

A Critique of Yorùbá Judgment: Non-Western Performance Aesthetics and the Development of the Nigerian Stage

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Art historians have done extensive work explaining Yorùbá systems of aesthetics, particularly with regard to the philosophy and practice of representation. Scholarship on Yorùbá aesthetics has produced a series of questions surrounding the relationship of audience to representation, the relationship of representation to authority, and the fluidity, innate power, and interpretation of representation. This work, particularly the discussion of *àṣẹ* or the authority of art, has not become a regular part of discussions of African theatrical theory and practice: in point of fact, despite the work of Wole Soyinka, Margaret Drewal, Andrew Apter, Karin Barber, and others, a vast array of contemporary criticism on African theatre still uses Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud for theoretical grounding. Given that African writers are aware of Brecht and Artaud, and that the formal changes in theatre have a surface similarity to Brechtian alienation and Artaud's theatre of cruelty, an understanding of contemporary Yorùbá aesthetics can be found in the disjunctions and intersections between traditional Yorùbá aesthetics and avant-garde Western theory. With recourse to Artaud's discussion of Western modes of representation as a point of contrast, this article explains the explicitly political ramifications of alterations of traditional Yorùbá aesthetics. In the Yorùbá system, where representation is always an act of authority but also conceived as fluid, the avenues of resistance are less clear than in the Western system, where the authority of representation, generally conceived as stable, is present as an aftereffect in the audience.

If one accepts the arguments of modernist Western theatrical practitioners such as Brecht, Artaud, Augusto Boal, and Jerzy Grotowski, the crisis point in Western aesthetics and its relationship to politics came early in the development of Western theatre. When Parmenides postulates that all being is unified, he effectively erases the possibility of representation. If that-which-is *is* and that-which-is *is* unified and unchanging, then there can be no divisions in the univocality that would allow man to intervene and create representations. Aristotle opens the possibility of an analogical world in which every being is related to that-which-is, but not part of the same being. The scholastics, humanists, and neoplatonists take this as a point of entry into their understanding of both metaphysics and representation, and thus,

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as Derrida says, the “theater is born in its own disappearance, and the offspring of this movement has a name: man.”²¹ In other words, this aspect of Western metaphysics is founded upon the idea of a rupture between being and form that theatrical representation is always trying to bridge. When the essence of being is separated from forms, the assumption of an ordered universe requires that some force—man—step in and recognize these forms for what they are, connect them one to another, and place them back in the order to which they belong. As long as Western systems of representation postulate a difference between signifier and signified—as long as the concept of representation is intimately connected with metaphor, analogy, and allegory—Artaud laments that theatre will never reach its potential for “total revolution.”²² Man, in his interpretive capacity, will always mediate between representation and “truth.” The political impetus of modern avant-garde theatre manifests in a desire to change this relationship and either remove the separation between representation and truth or reveal the illusion of representation so as to reposition man.

The fundamental conditions of Yorùbá representation are different but not diametrically opposed. There is no initial postulation of a rupture between signifier and signified, and the process of “reading” representation relies upon the authority of the representation and the authority invoked by the reader. The assimilative Yorùbá aesthetics places itself squarely inside the *ìwà* (inherent unchanging quality) of the world and authorizes the absolute nature of its representations through the evocation of *àṣẹ* (authority).³ The crisis point—or the point of revolution—for Yorùbá theatre and the Yorùbá political world comes when the assimilative nature of Yorùbá aesthetics is no longer able to match the old sources of *àṣẹ* to the present manifestations of what should be a stable *ìwà*. In other words, the question for contemporary Yorùbá theatre is about the authority of representation over time, not its imputed reality.

Traditional Yorùbá Aesthetics: The Voice of Art

I begin this section with a standard disclaimer. The Yorùbá were not historically a homogenous or isolated group, nor have they become so despite the regionalism of contemporary Nigerian politics. The Christian and Islamic traditions, along with Igbo, Hausa, and others, have been assimilated into Yorùbá culture. What follows is not the assertion of, nor the quest for, a lost, pure Yorùbá aesthetic. My definition of Yorùbá performance blends the examples of praise songs explored by Barber, religious rituals and festivals explored by Drewal, contemporary drama discussed by Soyinka, and, as will be apparent, the performative dimensions of the plastic arts. This definition encompasses hundreds of different manifestations of Yorùbá performance and, thus, while it is possible to discuss similarities across performance media, it is not possible to give a representative example that can account for each of the aspects of performance at stake in this argument. Likewise,

my brief statements on the Western metaphysics of representation are intended to show points along a developmental line and do not take into account specific variation within and outside of this line.

