

The Irruption of Trance in Contemporary Yoruba Theatre: Theatre, Witchcraft, and Social Fragmentation in Lagos, Nigeria

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The golden age of Yoruba folk opera, Yoruba travelling theatre, and Yoruba theatre is over and the brightly coloured trucks carrying the companies that cruised the Nigerian Federation up to the middle of the 1980s have certainly long since been dismantled. Although many actors, musicians, and directors have indeed moved from theatre to the flourishing home-video industry, a community of actors continues to present live performances that can be categorized as “neotraditional.” This genre of Yoruba theatre is undergoing a crisis in the context of an unrelenting economic recession in Nigeria that began in the early 1980s. This situation has released tensions that lead to a real and sadly all-too-justifiable sense of insecurity and to proliferating accounts of witchcraft attacks. The outcome has been a rise in violence, manifested in the unleashing of the powers of witchcraft and enflaming relations between small rival groups hitherto unified under the sway of a salaried and—at least until the beginning of the 1980s—optimistic middle class. Yoruba neotraditional theatre that represents deities on stage that belong to “an invisible world” is playing with fire and, by conjuring up the powers of witchcraft, has in turn itself been bewitched.

Key Words: theatre, witchcraft, social conflict, Yoruba, Nigeria

I wouldn't wish for a total secularization of the theatre. I have had occasion to be very moved by certain religious plays I have seen. Nobody would deny the extraordinary impact of mystery plays [...] Let us take a concrete example. When I staged 'Death and the King's horseman,' it was an experiment, or rather an exercise, in the profane. You have no idea how many times my actresses, and even certain of the actors, were possessed during the scene where the King's horseman is transformed. On several successive evenings they had to be helped off the stage. Part of the audience virtually fell into a trance ... but where can we draw the line between the profane and the spiritual or metaphysical?—Wole Soyinka¹

The golden age of Yoruba folk opera, Yoruba travelling theatre, and Yoruba theatre is over. Gone are the days, lasting a quarter of a century,

when the legendary companies of Yoruba players made headline news. Yet it was not so very long ago (between 1960 and 1985) that the performances put on by the Yoruba folk opera played to full houses in the southwestern cities of the Federation of Nigeria. Theatre-going became a feature of daily life and Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Oshogbo each had several venues for performances. The ambulant form of Yoruba travelling theatre also attained a substantial audience in rural areas. In the favourable economic climate stimulated by the Oil Boom,² a whole theatrical industry flourished, along with its professional organisation, fixed tour circuits, audience networks, and financial mechanisms. The success of the genre extended beyond the Yoruba states.³ Abiodun Jeyifo (1984) estimates that there were several dozen itinerant theatre companies travelling the roads of the country. Certain productions—for example, “Oba Koso” (written and directed by Duro Ladipo (1931–1978))—toured in 1972 and reached an international audience. Apart from Duro Ladipo and his circle, the best-known companies were those run by Hubert Ogunde (1916–1990), Kola Ogunmola (1925–1973), and Oyin Adejobi (1926–2000), to name but a few.

The heyday of Yoruba folk opera has been widely documented in recent years and several contributions deal with the period extending from the 1940s to the 1980s. Karin Barber’s outstanding book, *The Generation of Plays* (2000), examines Yoruba popular theatre as one of the most spectacularly successful theatres in Africa. Nevertheless, she passes over the present-day activities of a surviving theatre community next to the flourishing Nigerian home-video industry. Authors such as Barber (2000), Ogunbiyi (1981), and Ricard (in Barber et al. 1997) examine crucial issues related to the rise of theatre in Nigeria, more specifically its southwestern region. My concern in this essay is to focus on the present-day situation of theatre in Yoruba areas of Nigeria characterised by worsening economic conditions one or two generations after the pioneering era of the Ogundes. Thus, in contrast, the theatre scene of today at the beginning of the twenty-first century appears singularly limited. If the theatre as a sociocultural practice reached a large and popular base during the Oil Boom era, it has contracted in recent years into a small social grouping of theatre people who have lost their pan-social and truly popular basis (Fabian 1997) and who are now linked to an endangered middle class⁴ (e.g., preachers, army officers, policemen, teachers, doctors, lawyers, various civil servants, etc.). In spite of these social and economic changes, the genre of Yoruba theatre has not totally vanished. Although a number of actors, musicians and directors have indeed moved to the flourishing home-video industry⁵ (Barber 2000; Haynes and Okome 2000), a community

of actors still persist to present live performances that can be qualified as neotraditional. They are making a brave stand in the universities, regional cultural centres, and foreign cultural institutes. This “hard core” is managing to survive under increasingly precarious circumstances, which obviously affects both the quality of the productions and the morale of those who stage them.

Given these circumstances, in this article I will describe the current crisis of urban theatre in Yoruba-speaking regions of Nigeria as being the result of a broader socio-economic process that transforms the nature of a theatrical performance. In my approach, although a theatre play is the *locus* of social–political conflicts, it is not a political tool per se. Rather, the moment and the social situation in which a performance takes place construct the artistic event, making for a fragile situation. The ethnographic information presented herein is based on several periods of fieldwork that took place in Nigeria between 1995 and 2001.

