



Wasambo Were and the Impetus of Context-Smashing: Assessing Changing Patterns of African Performance Aesthetics

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Abstract. The paper investigates the changing patterns of African performance aesthetics using terms deployed to evaluate the encrustations to which African performances have been exposed and the correlative factors that now characterize performance in the African setting. Particular attention has been paid to Wasambo Were and other seminal contributions to the preservation and rejuvenation of indigenous artistic sources that Africa can rely on for contemporary artistic creation and production in theatre and film. Within the vortex of this proposed discourse, on one side are what constitute an African performance, elements and patterns like folkism, polycentrism, curve-linear and other patterns; on the other side are the postmodern, globalizing, consumerist and postcolonial factors which have exerted their influences on the artistic space that now determine the dominant artistic expressions within the continent. At this point, a perspective which emerges when a normative scenario of creative operation is established, bringing with it all its negative encumbrances. If some individuals take this challenge to the hilt to protect what is pristine and progressive to the continent, then a context is being smashed.

Keywords: Context, Patterns, Performance Aesthetics.

1. Introduction

The context of discourse in this paper is within the ambit of African Performance Aesthetics, which for years has been subjected to and rendered vulnerable to the foray of imperial and hegemonic manoeuvring by the West. Despite the degree of enlightenment of the peoples of Africa, they have not come to terms with the deliberate efforts to exert their influence and pressure to supplant indigenous cultural practices with those of the West and, now, other nations, especially China and India.

Aldous Huxley (1931) made a revealing statement years back in *Brave New World Revisited* that:

If the first half of the twentieth century was the era of the technical engineers, the second half may well be the era of the social engineers, and the twenty-first century, I suppose, will be the era of World Controllers, the scientific caste system, and Brave New World. The prophecies made in 1931 are coming true much sooner than I thought they would. The night of total organization has emerged from the safe, remote future and now awaits us just around the corner.

This was a shocking analysis of what was to colour the 21st century, more than two decades into it already, what humanity has spent, and what cultures and traditions have faced with their unique and unprecedented dimensions. By "World Controllers" and the infusion of a "scientific caste system," we would assume that globalization is what is being tersely, and to some extent glibly, described by Huxley above, thereby setting a context for African cultural studies. What comes to mind and has become central in postcolonial discourse is the issue of hegemony that the West has held Africa down with, therefore making it hamstrung to de-robe itself from the connections of control and dominance in the aspects of the tradition (with the performative aspects at the centre), economy, religion, and development.

Wasambo, among others, has realized that Africa's residual traditions must be safeguarded to open new creative vistas that can healthily herald competitive artistic production in a rapidly changing creative landscape. This is not possible by allowing the continuous erosion of what is left to sustain Africa's quest for uniqueness in its artistic development. Africa cannot fully realize its true artistic potential without taking iconoclastic steps to rescue the residual aspects of its traditions and exhuming those long buried to support the people's collective memory.

Were is shifting African artistic intellectualism from the erstwhile reflection to mediation and intervention, as rightly captured by Raymond Williams in Marxism

and Literature. Accordingly, Williams cautions that by projecting and alienating this material process to 'reflection', the social and material world, which was at once 'material' and 'imaginative', was challenged by the idea of 'mediation'.

Through mediation, the dominant context of analysis and experience undergoes an unprecedented process of reinvigoration and revitalization of what remains to be rescued. The process becomes that of new interpretation, reconciliation, and intercession. Others have set the pace in Kenyan theatre and cultural studies by researching the Bukusu's traditional heritage to uncover the processes by which particular existential values and knowledge of resilience are imparted among initiates and people of the Bukusu land of the Luyha people. To the Bukusu people, a person's life from birth to death is a series of concatenations that bring them closer to the purpose of their lives, which is to engender cosmic harmony between physicality and meta-physicality, rather than to create a tragic void that would bring hardship, striving, and unease among mortals. Wasambo Were understood to be a process of education through adherence to strict rituals and customs that bring the spirits of the Bukusu people together as a precursor to cosmic harmony. This is unique among Kenya's ethnic nationalities.

Despite the abundance of performative traditions in Africa, as represented by the Bukusu people, they find themselves in the vortex of three possible directions in contemporary discourse, and the dilemma that comes with being African from the late Twentieth Century to the early Twenty-First century. One of the directions indicated in the foregoing is the possibility of the total absorption of other people's civilisation through the total neglect of indigenous civilisation; by this, I mean the residual traditions of the Bukusu people. Secondly, the possibility of going backward to unearth to save substantial parts of Africa's traditions. This, of course, is motivated by nostalgic cravings among souls disgusted by the groundlessness of what Western modernity has brought to sub-Saharan Africa, supplanting indigenous traditions. The third is the direction represented by the Bukusu people in this chapter. The possibilities that contemporary trends in culture and artistic creation, in which global development trends exert their power, cannot be found among the Bukusu people. This would imply taking advantage of globalization and other artistic trends(patterns) in this postmodern epoch for their artistic credo and creation.