The above disclaimer itself opens one of the first characteristics of Yorùbá aesthetics: they are essentially assimilative even as they reflect a stable relationship with the universe. Wole Soyinka has commented on this phenomenon, saying that, unlike Yorùbá theatre, “Western dramatic criticism habitually reflects the abandonment of a belief in culture as defined within man’s knowledge of fundamental unchanging relationships between himself and society and within the larger context of the observable universe.”⁴ Essentially, Soyinka argues that the best theatre, while it may adopt and adapt a variety of forms that evoke the logics of different philosophies, ultimately concerns itself with issues that transcend the boundaries of these philosophies. Soyinka’s concept of “a fundamental unchanging relationship” is mirrored in the Yorùbá notion of *ìwà*, which designates the active manifestation of innate qualities of people or things. *Ìwà* is simultaneously the stable category of character into which one fits and an expression of the unique character one has in relationship to the cosmos. Both the commonality and the uniqueness, however, must be able to assimilate new cultural elements and individual difference. One’s *ìwà* does not change, but the mode of expressing it might.

One aesthetic manifestation that displays the relationship between assimilation and *ìwà* is the performance of *oriki* (generally translated as praise songs). Karin Barber says:

[This performance] appears to lack closure and boundaries, going on and on in an undifferentiated stream until some external reason, rather than an inner formal requirement, brings the performance to a halt. . . . An *oriki* performance appears endlessly accommodating and incorporative . . . [containing] not only elements drawn for the ‘pool’ of *oriki*, but chunks of Ifa divination verses, proverbs, *arö* (cumulative narrative poems) and even riddles. . . . [T]here is no determinate, ‘authentic’ text, but rather continual and fluid variations on a set of possibilities.⁵

Oriki performance must adapt to the changing conditions around it. The song must be appropriate in order to praise its subject through a variety of circumstances. While the *ìwà* of the figure receiving the praise is stable, the song must be endlessly assimilative to continue to praise its subject regardless of situation. If one considers this in light of Aristotelian tragedy, the difference is plain. Aristotle postulates a stable mechanism—the evocation of fear and pity—and a set of formal unities by which this mechanism is constructed. Aristotelian tragedy need not be concerned with authorizing its own voice, because this authority is manifested in the static

forms. The authority for Aristotle is always transmitted from the gods through the playwright, in a precise form, to the audience.

Yorùbá aesthetics does not deny the possibility of conferring authority via formal elements, but this is one of many mechanisms rather than the primary method. While in the example of *oriki* performance form shifts to allow for the stability of function, David Doris discusses how static forms in sculpture and photography can simultaneously evoke the individual *ìwà* and a communally understood *àṣẹ*. Traditional Yorùbá sculpture has a limited number of poses, each with a specific meaning, and photographic subjects often adopt these poses so as to associate themselves with the *àṣẹ* of the pose: “the individuality of the portrait’s sitter is acknowledged, but it is also transfigured, as it were, by his self-identification with a category of persons.”⁶ In this case, the photographer transposes the form, along with its symbolic content, into a new context. Yorùbá aesthetics does not codify the Western distinction between content and form in a consistent manner. Thus, when contemporary Yorùbá theatre, such as Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forest*, calls attention to the fluidity of symbolic representation, this articulates rather than violates Yorùbá aesthetic principles.

As one might expect in a society with a strong concept of *ìwà* as innate qualities related to one’s societal position, Yorùbá art is often didactic in its relationship to specific power structures. This didacticism, however, must always justify its *àṣẹ* or authority, which leads to the mixture of a display of unarguable wisdom and the self-conscious need to authorize this wisdom. Andrew Apter argues that the expression of *àṣẹ* is “at once the most profound and most difficult stage of entry into Yoruba culture.”⁷ Access to power is restricted, and this restriction is, in part, due to the inability of ordinary human beings to conceptualize the profundity of the ancient sources of power. Thus, according to Apter’s arguments, descriptions and evocations of *àṣẹ* are likewise restricted and profound. What follows in Apter’s argument is a detailed analysis of a ritual song that invokes the *àṣẹ* of Shango in praise of a king. Apter notes that the song moves from ambiguity and potential confusion into a clear declaration of the will of Shango. The performance is not complete without both of these portions. Shango’s authority is unquestioned but must be evoked and established through somewhat obscure means. The king gains authority through this association with Shango, but this authority is confirmed only by the king’s already existing relationship to Shango, which is manifested in his ability to correctly interpret and evoke Shango’s *àṣẹ*. The authority, the *àṣẹ*, cannot be approached directly, but, once present, it cannot be denied.

Roland Abiodun shifts the focus to objects after they have been imbued with *àṣẹ*. Sculptures and other decorations on shrines, for instance, “contribute to and share in the power of the sacred space.” These objects, too, have been imbued by an outside force through the manipulations of “secret names.” While the objects have innate qualities and have been imbued permanently with *àṣẹ*, there is a continual

re-invocation of these qualities that reinforces the power of the objects and, as significantly, reminds the audience of this power. An object or person may have a permanent, unchanging *ìwà* and have established its *àṣẹ* and still require the same rituals that were initially necessary to establish these principles. Abiodun goes on to discuss “specific colors, patterns, motifs, and aspects of the subject matter”⁸ emphasized in the plastic arts that are associated with *àṣẹ*. Certain forms, like the position of the sitter in the photographs described above, are associated with power—although even their power must perpetually be reestablished and reinforced.