Modern Yoruba theatre today

Performing arts in Nigeria, especially in Yoruba areas, were and still are known for their variety. The repertoire range of the companies is extremely broad—from William Shakespeare to Wole Soyinka and from Sophocles to Wale Ogunyemi. Within this diversity one genre draws our attention, as it exemplifies the continuity of Yoruba popular theatre. This genre, commonly labelled as “Yoruba theatre” or “Yoruba traditional theatre” by its audience and its practitioners, can be more accurately thought of as a neotraditional form, as it results from a reinterpretation of Yoruba opera and takes its inspiration from several sources (Götrick 1984). These sources include a body of work on Yoruba performance that has been produced by scholars and artists in recent years, claiming that it is instead a modern art form that is imbedded in a precolonial local performance tradition (Adedeji 1970, 1981). Most of these performances present stories from Yoruba mythology, portrayed in an epic style glorifying the deeds and actions of *òrìshà* gods.

Most of these “new” plays are unpublished. The manuscript is generally typed by a typist on a university campus and then photocopied and distributed within small circles. The texts are foundations, which are built upon and adapted during the rehearsals. The plays are written as working tools for performances and not as literary works—they cannot be considered “finished” products as such, but as works in progress.

The number of these new kinds of literary productions is difficult to evaluate. The present director of the National Theatre, Femi Osofisan,

affirmed that he received more than one hundred of these typed scripts in one year (personal communication with the author, 2002). Nor is it easy to establish an accurate roster of the authors of these works, but we could list a few recurrent names: Makinde Adeniran (“Abiku”), Felix Emoruwa, Don Pedro Obaseki (“The Bridge”), Abdul Azeez Oduntan (“Odu-Ifa”), Sesan Ogunledun (“Made in Heaven”), Charles Ogu (“Ordinary Resurrection”), Jide Ogungbade, Felix Okolo, and Tejumola Olaniyan (“Beggars’ Strike”). However, the total number of plays staged between 1985 and today does not exceed the annual production figure of the mid-1960s. It is true that Nigerian society has experienced unprecedented upheavals after 1980 and that the theatre world has certainly suffered from the country’s economic decline and authoritarian government.

The genre of neotraditional theatre deals with several themes, such as the tensions between rural and urban classes and between underprivileged people and an extremely rich minority; instability due to political corruption; and religious conflicts between Traditionalists, Muslims, and neo-Pentecostals over the use of various traditional ceremonies such as divination, *òrìshàs* cults, or *egungun* masquerades as a theatrical model and a dramaturgical reference. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that most of these plays reveal a special interest in the representation of witchcraft expressing social tensions on a metaphorical level. The term “witchcraft” involves various practices linked to numerous religious influences that cannot be reduced to one single cultural model. However, these practices share a common principle: through the action of a specialist (a diviner), a curse is placed by a person on a rival in order to weaken them. This phenomenon demonstrates the competition between members of opposing social groups. Produced by young practitioners and addressing a young, educated, urban, middle-class audience, most of these plays are named after a Yoruba deity (*òrìshàs*), a passage of the Yoruba divination corpus (*odu*), or an episode described in it.

The aesthetics of witchcraft

In the plays of the above-mentioned neotraditional genre, the performance convention is based on a distanciation that discourages a close identification between the spectator and the actor to the role. As such, Yoruba neotraditional theatre appears clearly as a political performance where the characters of the *òrìshàs* allow the spectator to analyse current political situations at a distance. This genre obviously refers to a modern theatrical model and not to a ritual. This is so despite the “ambiguity” of the dramaturgic material used, since this genre actually

represents a ritual on stage. Even though these theatrical elements are set within a modern framework, the actual analytical process being undertaken is far from self-evident since they issue from a universe considered by its present urban audience to be “traditional” and “pagan” (author interview with B. T., 1997).⁶ Indeed, the mythological stories presented on stage deal with what the mainly neo-Pentecostal audience calls “evil spirits” or “fallen angels” (i.e., *òrìshàs*) (author interview with A. M., 1997). The musical passages are taken from ceremonial rites and the costumes and masks worn by the actors are inspired by those used in ritual processions to honour ancestors (*egun-gun*) or in forms of *òrìshà* worship.

Witchcraft is primarily a metaphor that allows people to describe a peculiar urban atmosphere where hazard is part of daily life. During my field interviews, my interlocutors stated that the “spiritual danger” has mainly two sources: 1) the family members that remain in the village who are suspected of jealousy and 2) people that have accumulated enormous wealth in a very short period, who are suspected of having established a pact with “the forces” of the other-world.

The crisis in Yoruba neotraditional theatre seems to be related to the producers’ inability to remain in command of the frames of a theatrical performance (Goffman 1974). Incidences of producers’ loss of artistic control are evidenced in several ways. Often, conflict originates among the musicians or chorus, whose function has in recent times been upgraded from a minor function to a more central one.⁷ The directors claim that these persons no longer obey them and “take the liberty” of continuing to play or sing a musical piece well beyond the time allotted during rehearsals. Such problems are obviously detrimental to the work’s dramatic organization, which is drawn out to the point where the plot becomes completely lost. Theatre critics, whose articles abound in the columns of Lagos’ press, have inveighed fruitlessly against actors’ “lack of concentration,” slack direction, or the musicians’ inability to keep in time. There can be no doubt in the minds of theatre *aficionados* that they are witnessing the decline and fall of an art form.

