

Drum Aesthetics in Ayò Akínwálé's "Mountains of Wealth" and "Time for Change"

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Introduction

In a year 2008 movie production, "Arugba" from Tunde Kelani's Mainframe Productions, the following rendition will help us to situate and locate the usefulness of drum and its importance in dance:

Homage to all forerunners

Invocation to forerunners of our Art

All nimble feet

A compelling story of Sango's Love for the Bata Drum

Sate was Sango's Bata Drummer

Whenever they had performance

While Sango thrilled the audience with his footwork

Sate made the Drum roll

Sate had no equal as a Bata Drummer

Likewise Sango's shuffling steps had no match

The duo became world famous

Such that if Sate was not drumming

No function was complete

And if Sango was not dancing there was no party

But once anger-blinded reason and they parted ways

Was the day Sango's dance lost its rhythm

And Sate's drumming lost inspiration

Then the duo realised that drumming and dancing are inseparable

This is what life is all about

A world of symbiosis.

In the African theatre of today, the synergy of dramatic enactment, ending of African drums and rich display of creative cum energetic dances maintain a vital flow and artistic drive of a production. Apart from this, its communicative and entertaining qualities have ensured its constant usage in productions. Olusanyin (1997, p. 29) paints the picture clearer when he asserts that:

The dance to drum (and other percussion) is a potent and vitalizing element of African culture. Although diverse instrumentation, as well singing are commonly involved, drumming and dancing are almost synonymous projections – as ardent, driving rhythms, pungent complexities of form and constant articulate.

These diverse instrumentation as observed by Olusanyin characterise various festivals that each ethnic group and culture experience. Drums and other paraphernalia have, and still contribute immensely to the production of

festivals which had from time immemorial served as instruments of socialisation, community participation and togetherness. Despite the growing influence of other viable means of entertainment, the drum has not lost its value, especially within the arts, theatre and social events. Although some theatre directors have tenaciously held on to the "*dialogue*" dramatic form devoid of music and dance, the constant usage of the drums by most directors and the desired effect it has on the African theatre has further exemplified its usefulness in the theatre and other social gatherings.

Despite its usage within the theatre and other social gatherings/events, however, there are still points where it has been neglected or wrongly used. Apart from the secularisation of some traditional instruments/drums (Ojuade, 1997, 2002 and 2011), the position of the drummer declines in the same rate at which his art increases, hence his creativity is always subjected to the 'god personified director' who chooses what should be played and not be played. Also, the Yoruba traditional drums have been made to assume a role of "one for all" where it is utilised in productions within and outside the culture. This we view as a problem particularly when considering the aesthetic appeal of the drums for production of other cultures. Sadly enough, most of these drums are lacking in most theatre schools across the nation and consequently this affects their productions and equally the training of competent drummers within these universities.

Therefore, our study here is to examine drum aesthetics in Ayo Akinwale's productions. We intend to discover and identify various aspects of his two major productions, "Mountain of Wealth" and "Time for Change" where drums have been significantly and artistically used.

Literature Review

Aesthetics is a universal phenomenon. It is a continuous aspect of appreciating and recognising the wholeness or beauty of any work. From a scholarly perspective, Horpers (1969) reflects that:

An object is aesthetic only when it holds the audience or the readers attention. Consequently, aesthetic parts include the linguistics, stylistic and the dramatic stimuli that bring about a kind of instant response in the audience, during and after performance. Aesthetic includes the general metaphysics of the lives of a people (cited in Arinde, 2005, pp. 155-6).

From the above assertion, we take cognisance of three key words which seems to hold the essence and effectiveness of an aesthetic work. They are; "*linguistics*", "*stylistics*" and "*dramatic*" concepts. Thus, these three concepts are the varying qualities derived from the appreciation of beauty in any work of art. Beauty, therefore, becomes the harbinger of both qualitative and quantitative expressions of the viewer or listener. Kofoworola (2004, p. 3) quoting Gibran also reveals that:

never be found in the object perceived neither in the properties that make the whole but in the hearts of judgment and reactions.

In the parley of entertainment displays and overall aesthetics of a production, the drum rates amongst the top instruments. Its capacity to aesthetically ignite grace, precession and beauty into productions is lucid. In discussing drum aesthetics, we limit our scope to the Yoruba drums as it forms the core of Ayo Akinwale's practices in the theatre. However, other species of drums may be mentioned to corroborate subsequent discussions.