What might be seen as metatheatricality in Western theatre, then, is an intrinsic part of Yorùbá aesthetics. A performance must question its own status and authority in order to evoke this authority. Femi Osofisan’s *Morontodun* demonstrates this sort of questioning directly when one of his characters remarks, “We came here to do a play, a simple play. But History—or what some of you call Chance or Fortune—has taken over the stage. And it will play itself out, whether we like it or not.”⁹ The authority of the piece arises from a loosely defined exterior source. Something has taken over the performance. The fact that the identity of this force is not resolved within the play, however, differentiates Osofisan’s work from the traditional Yorùbá aesthetic, which might begin in obscurity but moves toward clarity. I return to this differentiation and its potential for political resistance in the final section of this article.

After authority is established, it still must find an audience in order to be didactic. The relationship of audience to performance, like the invocation of *àṣẹ*, is not something that the Yorùbá aesthetic takes for granted. The question of audience is explicitly a question of interpretation. This interpretation may involve intellectual musing or direct action of the artistic object on the spectator. Abiodun says that “[w]ithout Ohun (‘voice,’ the ‘verbalization or performance of the word’) neither Epe (‘curse,’ the malevolent use of *ase*) nor Ase (‘life-force’) can act to fulfill its mission.” This is true of both the plastic arts and the performed arts. “Iluti (literally ‘good hearing’) idiomatically refers to qualities such as obedience, teachableness, understanding and, above all, the ability to communicate. It determines whether or not a work of art ‘is alive’ and ‘responds’.”¹⁰ These qualities are ascribed to the piece of art, not to the spectator. The artwork itself must have a sensibility of the *ìwà* of the world, and the ability to communicate this *ìwà*. Art must hear and respond to the word, just as the spectator must hear and respond to the art. Once this cycle is closed, the spectator will emerge with a new and strengthened understanding of his place in the world.

While Abiodun moves quickly across a variety of performance and plastic arts, the issue of interpretation is perhaps easiest to understand when looking at a particular instance. “*Àrokò*” designates a broad category of what could loosely be termed sculpture. An *àrokò* uses commonplace items to send a specific message in a language accessible only to members of a specific group. Phillip Adédotun

Ògúndèjí discusses the difficulty in understanding an *àrokò*. The container of the *àrokò* can carry part of the meaning itself, as does the specific arrangement of items within the container. Sometimes the meaning of the container conflicts with the meaning of the object sent. These messages are fluid, as demonstrated by a legend Ògúndèjí recounts in which a warlord seeks an *àrokò* from his dead mother about an upcoming battle. As the message is being returned, a piece of fruit falls into the container, and the warrior thus misunderstands his mother's warning. The legend is but one of many that emphasize the variability of this message, but, ultimately, the moral of the tale is that the warrior should have been more discerning in his interpretation. The logical link here is that art contains *àṣẹ* through its connection to an *ìwà*, and the warrior should have been able to determine that what he was receiving was not in accordance with either of these. In several versions of the tale, he dies horribly in battle.

Misinterpretation carries consequences, and, in this case, the warrior is part of the message's intended audience and thus should have had access to the symbolic know-how to decipher it. Other artistic pieces, however, rely on a different kind of interpretation. *Àlè*, sculptures of a type that may enact a curse or a blessing upon their audience, are not bearers of a message, but are themselves the message. An empty snail shell nailed to a post is both a warning of what will happen to a thief and a curse to make certain that any thieves get what they deserve. This mode of sculpture is problematic inasmuch as the *àṣẹ* is there whether or not the "audience" makes an active attempt to interpret the sign. The interpretation, in this case, is the curse or blessing bestowed upon the audience, which signals the power of *àṣẹ* to demonstrate its *ohun* regardless of the circumstances. The audience becomes the physical embodiment of the interpretation.

Given the complexity of modes of interpretation and the dangers of failure, it is not surprising that the Yorùbá people have a god under whose jurisdiction interpretation falls. Emmanuel Eze says that

[C]entral to the interpretation and understanding of *Odu* [the written version of *Ifa*, a prophetic corpus] is *Esu*. . . . In fact, the *Odu* is regarded as praise songs to *Esu*—*Esu* being considered the way as well as barrier to *ashé* [a phonetic transcription of *àṣẹ*]. *Esu* is the he who makes understanding possible (or impossible!). He is the mediation a). between text and reader b). between text and meaning c). between truth and understanding (or lack thereof). In fact, in Yorùbá language, *Esu* is called *onitumo*, "one who loosens knowledge[,]” i.e. the interpreter.¹¹

Thus, the authority of the art depends upon interpretation which itself depends upon establishing communication with the authority of a god who himself requires

interpretation. Apter's claim about the necessary complications of the Yorùbá language when it comes to *àṣẹ* become much clearer when put in this context.