So, could it be that the dramatic material used by the present-day theatre practitioners has become an object of rivalry among the various new social groupings that have grown with the Oil Boom in a way that they each think they can claim traditional theatre? It seems that access to traditional culture has been distributed in such a manner among the social groups that compose Yoruba society that competition among the potential heirs of this culture has increased. The decline of Yoruba theatre has to be described as the result of a massive socio-economic process that affects the social grouping of the producers and,

at the same time, the entire structure of Yoruba society. My exploratory hypothesis is the following: the crises that affect a theatre genre that manipulates Yoruba traditional elements can be explained by the nature of the “dramatic material” used by the practitioners. To perform Yoruba tradition has somehow become too risky. As one director and playwright puts it, “the use of the very same traditional features that have been used in Yoruba folk opera or Yoruba travelling theatre in its heyday has now become dangerous” (author interview with A. M., 2001). The social group producing the genre⁸ has turned in upon itself for a number of reasons, central to which certainly is the country’s economic collapse. This influence is not, however, of a purely material nature. That is to say, the present economic situation has consequences that are not only quantitative, but which also have profound effects on the functioning of institutions. Viewed from this angle, Yoruba neotraditional theatre is suffering from an internal crisis, manifested in an increase in that very instability that is the essence of the genre. Instability is one of the emotional forces the audience claims to experience. The aesthetic quality of witchcraft in fact lies at the heart of the tragic emotion and the dramatic experience of neotraditional Yoruba theatre. Given that the divine beings represented on stage are associated with forces at work in the realm of witchcraft, a certain number of “precautions” have to be taken by an actor daring to play the role of a divine character (in this case, an *òrìshà*). The public is well aware of the danger. The situation is similar to that of the circus audience whose enjoyment of trapeze acts is heightened by the risk of falling. The performer’s skill or brilliance lies in controlling the perilous nature of the performance material used and attributing the “fall” to an inability to “master” those forces. Imagine a circus act where the catching of the trapeze artist is systematically bungled. Well, that is just what is happening in Yoruba neotraditional theatre! The risk is, theoretically, a calculated one insofar as the actors are supposed to know what “precautions” they have taken. These “safety” measures allow the actors to believe that they are not at that particular moment the target of an evil spell (*s’epe*) or curse (*Ogede*, *juju*, or *ofo*) cast by an enemy (*otà*). One must suppose that the effectiveness of these protective measures is less than perfect and thus that those producing Yoruba neotraditional theatre have reason to be afraid, since in fact—as we are reminded by the Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka whom I quote at the beginning of this article—witchcraft attacks occur frequently within the precincts of the theatre.

Fear and *uncertainty* are integral elements of neotraditional Yoruba theatre. It may seem paradoxical that this social grouping, composed

on the one hand of fervent and militant members of neo-Pentecostal or independent African churches (like the Aladura church⁹), should on the other hand be working to bring to the stage extracts from a corpus of mythology originating in practices considered to be “pagan” and “satanic” and therefore dangerous. The fact that a born-again Christian¹⁰ actor should play the role of a member of the *òrìshà* cult, Shango (a god associated with thunderbolts), is in no way thought to be blasphemous by the members of his prayer group (i.e., his Church.) It is, however, in the context of this emotional experience and within this affective field, gripped by a sense of its own vulnerability—implied by its pathological fear of criminal aggression and witchcraft attacks—that the problem of the contemporary theatre-making class in the cities of Lagos and Ibadan is unfolding.

Witchcraft as narrative

The proliferation of witchcraft accounts can be seen as a reinforcement of a political rhetoric making use of language that combines magic and religion. Recent studies have begun to examine the increase of such phenomena in the political sphere (Bernault and Tonda 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Masquelier 1993).

Forms of witchcraft and magic are depicted as forms of empowerment that not only have emerged out of relations of inequality in colonial times, but also have been mobilized in sustaining the elusive spirit-power of postindependence states (Taussig 1997). In other works, witchcraft appears as a cultural idiom intrinsically tied to colonial systems of inequality that has the potential to destabilize the political and economic orders of decolonized nations at the local and regional levels (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). Peter Geschiere (1997) has noted that, on the African continent, for instance, economic and political powers under modernity are inherently connected to local witchcraft practices: “Witchcraft continues to be a key element in discourses of power, despite modern processes of change (or perhaps because of them), thereby creating new forms of domination and resistance” (Geschiere 1997: 7–8).