The Yoruba traditional drums are dynamic instruments created to reflect the music and language of the people, while entertaining a wide range of people in the process. Akpabot (1989, p. 91) submits that:

Among the Yoruba's only the Oma and apa trees are used for carving out drums. These trees are situated near the roadside and the instrument makers believe that the trees listen to human conversations and are therefore better able to reproduce human tones when used as drums.

The Yoruba drums are progenitors of the rich musical, cultural and traditional values strongly held and passed on from ancestors and generations long gone. The bata and dundun drums, for instance, have a long history of captivating and igniting a spirit of dance into people. Its ensemble and other percussive instruments produce exhilarating sounds that sends the atmosphere into frenzy, thereby heightening the quality of such performance. Idamoyibo (2002, p. 73) comments that:

In Africa, instruments play in ensemble, with one instrument playing a pattern to establish a time line, (this instrument is usually the bell) after which the other instruments play one after the other, depending on the rhythmic pattern assigned to them. In dundun ensemble for example, one instrument usually act as the leader, playing a variety of patterns, while the secondary instruments play patterns having varying degrees of repetitiveness.

This mother-children relationship produces variety of rhythms that reflects aesthetic appeal and fascinating sounds that one can't but reason that an ensemble bata/dundun drums produce a great performance.

Classifying Drum Aesthetics

Alienating aesthetics from the performances of the drums/drummers would mean not recognising the great impact and unlimited creative exploration of sounds and rhythms that comes from the performance. As a result of this, we identify three of the aspects of the performance where aesthetics are usually experienced. They are:

1. aesthetics of sound/speech;
2. aesthetics of rhythm, and
3. aesthetics of dexterity.

Aesthetics of Sound/Speech: The talking drum is widely known for its sonorous sounds and captivating speech technique. It is an instrument that is capable of variety of sounds and speech patterns that could leave its audience enthralled. The Yoruba talking drum, particularly the dundun has the capacity to reproduce human speeches indirectly, and the reason is not far fetched, it is the tonal quality of the Yoruba language where the drum itself originates from. Euba (1990, p. 191) informs that:

Talking with the musical instruments is one of the principal characteristics of Yoruba music and since drums are predominant among Yoruba musical instruments, the practice of talking with drums has been carried to a high degree of perfection.

To the Yoruba people and particularly people from other cultures, the exhilarating sound and speeches that emanate from the talking drum is aesthetically pleasing, at times, it is alluring that it sends an atmosphere in frenzy.

The Iyaalu (in another Yoruba clime, it is called Iyaalu) in particular holds a key role in exhibiting aesthetics. Its primary role as an interpreter and in taking the lead in all aspects of the entertainment gives it a unique ability to explore the varying degrees of sounds and speeches it is designed for. Euba (1990, p. 192) explains further:

The Iyaalu fulfils a dual role in dundun ensemble, for it not only functions as a musical instrument but also as a speech instrument. It could be argued that an instrument in which literary and musical functions are combined should be considered as being essentially musical. In other words that its speech function has been assimilated into its musical function.

In essence, the literary and musical function of the 'Iyaalu' further strengthens its aesthetic appeal in performance.

Aesthetics of Rhythm: Rhythm is an important aspect of music and consequently drums. It is an indispensable quality of variety in drums. Rhythm represents the life wire, and the engine of creativity in Yoruba drumming. Rhythm is to drums what style is to fashion, a sacrosanct aspect of its quality. Jones (1959, p. 26) opines that "rhythm is to the African what harmony is to the Europeans, and it is in the complex interweaving of contrasting rhythmic patterns that he finds his greatest aesthetic satisfaction." The variety of rhythms that could be played from an ensemble of the Yoruba drums brings about aesthetics, and thus invariably contributes to the polyrhythmic structure of the African musical instruments.

The dundun and bata ensemble, for example, possess varying degrees of rhythmic sounds. The way in which each drum is produced, and the specialty of each one enable different rhythms which makes the whole production artistically and aesthetically pleasing. From a practical outlook,

instruments are organised in such a way that when the ensemble includes one only of each type of instrument, no two instruments play the same rhythm".

This emphasises the multiplicity and variants of rhythms available in the Yoruba drums. As an addendum, it is not surprising that the many rhythmic variant available from these drums from time, characterise the difference and uniqueness in the rhythms played for the worship of the different gods in Yorubaland.