When complete, the interpretation of Yorùbá art is conceived as a concrete force. The correct understanding of the audience adds to the *àṣẹ* of the piece. Force and authority have been generated and reinforced. While someone can misinterpret art, the art cannot end with misinterpretation. The correct view—however complex and idiosyncratic this view may be—will emerge eventually, as seen in the innumerable fables of the fates that befall those who fail to understand the artistic projects with which they are presented. While Aristotelian theatre certainly creates an effect in the audience, the concept of the reciprocity of the exchange is missing. The audience doesn't explicitly need to interpret events; these events, by nature of their form, will create fear and pity and thereby lead to virtue. The commonplace that the audiences at African theatrical events tend to participate more is not simply a physical reality or mode of appreciation of Yorùbá theater; it is a metaphysical part of the aesthetic grounding of the stage. Art requires participation.

In relating the Yorùbá aesthetic to the neoclassical understanding of classical representation, which has shaped mainstream contemporary British and American theatre, several points of contrast become clear. While Western representation is bound up in the question of the unity of being, the Yorùbá aesthetic takes this unity for granted. The authority of classical Western modes of art comes from innate and permanent qualities of form, which stem from a single concept of virtue. In Yorùbá art, authority is simultaneously innate and in need of constant invocation and will be obscure through parts of this process. Interpretation is something that happens to Western art. Interpretation is Yorùbá art. The spectator in Yorùbá art may, at times, be passive, but the *ohun* of the art will enact an active interpretation upon the spectator. Western art in various periods has attempted to codify the relationship between form and function and between content and form. The fluidity of these relationships is fundamental to Yorùbá art. Yorùbá art, then, conceives of itself as interactive and fluid, but also as possessing a physical and spiritual concreteness that has a direct impact on the world.

Theatrical and Political Ramifications:

Contemporary Yorùbá Theatre and the Western Avant-Garde

While the above points may be interesting in the abstract, their importance is magnified by the fact that art, particularly performance art and theatre, has become a major mode of political action in Nigeria. The unique qualities of Yorùbá aesthetics require that the analysis of this political impetus be separated from both Western theatrical theory and Jameson's statement that "everything is 'in the last analysis' political."¹²

To be perfectly clear, I agree with Brecht, Boal, Artaud, Soyinka, and Osofisan when they claim, in their various ways, that every mode of theatre has or had a

direct connection to a particular set of conditions—an ideology or set of discursive practices. Brecht claims that

[t]he proper way to explore humanity's new mutual relationships is via the exploration of the new subject-matter. . . . [S]imply to comprehend the new areas of subject-matter imposes a new dramatic and theatrical form. . . . [P]etroleum resists the five act form.¹³

Osofisan says that

The dramatic heritage available to us has simply proved inadequate. And it is not only that the machinery provided by the old society for dealing with chaos has lost its capacity for total effect, it is also that the very metaphysical *raison d'être* of that machinery has been eroded with the advent of a new sociopolitical philosophy.¹⁴

Presumably Osofisan's "dramatic heritage" includes traditional Yorùbá theatre and the "five act form." While the point is sometimes lost in the fiery polemics of these writers, the new theatre that they develop is itself contextual.¹⁵ The most radical avant-garde will someday become the "dramatic heritage" that has "proved inadequate." Likewise, since both the theatrical and socio-political conditions differ widely from Europe to Africa, it would be foolish to assume that the political implications of either the traditions or changes of traditions that occur in one venue would apply to the other. In what I describe below, there are some contingent, local ways that traditional Yorùbá aesthetics seem, like Artaud's mythical Orient, to point toward what Western theatre could or should become. Whether or not the West chooses to draw artistic inspiration from Africa, traditional African aesthetics bears the same relationship to contemporary African life that traditional Western aesthetics bears to contemporary Western life—in both cases, theatrical experience and lived experience have become separated, and theatre has been deprived of a vital political power. Nevertheless, the nature of the Western separation, due to its familiarity, helps to clarify the homologous African situation.

Jacques Derrida, in one of the most complete analyses of Artaud's relationship to Western systems of representation, declares that the "implacable necessity" of the theatre of cruelty operates as a "permanent force" causing us to be aware of the "declining, decadent, and negative" aspect of Western theatre and return to its (pre)classical roots. Specifically, Derrida argues that the "theater of cruelty is not a *representation*," that it produces "the closure of classical representation, but also the reconstitution of a closed space of original representation, the archi-manifestation

of force or life.” The space of original representation is closed inasmuch as there is no separation between signifier and signified or between object and ground: this “force or life” does not need to point outside itself to find its completion. In this type of theatre the *mise en scène* is fully integrated into the meaning of the piece and the importance of words diminish and shift. By the same token, however, Derrida recognizes the “*fatal*” necessity of representation to reemerge in theatre’s repetition: “Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself.” This explains the necessity of the theatre of cruelty to be an active, mobile force. The closure of representation, once accomplished, is itself represented, and then the process repeats itself. Theatre of cruelty, if it remains motionless, becomes a representation of the closure of representation rather than an actual closure: hence Artaud’s comments that “As much as I love the theater, I am, for this very reason, equally its enemy.”¹⁶ Western theatre was born of representation and, according to Derrida, will either remain dead or engage in a perpetual struggle to “present” rather than “represent.” This struggle gives Western theatre its vitality, and the necessity of the struggle causes Artaud’s enmity.