Witchcraft accusations are part of the self-destruction of interpersonal relations, as they express, as they always have, illicit power, power misplaced or even misused. For instance, in Kajsa Ekholm Friedman’s (1991) book, the first recorded epidemics of witchcraft occurred in the Leopold period, when the political structure was collapsing. It is in this period that witchcraft becomes individualized and widespread, which associates it with colonialism but as an articulation within native ontology. Also, Adeline Masquelier (1993) shows that

witchcraft has become a local form of resistance to non-indigenous forms of trade relations in a community and Mark Auslander (1993) argues that witchcraft accusations reflect the lack of equitable forms of integration of members of a community into a market economy, as evidenced by cases of lower social class groups attacking middle-class groups such as theatre people. As Peter Geschiere (1997) shows, witchcraft is very much a part of a “modernizing” Africa. *The Modernity of Witchcraft* explores the ways in which the belief in witchcraft has transformed itself as a tool to respond to political and social changes. This transformation is part and parcel as he admits of the very logic of witchcraft. It also transformed itself when it emerged in its late nineteenth century as an individualized form. But the logic seems to be the same; only the personnel have changed. Interestingly, the concept of witchcraft has several different meanings. Witchcraft is often seen as a mode of political resistance, exemplified by the state bureaucrats Geschiere talked to, who believed that local villages used witchcraft to subvert state projects. It is also viewed by Cameroonians from all social groupings as a mode of gaining power. Politicians will call into service a *nganga* (healer) who will protect them, making them politically stronger. The presence of these “witches” creates a sense of disempowerment on the part of the people who feel that the intervention of such experts and their powers removes their power. In addition to examining witchcraft’s relationship with power, Geschiere also looks at regional differences in conceptions of sorcery and the close link between witchcraft and kinship in an expanding modern world.

Although a quantitative increase of witchcraft attacks cannot be statistically documented, the burgeoning accounts of witchcraft attacks seem to accurately reflect the actual increase in this phenomenon.

Coup de théâtre

Theatre is no exception where this obsession is concerned. Not only is it the setting for a pictorial and metaphorical evocation of witchcraft, it is the actual scene of witchcraft. There is an ever-growing number of cases whereby the actors playing the parts of gods (*òrìshà*) fall into what they recognize as an “unexpected trance” (author interview with B. T., 1997), interrupting the performance and ultimately bringing it to a complete halt, much to the fury of the audience who wants its money back. Such an event—as we should see—is viewed as a “punitive possession” inflicted by witchcraft. The intervention of a specialist is required to identify the source of the attack, to propose remedies, and, if necessary, to suggest forms of retaliation; this “specialist” may be a soothsayer (*babalawo*), a Christian preacher, or anyone considered to

be a “strong” person, that is, “one who holds a sufficient amount of *ashe*” (author interview with A. M., 1996). The choice of one or another is left to the victim and/or his immediate circle. The incidence of these “punitive trances,” involving one or more people uninitiated into the *òrìshà* cult, obviously poses certain problems. The accidents are deemed to be the result of a curse (*epe*). According to a large number of actors in Lagos theatre that I interviewed, the virulence of the attacks is increasing rapidly within Yoruba theatre (i.e., its neotraditional form produced by the youngest generation). A description of such cases and of how they operate within the precincts of a theatre—in this instance, mainly the National Theatre of Lagos (Nigeria), the Cultural Centre in Ibadan, the French Cultural Centre, or the Goethe Institut in Lagos—will serve to shed fresh light on the social significance of witchcraft as a discourse, but also as a genuine social practice.

A description of one such case should be useful at this point. The event occurred during the performance of a work entitled “Odu-Ifa.” As the title indicates, the source of inspiration of A. M.’s play resides in an *Odu* of Ifa corpus.¹¹ It narrates, in an epic and allegorical fashion, the history of the Yoruba pantheon’s deities, the *òrìshàs*. The framework of the play is built on the basis of a verse or *odu* of this Ifa corpus selected by the play director or playwright, in which the *odu* exposes a situation involving some *òrìshàs* by inviting common mortals to learn from it. Hence, the narrator offers a series of mythological scenes revolving around this text nucleus whose spirit is melodiously preserved by the dancing choir accompanied by musicians.

Among the most famous of these *òrìshàs* are Shango the god of thunder; Oduduwa, the god creator; Eshu, the trickster-messenger; Orunmila, the custodian of Ifa oracle; Ogun, the god of iron; etc. Each of these deities is symbolised by an object illustrating his function and temperament (thunder, staff of messenger, etc.) and each is attributed a specific colour. They represent deified founding ancestors and they incarnate stereotyped characters easily recognisable with the exaggeration of one their traits.

Òrìshàs usually manifest themselves in the world of the living by “straddling” one or more of their disciples during a trance session. The fact that the trance can also take place on stage does not, however, constitute any specific trait at all. Indeed, dance-drama clearly claims to be a practice free of any religious function.

“Odu-Ifa” narrates the story of a woman who had been pregnant for seven years and who is unable to deliver simply because a spell by a “witch” (*àjé*) is impeding her. This metaphor of the “tedious birth of democracy” (author interview with A. M., 1996) invites the gods of the

Yoruba pantheon to the stage in order to look into the fate of people and to contribute in untying the Gordian knot in which, according to the play's director, members of the political class are entangled.

The fable is introduced by a narrator after a long musical prelude whose chorus, accompanied by instrumentation, provides the colour and tone right from the beginning. This is followed by the scene of the pregnant woman imploring Òrìshànlá, the deity draped in a magnificent white gown, known for his temperance and wisdom. However, the threat of the spell inflicted on men also is an affront to the gods. A joust therefore ensues between the witch and Òrìshànlá, the outcome of which will determine the possibility of childbirth and its circumstances. Will the child be born if the mother offers herself up as a sacrifice at the altar of the protecting deity of the witch's place of origin? This idea upsets Shango, the fiery conjurer of thunder and custodian of justice. Ogun, the god of iron, is perplexed and does not know with whom to side. Eshu himself, the messenger of the gods who in reality does as he pleases by enjoying himself as much in stirring up ill feelings as in calling people to order, no longer knows what to do.