Aesthetics of Dexterity: This is one area in the art of drumming solely depends on the drummer's artistic intellect, creativity and maneuvering techniques. However, the training of the dancer takes a considerable aspect of such abilities. The physiognomy of the Yoruba drums, particularly the dundun drum gives the drummer ample opportunity to explore. However, the application of skill and understanding of the technique required to bring out the best in the instrument depends on each drummer's yielded time to rehearsals and practice. The drummer is equipped with the wherewithal to be able to praise, entertain, eulogise, abuse and to invoke amongst others. Though most drummers have a knowledge of this, it is skill and dexterity that ranks these drummers in order of preference, and that is why some drummers are constantly consulted for variety of social or sacred outings while others struggle to make ends meet. Dexterity plays a major role in the aesthetic appeal and acceptance of a drummer and his art. In other words, in talking, praising, eulogising and all other things he could do with the drums, his skills and dexterity is key. To support our claims above, Euba (1990, p. 299) educates more that:

A knowledge of vocabulary alone does not however enrich the musical style of an Iyaalu drummer. He must also know how to use words and how to select them for their musical value. The principle of selectivity is a key element in the musical realisation of Yoruba texts. Since the raw material that the drummer uses is fixed, at least in terms of individual words, the drummers control over this material lies not so much in the liberty to create a new vocabulary as in the selection of existing words to form textual units in such a way that these units make sense linguistically and musically.

With dexterity, skill and a technical know how of the instrument, the drummer masters the art and invariably produces exhilarating and aesthetic rhythm and sounds anytime he performs.

Drum Aesthetics in "Mountains of Wealth" and "Time for Change"

The productions under review were performed in the new millennium and are channelled towards total theatre aesthetics which has been the fulcrum of Ayo Akinwale's productions overtime. Also, it is worthy of note that our playwright and director under review pitches his tent within the festival

displays and other forms of theatrical aesthetic enactments. From our reckoning however, Akinwale's theatre intensifies the dramatic moments with the involvement of dance, music, acrobatics, and drums display. He ensures the continuity of actions, expressions, lines and delivery by exploiting the various dimensions of creativity embedded in the arts of the theatre. In performances, the audiences are kept busy throughout and they are equally punished as they miss the actions when they distract themselves from the dramatic flow of the play. Due to the possible recurrence of the variants in all his productions, we shall discuss all the variants from the purview of the two chosen productions.

Variant 1

Drum Poetry Aesthetics: From Sotunsa's (2005, p. 299) perspective, drum poetry as "an indispensable part of Yoruba traditional music, is woven into the fabric of the music. Drum poetry thus forges a stylistic/literary relationship between the music and the action". Drum poetry is an apparent medium of expression in Akinwale's productions. His constant experimentation with the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba, the festival theatre aesthetics and the Yoruba ancestral gods and deities, strengthens his productions. In "Mountains of Wealth" for instance, Akinwale significantly employed the drum poetry aesthetics for a variety of actions, in some instances, he allows the drum chorus the songs first for effectiveness and added artistic impetus before the orchestra sings. In some scenes during the performance, some aspects of the performance experienced the use of drum poetry. For instance, during the chaos between the Scientist under Professor Fabiyi and the Warriors of Aboke, the Chief Priest, the drummers were made to play some poetic songs that empower and strengthen the position of the traditional people led by Aboke, the Chief Priest. The drums played:

Ile wan na nu ni (2ce)

Ile abere wo

Bi ile ekute

Ile wan na nu ni.

This literarily means

Is this not their house (2ce)

A house as lowly like that of a rat

Is this not their house.

The effect of the mockery intended in this aspect of the confrontation between this two camps was achieved because of the dual expression of the drums poetry and then through the fast tempo rendition of the songs by the

warriors and the orchestra at large. This drum poetry technique is further emphasised when Euba (1990, p. 150) expresses that:

Although the Iyaalu is commonly regarded as a talking drum, it is able, like the human voice to produce pitches of clearer definition than those required for ordinary Yoruba speech and can easily CROSS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN SPEECH AND SONG. The singing technique of Iyaalu drumming is based on two principles: (i) the use of the upper register of the drum, and (ii) the use of a vibrating arm on the tensioning strings (emphasis mine).

Akinwale's deep knowledge of idioms, proverbs and eulogies in the traditional Yoruba culture influences this drum poetry aesthetics as he usually instructs his array of drummers on the specific rendition or poetry to be played. This is a constant feature in his production.

