands; when it walked, it was with the most awkward gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking barefooted for the first time, over frozen ground.

This account by Clapperton confirms use of face and body makeup in the Alarinjo theatre. It also confirms that the Europeans met a developed theatre in Nigeria on their arrival, that it failed to conform with the familiar structures of their continents' theatre cannot justify their denial of the fact that they did not introduce theatre to Africa. It is necessary to note that, African theatre has never been traced by any scholar to have its' origin from the European Greek theatre or its' later developments. African literates need to update our cultural records. According to Atakpo (2012,

p.476), "in updating a peoples' culture the objective is to shape their literature, which is the invisible string that binds the past with the future". The time when such tales of how Mongo Park discovered the river Niger, without acknowledging that the natives he met had lived there and knew the river well centuries before his arrival, is the type of misinformation that should stop being promoted in African schools. It needs to be updated to read that; Mongo Park was the first white man to make contact with the civilization of the black people along the river Niger.

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