The Yorùbá aesthetic is a radically unclosed system in this regard. Representations always reach outside themselves to establish *àṣẹ* and create the interpretative link with the audience. Conversely, traditional Yorùbá aesthetics cite the power of *Àlẹ̀* to have concrete effects regardless of interpretation. Representation is at once totally dependent on the “metaphysics of language” that Artaud seeks to modify and the “unperverted pantomime” that Artaud seeks to create.¹⁷ Yorùbá aesthetics cannot remain motionless because of the necessity of interpretation and reinscription, but the motion of the aesthetic is to reinforce existing lines of power or create compatible new sources of authority. It is Osofisan’s contention, as cited above, that traditional Yorùbá theatre’s ability to communicate has been eroded by the advent of a “new sociopolitical philosophy.” The nature of theatre’s communication for Osofisan (to say nothing of Brecht, Artaud, Boal, Derrida, and Soyinka) is found in

its stance of direct confrontation with the mode and direction of all preceding literature . . . taking [its] stand on the aggressive principle that the world is always susceptible to human action and can thus be changed for the better, seek[ing] to harness and promote . . . literature as an organic phenomenon, ineluctably linked to the process of our historical evolution . . . the creation of a literature . . . which is . . . deliberately and subtly oriented towards a positive ideological indoctrination.¹⁸

Because the changing political situation in Nigeria deprived theatre of its ability to communicate, the implication of the above passage is that the old theatrical modes must be resisted because they are part of a negative “ideological indoctrination.” Traditional Yorùbá theatre and African manifestations of Western theatre are bound up in the regionalization that brought down the First Republic and led to the civil war and the emergence of a string of military dictators. Osofisan rejects this theatrical tradition as vehemently as Artaud rejects that of the West.

The primary question in this case is not the specific political intervention that Osofisan or any Yorùbá playwright makes, but a reading of the theoretical ramifications of the aesthetic interventions. Nevertheless, some political context is useful. Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forest* was performed on the eve of Nigerian independence in 1960. Osofisan’s *Morountodun* was performed in 1979 as Olusegun Obasanjo held open elections, after the hope of the newly formed nation had been severely challenged by a civil war and thirteen years of military rule. In both cases, the playwrights expressed skepticism about the potential of the newly emerging government. Because, however, the new government had not actually come into existence in either of these cases, the object of critique in the two shows is not so much a specific political policy as a general understanding of the political system. I argue, along with Brecht, Boal, and Artaud, that theatrical genre always interacts with politics at this level, but these two examples accentuate the point.

I have elsewhere discussed the characteristics of the political situation surrounding Soyinka’s performance—a preponderance of autobiographical and biographical material that conflates the individual and the nation, an insistence on a teleology that traces itself from the ancient past to the glorious future, and the utter exclusion of a shifting set of groups from the concept of the individual and the teleology of the nation.¹⁹ The sheer quantity and homogeneity of political publications during the late 1950s make the identification of these characteristics relatively straightforward.²⁰ Soyinka’s text functions as an intricately crafted reminder of the traditional Yorùbá aesthetic’s need for interpretation and repeated validation of *àṣẹ*. *A Dance of the Forest* is a play that resists the easy certainties of pre-independence discourse. It replaces demagoguery with fluid transactional identities that constantly fail to reaffirm their place in the world. Notably, its final lines involve the unfinished performance of a proverb about seeking knowledge: “When the crops have been gathered, there will be time enough for the winnowing of the grain.”²¹ While Soyinka’s text does not follow any of the traditional performance modes of the Yorùbá, the critique he makes fits within the philosophical implications of the aesthetic parameters of the form—knowledge, interpretation, and power can come about only through transaction and effort.

Osofisan is a more complex case in this regard. Soyinka is a part of the dramatic practice that Osofisan rejects, and Soyinka’s critique of the First Republic’s modes

of representation was already well established by 1979. Osofisan's play follows the promise of democratic elections and the end of years of military dictatorship. The First Republic had collapsed, the oil boom was over, and the scars of the civil war were visible across the country. Traditional modes of aesthetics, at least in their post-colonial form, had failed to create for Osofisan a theatre capable of dealing with these realities. One of the strongest voices to emerge in the midst of these realities was that of Olusegun Obasanjo, then the military dictator and eventually the civilian president of Nigeria. The fact that Obasanjo remains an influential political figure makes his role in the creation of political discourse more difficult to codify. He has been praised by figures ranging from Nelson Mandela to Nadine Gordimer and condemned by Soyinka and a number of other Nigerians.