Variant 2

Continuous Drum Display Aesthetics: This is one of the styles constantly employed by Ayo Akinwale in his directing process. This variant ensures that the drum starts the production, and does not stop until the play has ended. This not only keeps the drummers busy and alive, it also contributes to the rhythm and tempo of the play, more so, it is one of the constituents of his newly derived theory; the "straight take" theory. Akinwale (2010, p. 36) reveals that;

Another theory propounded by me (Akinwale 2009) and which we have found very useful and useable is the straight take theory. Here, because of the impatience of our theatre audience in Nigeria, the play opens and from beginning to the end, there is no light out. This is the straight take theory.

It is believed that dance, music and in this case drums are the artistic ingredients that sustain the attention of the audience in his productions. He, therefore, uses this artistic fusion to constantly establish a non-stop performance.

The beginning of his productions always includes the drums and this varies from blasts to syncopative drumming etc. However, some of the activities of the drummers include cueing the important actions in the play, commenting on some issues where necessary and what we refer to as the "*rising and falling*" drumming technique. By this we mean that while the drums play from the beginning to the end, it goes through the process of "*rising*" when actions takes over from line rendition and "*falling*" when lines are being rendered. With this, the constancy of the drum helps the pace of the actors' lines, movements and actions within the genre of the play.

In the production of "Mountains of Wealth" for instance, this variant helped induce colour and vibrancy into every scene. Apart from interpreting some deep meaningful line rendition, it ensured the desired pacing in tempo which the director had initially and tirelessly worked on. The same goes for the production of "Time for Change" where this variant was one of the means

production.

Variant 3

Tripartite Drum Aesthetics: By this, we mean a combination of three species of drums i.e. the badagry ensemble, the bata ensemble and the Iyaalu to provide a huge amount of alternating rhythms at different instances. It is a usual practice for Ayo Akinwale to engage the services of professional drummers to give artistic impetus to the efforts of amateur student drummers, thus strengthening the bond between the town and the gown.

Thus, the experience of the professional dundun and bata drummers cushion the overall aesthetics of the production which may have been ordinary with just the badagry ensemble at work. In "Mountains of Wealth", not less than twelve pieces of drums were used. These were eight pieces of Badagry drums, three pieces of bata drums (omele Ako, omele Abo and Iyaalu) and a dundun drum to cap it up. Each one of this tripartite has specific functions, while the badagry ensemble provides the background rhythm and occasional cues, the dundun drum is saddled with the responsibility of rendering poetic statements where necessary and the bata drums for syncopative drumming and supporting the attacks of cogent aspects of entertainment. In "Time for Change" for instance, the bata ensemble introduced the production with a high tempo rhythm which later ushered in Sango. Subsequently, the bata drummers gave Sango his signature tune which enabled him jerk and interpret the speech from the drums.

The tripartite drum aesthetics, therefore, ensures the fusion of background rhythm, cues, syncopative and interpretative drumming, poetry and rendition in the overall aesthetics of Ayo Akinwale productions. Interestingly, the inclusion of the professional drummers from our experience and observation stems from his rich vein of artistry which he believes drums can confidently induce. It is, therefore, common in his rehearsals to hear the statement "you are all amateurs" especially when he is not getting the desired output intended when the amateurs alone are at work.

Variant 4

Sound Accompanying Aesthetics: To alienate sound from a dramatic production is to render it less expressive in terms of actions that need specific sound interpretation. However, Ayo Akinwale, has constantly derived a personal means of relaying some sound effects through drums aesthetics. This he does by ensuring a sharp display of drums especially in instances where collapse, pandemonium, chaos and struggle occur. In "Mountains of Wealth" and "Time for Change", this was evident. Both productions had scenes of pandemonium and struggles, and Akinwale's artistic response to this from

interpretative angle is a merger of electronic sounds effect and a blast from the drums to heighten the spirit and tension of these scenes.

Hence, the audience is made to feel the immediate impact of such occurrences as though they are instantly happening. At some instances, particularly in the production of "Time for Change", the major source of sound effect was the drums and this was employed to ensure interpretation of the scenes where pandemonium occurred. The sound effect aesthetics, therefore, provides a viable alternative to sound effect and equally a merger of electronic and live sounds where necessary.

Variant 5

Cross-Continental Fraternisation Aesthetics: In the global world today fraternisation is a common phenomenon, particularly in the arts. However, in play production process, such feat remains an unexplored area. This Akinwale attempted in one of his recent productions "Time for Change". By cross continental fraternisation, we refer to the equal or almost equal use of both traditional Yoruba drums and the Western brigade drums. Although, this is necessitated by the storyline of the play, Akinwale's apt recognition of the brigade drums alongside the traditional becomes an experiment within African drama productions especially when both are made to play, cohesively complementing each other.