This is followed by a series of scenes interspersed with songs accompanied by musical instruments illustrating the feats and traits of the opposing deities. The relationships among these archetypal characters are defined by their attitude vis-à-vis the witch (*àjé*) and the main character incarnated by the pregnant woman.

The deity Orunmila, custodian of Ifa oracle, is consulted in a traditional session wherein the theatre stage itself serves as divination stage. A sign that refers to one of the sixteen main verses or *odu* of the Ifa corpus appears on the ground, at the far end, as a concluding proposition. This verse, called *èjì-ogbè*, is regarded as the first and most powerful passage of this collection of sacred texts. This *odu* demands patience, peace, and discernment, but most especially the acknowledgment of the ineluctable:

Orunmila says that we should measure the length and measure the breadth. The hand reaches much higher than the head; young palm fronds reach much higher than old palm fronds. No forest is so dense that the iroko tree cannot be seen; no music is so loud that the gong cannot be heard (Bascom 1969: 141; also quoted by Makinde Adeniran, the director of the play (author interview, 1999)).

The child must therefore be born and the witch must withdraw the spell put on the woman thanks to the intervention of Orunmila, the custodian of the oracle consulted by men in search of the future.

Music is omnipresent in this play. The presence of the chorus, the rhythm of instrumentation, and the interventions of the narrator-storyteller situate this show between tale and musical rendition within the right lineage of traditional shows. The costumes and scenery are based on a symbolism of colours and an arrangement of the stage setting that conforms to the original form of the divination stage. Characters stemming from the traditional pantheon are used here to comment on an issue that is closely related to the current political context. Nigeria is indeed stepping into a difficult electoral period¹² whose outcome ought to be the successful return to democracy. Hence, such is the bias of the play director resorting to a traditional reference in order to illustrate a modern situation, as announced by Orunmila, the child is already born in the mind. Will events dare contradict him in their unfolding?

The moment the actor playing the part of the *òrìshà* deity called Shango arrived on stage, he fell into a trance perpetrated by that very deity. After a short period of confusion, it became clear that the actor was continuing to “play his part” for much longer than the time decided in rehearsals. The “victim” was repeating mechanically, in a disjointed and twitching way, Shango’s gesture of raising and lowering his insignia of office (a double-bladed axe or *Oshe Shango*). His eyes clouded and assumed a vacant look. A slight white foam appeared at the corner of his mouth.

From his standpoint in the wings, the director, as he told me, supposed that the actor had made a mistake, so he tried to set things right by prompting, but to no avail. In the words of the director (author interview with Yemi Oyewo, 1999), the person who was acting as “*Shango*” was becoming an incarnation of “*Shango through trance!*” The play could not continue and had to be halted. The audience was asked to leave. The actors came out from backstage and went to join the percussionists. The “victim” was left alone on stage, but still seemed incapable of returning to normal. Clustered in the now-empty theatre, the company decided to bring in a “specialist.” A discussion developed as to which sort of person to ask for help: should it be a traditional diviner (*babalawo*) or a preacher from the Church to which the victim belonged? In the end, the choice fell on a *babalawo* known to the theatre director. One of the actors called a taxi and went off to fetch this person, who lived not far from the National Theatre in Lagos. It was now around 8:00 p.m. He returned around 10:00 o’clock. The actor was apparently still in a state of trance. The *babalawo* diagnosed the “accident” as a “punitive possession” resulting from a curse. A few days later, it was revealed that the *babalawo* had identified the instigator of the attack as a member of the victim’s family from Oyo.

Punitive trance and social conflict

The fact that a “punitive possession” can affect a person who is not a member of an *òrìshà* cult poses a certain number of questions as to the manner in which the *image* of a deity has been transmitted. In the present case, it would seem that the trance worked by the “reactivation” of a kinesic memory. This mnemonic component is constituted either by a conscious learning process or by absorption. The conscious or indirect learning occurs during the acquisition of body techniques, which trigger a state of trance. The “invasion by another being” that manifests itself at the height of an uncontrolled possession (or, rather, which is awakened by its “silent partner,” the enemy, *ota*) is activated by a combination of stimuli (smells, visual prompts and—especially—musical triggers (Euba 1988)). Music often plays a vital role in this process and it is also through music that the image of the *òrìshà* is inculcated. In this way, the activation of a trance becomes a reflex.

The person in question, i.e., the actor who was the victim of the punitive trance, was related on his father’s side to a family of *òrìshà* devotees (*elegun Shango*) and on his mother’s side to a Lagos family of *Saro* origin, several of whose members had become Anglican preachers. Certain members of his family had founded a neo-Pentecostalist Church, while their cousins belonged to a sect dedicated to Shango in the town of Oyo. The actor knew his Oyo relations well, having visited them from time to time since his childhood. He says that he has many memories of these visits, particularly of the *egungun* rites and ancestral mask ceremonies. “They people my dreams” (author interview with B. O., 1999), he still declares today. As a member of a Lagos Pentecostal Church, he had no choice but to disapprove of the “devilish” practices of his cousins, whom he tried without success to convert and, in the end, reluctantly had to tolerate. He did however begin to take more interest in their practices—particularly in the Shango sect’s trance techniques—when he decided to become an actor specializing in the art of Yoruba folk opera. The fact is that he could not ignore his relationship to these family members anymore and that he had somehow taken account of their “claim to see him back” (author interview with B. O., 1999).