Obasanjo's remarkable staying power as a figure in the fluid waters of Nigerian politics is, in part, attributable to his ability to assimilate new realities into his existing rhetoric. For instance, in August of 1975, upon his first speech to the press as the Chief of Staff of the new military regime (of which he would become the head in 1976), Obasanjo said:

It is our intention to adopt a military posture in all our actions. This Administration wishes to be close to the people. It will, therefore, be responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of Nigerians. It will be an open Administration, quite ready to consider genuine and constructive criticism as well as ideas from any quarters. This does not mean that the Government will be taking dictation from any quarters. Every action of the Government will be as a result of extensive discussion and very careful consideration.²²

The contrast between this speech and those of the pre-independence parties, the National or Northern People Congress (NPC), the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), and the Action Group (AG) is clear. The earlier speeches tell Nigeria what it is, how it became so, and what it will be. These parties' confidence is intimately tied to their identity: the pre-independence speeches erase the possibility of dissent and create a unilateral national identity that is as limiting as it is unifying. Obasanjo's speech, in contrast, explicitly calls attention to the source of its authority—the military—and the limitations of that authority—the will of the people—and the need to interpret both carefully. On a continent rife with extraordinarily powerful military regimes and non-military monarchies and dictatorships, actively soliciting the opinion of the people is a striking rhetorical strategy, regardless of the actual manifestations of power within the regime.

As Obasanjo left office in 1979, he relinquished power to Shagari, whose opening speech parallels Obasanjo's earlier speech, replacing the military with the constitution:

Today, our new constitution comes into effect; a constitution carefully drawn up by ourselves for ourselves. We are assuming office as a result of a free, democratic and peaceful election. We must be proud of this, and we must be grateful to God and to all those who have worked so hard to make it possible. This is an occasion, which calls for sober reflection on the problems of the First Republic in order to appreciate the magnitude of the tasks ahead.²³

The past authorizes Shagari's new government only after it has been interpreted by careful reflection. This careful reflection both presumably precedes and follows the drawing up of a constitution that is presented as a mutual agreement between government and people. Aside from reflections on the past, Shagari authorizes himself through the agreement of the people and through God. Unlike the pre-Independence politicians whose occasional fluidity only concretized their own identities and that of the nation with its glorious past, Shagari implies that he is open to the fluid reinterpretations of the past that will result in ongoing dialogue. He draws his authority from a variety of sources as need dictates—God, the constitution, and history being three primary ones—and he makes this invocation explicit. He speaks of “encouraging” a “primary objective” whose authorship is only implied. He is a master at leading consistently without appearing authoritarian. In other words he has managed to adopt the fluidity of the Yorùbá aesthetic along with the stability of the *ìwà* and the self-conscious need to reinforce *àṣẹ*. He does all this while maintaining a very visible discourse with the public. He had a number of highly publicized meetings with Soyinka, for instance, in which he was careful to state that communication had taken place.

Thus, Obasanjo and Shagari had crafted a political system difficult to challenge from within artistic practice. How could a self-avowedly revolutionary writer such as Osofisan resist an essentially assimilative aesthetic that already recognizes its own contingency and questions its own authority? This is a paradox no less difficult to conceive of than the repeated cycle of closure in Artaud's perpetually unattainable theatre of cruelty. Apter has argued that *àṣẹ* is essentially mystifying, and so Osofisan employs a metatheatrically self-conscious demystification of authority by having the actor play the role of “director” speak these lines until he is interrupted:

In the end, peace came, but from the negotiating table, after each side had burned itself out. Yes, that's history for you. . . . But still, you must not imagine that what we presented here tonight was the truth. This is a theatre, don't forget, a house of dream and phantom struggles. The *real* struggle, the real truth, is out there, among you, on the street, in your homes; in your daily living

and dying. . . . We are actors, and whatever we present here is mere artifice, assembled for your entertainment. Tomorrow the play may even be different. It depends.²⁴

The art pushes the possibility of *àṣẹ* onto the spectator. The vast historical swath of *Morountodun*, which traces the roots of contemporary problems to struggles in the mythical past, burns itself out as a mode of authority. The theatrical structure and the authority of the director are contingent on outside forces less important than the everyday truth of “the street.”