In "Time for Change", the traditional drums and Western drums had their specific aspects of display and at the end, they played together. In the first scene, Sango was ushered in with his typical bata rhythm, then in the next scene where academic possession occurred, the Western drums and trumpets played. However, the end was a colourful, musical dance scene where songs and dances with dramatic actions heightened the building of the tower and the collaboration between the people, educationists and the soldiers. During this scene, Akinwale intentionally and artistically coordinated the fusion of the traditional and Western drums such that it was aesthetically pleasing, as it gave the scene a lively end.

Though some musicians or drummers may argue that no music should combine bata/dundun, badagry drums and European brigade drums, this writer concedes that the effects derived from this experimentation (as Akinwale has practiced) is personal and opened to criticism. Meanwhile, these criticisms should be a product of further research into the possible cohesion and utilisation of variety of cross continental instruments in the artistic world.

'Drumstainment' as Critical Intervention in Drum Aesthetics

The variants discussed above are artistic nutrients that adds creative impetus to Akinwale's productions, it is therefore worthy of note that Akinwale integrates his drummers not just as part-time drummers who play

when necessary and keep quiet when they are not needed, but as cogent performers whose importance to the production is equal to each actor and actress. Thus, owing to our discourse above, and the eclectic/artistic nature of Akinwale's productions, particularly considering drums aesthetics, we derive a coinage "*Drumstainment*". This means a utilisation of the drums in a holistic manner, paying attention to the dramatic, sequential and overall message of the production. As a result, we draw out some features of our coinage "*Drumstainment*" which may be a useful material for directors when considering the drums aspect of their respective productions. They are:

1. precision and accuracy in drumming (especially when uniformity is emphasised;
2. the application of a musical background by applying the "rising and falling" technique;
3. the sustenance of pace particularly through the constancy of the gong or any instrument that gives the metronome;
4. the expression of important actions by using the tonal cues, sharp cues or proverbial statements from the drums at such instances;
5. the enhancement of the productivity of the dancers through an already induced rhythm;
6. the fill in of gap when the stage is being set for other scenes or when words are briefly suspended for actions to take place;
7. the reality of the drummers fulfilling their role as performers (by singing along and being an active part of the production);
8. the subjection of the drummers to artistic disciplines rather than a creative impulse that may not be accounted for in the sequence and at the end of the production;
9. the building of the drummers as performers on stage, either by creating a few lines for them or by showcasing them on stage during festival scenes or celebration scenes (A.A.Adeoye has used this style several times in his neo-alienation style), and
10. the riding of the performance to a dance-dramatic climax in a manner capable of captivating the audience, while retaining the message of the play.

The above features are some of the canons which Akinwale uses to channel a total theatre performance of immense aesthetic appeal. Thus, through a well planned rehearsal, and an application of some of the features above, play directors will begin to experience a new dimension of aesthetically pleasing productions.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Despite the various submissions above as regards drums aesthetics, there are a number of areas to be considered and improved on to ensure a more compact use of the drums in theatrical productions.

First, directors should always see the drums and consequently the entertaining part of their productions as important to the overall success of such production, except when it is tragic. Also, while the merging of the professional and amateur drummers is of great value, adequate attention should be given to the training of young and aspiring drummers within the university so as to build the skills and technical know how of drums in them. Equally, instruments of practice should be available to strengthen such training. Ayo Akinwale should also learn from this.

For the purpose of adequate representation, directors should painstakingly make available instruments that are specifically for the culture in which their play is premised, rather than adopt other drums to fit into such cultures. This would enhance originality in respect of the culture. Ayo Akinwale is a good example here.

Conclusion

The involvement of drums in the artistic realisation of a production is very crucial. Although a play can communicate without it, the African theatre practice of a holistic dimension through the total theatre aesthetics will remain defeated without the roll of drums.

Although some of the African directors have focused solely on dialogue productions, Akinwale (as we have discussed in this essay) is an example of few directors who continually experiment with different types of drums available. It is believed that as the African theatre enjoys a rapidly growing reputation in and outside the continent, African and Western directors will find it necessary and fulfilling to rely on the various entertaining and artistic qualities of the drums in enhancing the general appeal of their various productions.

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