The trance into which the actor fell can be explained by the sudden resurgence of a problematic group adherence, occurring through the reactivation of a physical memory. The reactivation is produced through the intermediary of music, whose role as a trigger of trance has been clearly demonstrated (Euba 1988; Rouget 1990; Verger 1954). The element of suspense suggested above that is a feature of

the audience's experience is more readily understood when all are aware that the character being portrayed on stage—in this case an *òrìshà*—is potentially dangerous in the sense that he embodies social connections that may be reactivated. Marc Augé (1982: 42) has written on this subject: “The different elements making up the whole person can be seen therefore in terms of a number of ‘connections’ which render more complex and relative the concepts of individuality and personality, concepts grouped and expressed in the notion of identity.” In order to understand the significance of the resurgence of “punitive trances,” we need first to understand the progressive integration of *Saro* and *Amaro* families into local family and/or kinship structures. In fact, in examining the case described above, it might be considered that it was this family bond, presented as that which links us to the social or family group, which was attacked. *Òrìshà* is a family heritage (Verger 1954) to be transmitted through the generations, though without necessarily obeying the laws of biological logic (meaning that an adopted as well as a natural child may inherit the responsibility for the *òrìshà*). It would seem that its “image” (*emi òrìshà*) is able to circulate passively within the network of relationships, which may occasionally extend beyond the kinship unit. Just as the image of an *òrìshà* can spread passively, so there are also “dormant networks” along whose pathways the *òrìshà* travel. The *babalawo* diviner will attempt to retrace these pathways in order to identify the person (not the deity) from whom the attack originated. Thus, it is possible for somebody to be dominated by an *òrìshà* whose very existence is unknown to him.

Witchcraft is often described by theatre people as a practice based on the concept of a “closed circle”: as if the amount of energy (*ashe*), being limited, the management of its potential has in some way to be slightly optimized. All material wealth, inextricably associated with an accumulation of *ashe*, becomes necessarily “suspect.” It generates jealousy, which manifests itself in the suspicion that the wealth has been gained by witchcraft. To be “rich” implies that the wealth has inevitably been taken from some other person since a generalized simultaneous enrichment is inconceivable. Barry Hallen¹³ reminds us that although there are specialists in witchcraft (*àjé* and/or *osho*), the performance of it is within everyone's capabilities. Somebody who fails to achieve his fixed objectives will declare that his failure has been engineered by an enemy (*otá*). He will have drawn this conclusion after identifying certain signs (*àmi*) that have been “tested” (*ri*) and are presented as being the result of an evil influence (*ise*) (Hallen 2000: 60). The “unexpected trance” is one such sign.

A play as a situation that reveals social conflicts

The period of conceiving a play and the community making up the drama company constitute a forum of tension between many social groupings. The staging then forms an ephemeral web in which each thread refers to a social component conveyed by one of the participating social actors: it offers cultural elements that are potentially suggested by the cultural environment in which it is actualised. The performance itself is a precipitate generated by the organisation of its components: the text and its interpretation, the acting and the casting, the scenography and the scenery, the sponsors and the public's cultural background. Like other forms of neotraditional performances, "Odu-Ifa" lies at a crossroad of influences brought in by other genres and notably funerary ritual performances (*egungun*). Thus, form and content originally belonging to different "systems of representation" combine. I use the term "combine" here because it is not simply a question of mixture, but of a structured articulation creating something new, at least from the viewpoint of a foreign observer, i.e., an anthropologist in the field.

One of the most amazing phenomenon that emerged during the various discussions held in the course of my field investigations was the fact that the genres examined were not absolutely independent of one another: a character wearing a mask could be found acting in a play; the *bata* drummer could handle the musical aspect of a video film, just as the costume of an *egungun* mask originally designed for a play commissioned by the Osun State Council for Arts and Culture could be the foundation stone of a new initiative of ancestor worship. In the same way, an actor personifying a character fiercely hostile to traditional paganism one day on stage would turn out to be an *Elegun òrìshà* (i.e., a member of a possession cult of some deity belonging to the Yoruba Pantheon) of a cult dedicated to Shango.

This protean feature seemed even more perplexing when it appeared that the interviewees who were actively involved in various genres explained their practice in completely different ways based on the situation in which they found themselves. After a proselyte play whose nucleus was based on a traditional chief's conversion to Christianity, an actor, when questioned (author interview with J. K., 1999), insisted on his deep faith (belief) in Christian salvation and his hostility to the Yoruba traditional religion. This same person then declared some time later in an interview held after an Ifa divination session that he felt that ceremony would be beneficial to him and besides he saw absolutely no reason why this would not be so.