Were these the final lines of the play, this theatre would still place the spectator in a traditional Yorùbá relationship to the stage, however, and thus would be in keeping with the contingent rhetoric of the politicians. As in traditional Yorùbá theatre, the audience is asked to conceive of themselves as active recipients, interpreters, and co-creators of a message. However, Osofisan’s text does not end there. The actors interrupt the director and “clamp their hands over his mouth.” These actors close in song: “Be always like this day / Beside me. Wear hope like a jewel: It never fades / It never fades / It never—.” The play ends with these actors frozen and the hero from the past and the hero of the present in “harsh spotlights, looking at each other.”²⁵ In other words, the director’s final speech, his ending and summation that tells the audience that the authority is theirs, is cut off by a song. The song, with its message that hope never fades, is itself cut off, and all that is left is an uneasy look between past and present. Unlike the openness of the traditional Yorùbá system of aesthetics that does eventually reach a conclusion, or Soyinka’s implication of a journey yet to be taken, this play ends in stasis, not movement. The director’s call for action and the song’s call for hope are both trapped between past and present, frozen in the glare of the lights. The final authority, divided somehow between past and present figures, is not transactional and fluid.

Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forest* is a riddle without an answer, a perpetual journey. Osofisan’s *Morountodun* is an end to riddles and a call for a new source of artistic and political authority. This is not an alienation effect, but it could be considered the reverse. The Yorùbá system of aesthetics calls attention to issues of authority, representation, and interpretation. Audiences are accustomed to being asked to participate in the invocatory process by which a performance is invested with its authority. Osofisan raises the possibility of such participation and then closes it down. His final moment of representation on the stage is symbolic in the sense that Artaud repudiates. The past and the present are represented by actors unself-consciously representing characters. One might read this bleak move toward a foundational Western aesthetic of representation as a plaintive reminder that the power granted by an invocatory participation in the process of authorization—a democratic vote for a government or a prayer for an *orisha*—is itself only a representation of actual participation and does not guarantee *illuti* or *ohun*.

Conclusions

Boal's model of theatrical resistance requires the audience to break through what he sees as the passive nature instilled by Aristotelian theatre and participate actively in the performance. Brecht's mode of resistance lies in forcing his audience to consider a variety of issues by exposing them to the illusion of the play. Artaud's mode relies on a "visceral" reaction in the audience. Osofisan, in some regards, seems to offer a structurally opposed method. Boal inspires action by having the audience act; Brecht inspires thought by forcing the audience to think; Artaud inspires "life" by forcing the audience to feel. Were Osofisan's work to function the same way, he would be inspiring the audience to apathy through a demonstration of the hopeless fixity of the system. This point would be amplified even further by the fact that traditional Yorùbá aesthetics are not fixed.

Since this answer is obviously unacceptable, we are left with the idea that Osofisan does, in fact, uncover the illusions of traditional Yorùbá aesthetics. These are not the illusion of fixity provided by a neoplatonic ideal, but rather the illusion of choice and participation. These illusions rely on the idea that, while there is authority, this authority is perpetually reestablished from outside sources and a communal effort. Osofisan's work addresses the crisis of a military authority that authorizes itself in a direct, violent way while maintaining the rhetorical illusion of a participatory system. In other words, while Bertolt Brecht destroys the illusion of the fixity of stage representation by calling attention to theatrical devices in order to give the audience a space in which to participate in questioning, Femi Osofisan destroys the illusion of participation in stage representation by calling attention to theatrical devices in order to remind the audience of their potential non-participation.

Morountodun demonstrates the complexity of cross-cultural understandings of theatre. Eugenio Barba says that

Today the very word "comparison" seems inadequate to me, since it separates the two faces of the same reality. I can say that I "compare" . . . traditions only if I compare their epidermises, their diverse conventions, the many different performance styles. But if I consider that which lies beneath those luminous and seductive epidermises and discern the organs which keep them alive, the poles of the comparison blend into a single profile.

While Barba is referring to Eurasian theatre here, his general point has certainly influenced critical approaches to understanding the relationship between African and Western theatre. According to Barba, "they are analogous principles because they are born of similar physical conditions in different contexts. They are not however homologous, since they do not share a common history."²⁶ Barba at once

acknowledges the possibility of shared conditions but notes that, even in cases of commonality, different contexts generate meaningful distinctions between “analogous principles.”

While academics have been espousing similar theoretical positions for decades, the results of this stance have been slow to manifest in theatrical theory. I have argued that radically different theoretical modes create theatre whose formal aspects must be understood in radically different ways, but this argument has a corollary that is no less significant for its existence on the very edge of textual and performance analysis. Theatre, in all the forms that I can conceive it, is a “representation” of man’s lived experience. In representing this experience to an audience that is, at least momentarily, joined in an interpretive community, theatre cannot help but shape the way the community perceives this experience. In this genre, then, the assumptions of a particular interpretive community are remarkably difficult to expunge. To conceive of radically different theatres is to conceive of a radically different life. This life cannot be reduced to any of our modern or postmodern variations of the idea of the other, because these ideas are already incorporated into how we perceive ourselves. Beyond hybridity, borrowing, and contact zones, there is something at stake in the pursuit of different theatricalities. Charlemagne famously said, “To have another language is to possess a second soul.” To have access to a second conception of representation is an equally potent doubling and displacement of our fundamental concept of reality.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime*, ed. Tim Murray (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 41.