Witchcraft, economic crisis and social fragmentation

The increasing insolvency of people living in the cities of southwestern Nigeria puts them in a particularly vulnerable situation regarding witchcraft attacks. This is all the more resented as hopes have been so brutally dashed.¹⁴ A study of some of these phenomena tells us much about the growing complexity of social relations in Nigeria's cities. The problems of living with the ties that bind one person to another can be observed on both an existential and an emotional front. Rivalry between groups has become more vicious as the "cake" gets smaller. The growing polarization of society is perceived as an ever-greater control over the power of *ashe* by a minority that seems increasingly rich. This wealth is assumed to have been amassed by using suspect methods of obtaining power/money/*ashe*. It is very revealing that there has been a marked increase in accusations against the newly rich of having indulged in "money-making rituals." Competition between individuals and groups degenerates into a conflicting rivalry. Nigerian society is imploding because the middle classes, who were once its supporting framework, are today fighting within their own ranks. This is the problem inherent in the functioning of these social structures, which is the creative force in Yoruba drama.

Theatre people (over and above the performer/audience divide) come from a social group that has developed with the (partial) industrialization and (galloping) urbanization of the southwestern regions of the Federation. This is an educated and Christianized social group (a case of killing two birds with one stone, since the schools are for the most part run by missionaries). In Yoruba towns, "middle class" generally refers to the recently formed socio-economic group that emerged alongside the modern economy and was able to take advantage of the rapid growth in administrative services and the "educated professions." These middle classes differ from the former bourgeoisie, but it seems that they have partly inherited its *habitus*¹⁵ (customs, skills, and body techniques). The theatre is one such legacy. Today's ruling and moneyed classes can be seen in the audience of classical music concerts at the MUSON (the Musical Society of Nigeria) on Lagos Island in the old city centre. The middle classes expanded considerably between 1945 and 1980, a growth accounted for by the strengthening of "public services" and by the general rise in income levels that developed a new industrial economy. The middle classes refuse to be confused with the peasant and "lower" classes. Belonging to a Church founded by one of the "new religious movements" (Marshall-Fratani 1998) is a way of demonstrating this social difference, in that it permits the individual to sever his kinship ties and to reinvent himself in

a new social order (not “new” in itself, but “new” to the individual concerned who “goes up” to Lagos and integrates into the social and economic life of the city). Breaking away from a kinship network permits reinsertion in another network.

The “revival” of witchcraft and its undermining of modern theatre is the expression of political discontent. A heterogeneous urban population in the midst of a demographic explosion (resulting from the rural exodus and the social decline of the former middle classes) is taking advantage of the symbolic ties of kinship, which link it to the “propertied” classes. The latter, themselves caught in the economic squeeze, wish to forget their former ties and the (financial) duties implied by them. They are sometimes given an unwelcome reminder by the appeal that *òrìshà* music continues to hold for them.

Conclusion

The present crisis in Yoruba neotraditional theatre has arisen from a process of *re-ritualization* (i.e., *re-politization*) that continues to pose problems. Recent developments stem from the crisis facing the social grouping that produces the genre and makes up its audience. I have tried to demonstrate that the practice of witchcraft is in no way dying out, but is, on the contrary, experiencing a revival, gaining strength from the social fragmentation caused by the country’s economic crisis. Witchcraft is taking advantage of a fragmented situation that is distinguished by a multiplication of centres of power.

The proliferation of witchcraft attacks—of which the punitive trance now springing up in the theatre is an example—represents a chronological continuation of political and magico-religious practice. The political initiative behind such practices seems also to be gaining in strength and persistence.

The multiplication of witchcraft cases is definitely a contemporary phenomenon. It expresses a profound crisis that resonates on a personal, existential, and interindividual level. The fragmentation of society leads to a general air of suspicion. Witchcraft is traumatising for most of people because it is linked to a social situation that is potentially very violent. The social group of the theatre producer (including actors, technical personnel, and audiences) is especially concerned by a social crisis that relates to global economic trends. As a consequence, the theatrical performance is the stage on which are enacted confronting and clashing social forces. In essence, order and disorder are presented at the same time and social change is rooted in the system itself. Thus, the trance is neither an essentially psychological nor mystical nor, still

less, paranormal phenomenon. Its occurrence—particularly when brutal or unexpected—has political significance.

The upsurge in trance phenomena, in combination with the proliferation in accusations of witchcraft, indicates a *malaise* among the urban population. The urban environment in which Yoruba neotraditional theatre survives is labyrinthine and the moral values of the social group that produces that genre are threatened. Their legitimacy to perform *òrìshàs* is contested by popular classes that identify with their cults. This lack of recognition is clearly expressed through the *coup de theatre* I have described above.

The development of home video and the coeval economic crisis are not sufficient to describe this transformation of the nature of theatrical performance of a neotraditional genre. Something original and surprising that is paradoxically caused by enduring and long-term dynamics is occurring and one question among several others remains crucial: are we witness to the disappearance of a genre or to the invention of a new cultural practice that is at once artistic *and* religious? This last option would indeed realise Wole Soyinka's ideal of a genuine Yoruba ritual theatre (Soyinka 1976) that is suggested in the quotation that opened this article.

Notes

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1. Taken from a filmed interview conducted by Alain Ricard (1990).
2. The peak of which was 1973.
3. Yoruba traditional theatre is performed in the five Yoruba states in the southwest of the Federation of Nigeria. The population of these regions is around 20 million (about 18 percent of the total Nigerian population of 120 million inhabitants). The rate of urbanization and industrialization of the five states is high compared to the rest of the Federation and the continent as a whole.
4. In the late 1980s, inflation and wage controls had drastically eroded the incomes of the middle classes. It was not unusual to find a professor's campus garage used as a warehouse for his trucks and the equipment in his construction business, and behind the house pens, where his wife conducted a poultry business. Others sought to emigrate, especially skilled people, such as doctors, lawyers, and professors, who realized they could do much better abroad. The sudden decline in the income of the middle classes resulted from Nigeria's belt-tightening policies. Business people, especially those in trade, were less affected by inflation, but the recessionary effects of the structural adjustment plan (SAP) had cut into their incomes as well, by lowering demand or by controlling imports and exports more tightly. By the late 1980s,

however, many of the middle classes and even the elites were being obliged to adjust to a lower standard of living.

5. Between December 1994 and July 1999, the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board registered 1,300 new Nigerian video films (Haynes 2000).
6. The initials of my interviewees are used throughout this essay to provide anonymity.
7. Musicians generally belong to lower social class than the director, the actors, and the audience.
8. This neo-Yoruba traditional theatre is not a popular art form anymore. Founded in the nineteenth century by a merchant class, which since the mid-twentieth century and in the aftermath of the Oil Boom, expanded to form the middle classes and—to a certain extent during a short period—rural and urban classes. These Nigerian middle classes have been the ones to suffer most from the recession, which began in the early 1980s.
9. The word “Aladura” (the prayer people in Yoruba) refers to various independent churches of West African origin characterised by their belief in prayer, divine healing, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The belief in the possibility of deliverance from evil forces reflects a perception of the continual presence of God’s power and the need to pray, to prophesy, and to heal assumes the possibility of immediate divine intervention.
10. The name given to members of the very heterogenous movement of neo-Pentacostal-ist Churches. The adepts are said to begin a new existence by being reborn in Christ after rejecting all “satanic” practices (Marshall-Fratani 1998).
11. Ifa corpus is a compilation of texts, proverbs, and philosophical propositions, which the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria regard as their “bible.”
12. This play was staged at the National Theatre, Lagos, 12 February 1998.
13. “The personality type in Yoruba society know as *àjé*, conventionally rendered into English as ‘witch’ by Christian missionaries and a disappointing number of social anthropologists, may more specifically be interpreted as referring to persons of extraordinary intellect rather than this folkloric bugaboo [...] It is also relevant to note that Favret-Saada eventually concluded that, even for the prelogical ‘peasants’ who were the subjects of her study, there were no clearly identifiable human beings in these communities who could in fact be considered witches. What did exist more importantly, for these contemporary citizens of France were undesired and undeserved misfortunes which were attributed to the malevolent thoughts of indeterminate ‘others,’ and which could be reliably disarmed via the ministrations of local healers” (Hallen 2000: 62–63).
14. A few figures speak for themselves: between 1983 and 2001, the gross national product fell from \$1,000 to \$300 a year. Daily production of petroleum fell from 2.4 million barrels in 1979 to 1.4 million in 1985. Between 1980 and 1990, Nigeria was reclassified into the category of the world’s poorest countries, with more than 80 percent of its population living below the poverty line (in 1980, this figure was 40 percent, making it the least poor in black Africa). Despite strong initial reluctance, after 1987 Nigeria progressively adopted the program of structural adjustment prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. It should be added that General Buhari was meanwhile deposed by the former head of the army, General Ibrahim Babangida. Salaries have been frozen since 1980. The minimum monthly salary of 125 nairas, at that time worth \$170, was worth about \$30 in 1988. In 1984, an average civil servant spent less than a year’s salary to buy a car; three years later, to buy a Peugeot 504, assembled in Nigeria, he would have spent five years’ salary. It is paradoxical that Lagos, which a few years ago was the most expensive capital in the world, has become one of the least expensive for visitors. The country has

provided itself with a new capital (decreed on 1 February 1979 and inaugurated twelve years later in 1991) and since 1 October 1996, is made up of thirty-six states, whereas in 1980 the Federation had only twelve. The population has risen from 85 million to around 123 million; the rate of urbanization has increased from 31 percent in 1984 to around 44 percent in 2000. According to World Bank estimates, the number of inhabitants in Lagos alone has gone from 4 million in 1982 to more than 10 million in 2001.

15. Durkheim defines the *habitus* as “the general disposition of mind and will that makes one perceive things in a particular light” (Durkheim 1974 [1923]). Bourdieu (1980: 154) gives the term a more practical definition: “a system of lasting and interchangeable standards, set principles predisposed to function as shaping structures, that is, which serve as the source and organizing power of behaviour and perception.” These principles can be objectively adapted to achieve their goal without implying the conscious seeking of that goal or the deliberate mastering of those operations necessary to attain it. Thus, the *habitus* is what distinguishes one class or social group from others that do not share the same social conditions. The *habitus* serves as the materialization of collective memory, reproducing in later generations the acquired patterns of earlier ones. In this way, it permits the group to perpetuate its being.

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