2. Antonin Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre*, ed. Claude Schumacher and Brian Singleton, (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 2001) 123.

3. In the interest of readability, I provide here a glossary of repeated Yorùbá terms as they are used throughout the paper.

àṣẹ - the authority of the art or authority generally

ohun - voice

iwà - inherent unchanging quality or character

oriki - praise song

4. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1976) 38.

5. Karin Barber, “Interpreting Oriki as History and as Literature,” *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts*, ed. Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias. (Birmingham: Birmingham U African Studies Series, 1989)18.

6. David T. Doris, “Symptoms and Strangeness in Yorùbá Anti-aesthetics,” *African Art*, 38.4 (2005) 25.

7. Andrew Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yoruba Society*. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 117.

8. Rowland Abiodun, “Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics: The Concept of Ase” *African Arts* 27.3 (1994) 72-4, 76.

9. Femi Osofisan, *The Oriki of a Grasshopper and Other Plays* (Washington, D.C: Howard U P, 1995) 119.

10. Abiodun, “Understanding Yoruba Art” 73.

11. Emmanuel Eze, “Truth and Ethics in African Thought,” *Quest Philosophical Discussions*:

An International African Journal of Philosophy 8.1 (1993): 9.

12. Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1981) 20.

13. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 29.

14. Harry Garuba, "The Poetics of Possibility: A Study of Femi Osofisan's *The Chattering and the Song and Morountodun*," *Portraits for an Eagle*, ed. Sola Adeyemi, (Bayreuth, Germany: Bayreuth African Studies, 2006) 219.

15. Olu Obafemi and Abdullah S, Abubakar have discussed the relationship between Brechtian metatheatre and what they term "Osofisan's theatre of the fantastic" in "Fabulous Theatre: A Re-Assessment of Osofisan's Revolutionary Dialectics," *Portraits for an Eagle*. The article traces a large number of thematic differences between the two playwrights and then puts these thematic differences into a theoretical matrix. This catalog of differences, however, is not based on a firm understanding of either Western or Yorùbá aesthetics, and thus, while the data may be complete, the analysis remains localized at the level of the two pieces of Osofisan's that they examine.

16. Derrida, "Closure" 42, 46, 59, 58.

17. Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 38.

18. Femi Osofisan, "The Alternative Tradition: A Survey of Nigerian Literature after the War," *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. A. Gerard (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1986) 788.

19. Glenn Odom, "'The End of Nigerian History': Wole Soyinka and Yorùbá Historiography," *Comparative Drama* 42.2 (2008).

20. While there are many direct examples of politicians asserting that they alone can see the clear future of Nigeria based on their unique life experiences and their connection to a glorious past, the same idea of fixed, rigid identities manifests in subtle ways as well. For instance, in *Footprints on the Sands of Time* (1962), a commencement address for the University of Nigeria (at Nsukka), Nnamdi Azikiwe spends the first two-thirds of his speech reciting a list of the figures for whom buildings at the University of Nigeria were named in order to establish the university as a place of international importance, but also as a place that is built one individual at a time. Azikiwe reduces each of these individuals to a single accomplishment or value: for example, "[t]he College of Finance has been named after Winfried Tete Anisah" who fought the "monopolies . . . whose tentacles extended to banking, commerce, insurance, mining and shipping" (17). This is not a transactional evocation of authority, but a description of a specific action or characteristic. Once Azikiwe finishes with his thirty-page list of namesakes, he makes no transition before discussing the students, saying that they "form the hard core of . . . the 'Spirit of Nsukka'" (31). The contrast between the listed accomplishments of individuals and the collectivity of the students is striking. The "Spirit of Nsukka" consists of "academic discipline and self-discipline or proper deportment" (31). Students are warned against joining the "Noise Brigade" and are encouraged not to agitate against the Peace Corps volunteers. Even this exhortation is couched in a personal narrative of Azikiwe's dealings with "Mr. G. Mennen Williams, Assistant Secretary of State to Nigeria" (35). The students are directly addressed for only a few pages, and told to behave themselves, before the subject turns again to the acts of great individuals. The individualism on which the university was founded has created an environment in which certain types of individual expression are discouraged. The audience is told precisely what their interpretation must be.

21. Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1973) 74.

22. Olusegun Obasanjo, *A March of Progress: Collected Speeches of His Excellency Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo* (Lagos, Nigeria: Federal Ministry of Information / Third Press International, ~1978) 1.

23. Alhadji Shagari, "Inaugural Address," www.dawodu.com.

24. Osofisan, *Morountodun* 192.

25. 193.

26. Eugenio Barba, "Eurasian Theatre" *The Intercultural Studies Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (New York: Routledge, 1996) 218, 220.