Chiweizu (2004), in his seminal article titled 'Prodigals, Come Home', gets agitated about cultural servitude masquerading as cultural modernity replete with European sensibility. This kind of cultural servitude comes with a veneer of civilization that eats deep into the fabric of any tradition that is a veritable aspect of a viable culture, not merely a vibrant one.

In the same manner, Soyinka, in *The Fourth Stage: Ogun/Origin of Yoruba Tragedy*, draws a profound dichotomy between African drama, using Yoruba mythic tragedy with its idiosyncratic elements, and European modes. According to Soyinka, the elements are harnessed from archetypal reserves, suggesting the form presented to people for them to master. No matter how European techniques are deployed in our presentations or representations, it is not analogous to European modes. Moreover, until these elements, which are different forms, are identified in their original bases whether they are embedded in some highly ritualistic traditions or festivals, like Wasambo Were has done with the Bukusu tradition, or some less ritualistic customary engagement of the people of Africa, it is in those practices that the uniqueness of the drama and theatre of a people showcase itself. That was the existential challenge that Chinua Achebe and Soyinka shouldered to counter the wholly false impression that early Western novelists such as Joseph Conrad, John Buchan, and others had spread about Africa. The drive towards the restoration or projection of Africa's authentic cultures has continued despite their misrepresentation by the West. Today, many dramatic works and films are deliberately written to obscure Africa's indigenous artistic heritage. This is partly because the West began writing before Africans, and, sadly, the art of writing has been prioritized over rich, authentic heritage that exists in oral form and is highly performative.

2. Definitions of Some Critical Terms: Context, Performance, Aesthetics

2.1 Context

Wikipedia defines context as those objects or entities that surround a focal event, of some kind. This is with reference to the popular fields of anthropology, semiotics, linguistics, and sociology. The words "objects" and "entities" mentioned in the definition apply aptly to the discourse on performance aesthetics and to Wasambo Were's engagement with the revered tradition of the Bukusu of Kenya. The objects mentioned are neither emblematic nor merely nominal in their appearance or in the role they play in a given ritualistic performance. Examples include circumcision, blood, and dance, and the specific

activities in the general process of socialization can be likened to Richard Schechner's complex chain of activities that form the web and fan in his performance theory (1988).

2.2 Performance

Performance in the context of this Chapter refers to all the ritualistic, entertaining, pulsating, and transformative activities that draw closer cosmic and profane aspects of the African being and existence into a robust moment of socialization. These activities include make-belief, but are not limited to, the liminal and the visceral; they can be subjunctive (Schechner, 1988) and go beyond the threshold of make-belief.

2.3 Aesthetics

Aesthetics is a collection of tenets and principles that deal with the nature and appreciation of beauty. This also deals with the philosophy or the nature of thinking that comes with it. This is rooted in the simple assumption that the same object of beauty can be viewed from different standpoints. It is only naivety that makes someone believe that what is seen as beautiful in one region of the world must be seen in the same way in another region.

3. The Context of Wasambo Were's Attempts and Postcolonial Theory

Some discomfort and unease toward the ruins and damages of colonialism presumably influenced Wasambo. This is particularly dysfunctional to a progressive African who knows how people, a country, a continent that is bound by many common denominators, is supposed to operate, basically, on its terms and its plans for its socio-political, traditional, and cultural developments. These call for action and inquiry in several ways to salvage this situation. This is because no sentient cum conscientious African should be comfortable with the palpable realities of Africa. The need for intellectual and scholarly inquiry into the epistemological strongholds of an African being has become imperative in the 20th and 21st centuries. These imperatives are condensed in the general objectives of post-colonial theory.

Mark Fortier (1997) argues that postcolonialism is an attempt to describe the contemporary situation and its culture, this time by focusing on the effects of Western imperialism, which has dominated the world since the Sixteenth century. He posits that postcolonialism is both a situation coming after colonialism and a situation in the heritage or aftermath of colonialism, both an ongoing liberation and an ongoing oppression.

This realization of duty to the continent of Africa has been summarized in the ideological distillation by Fanon (1986), Cesaire (2000), Bhabha (1994), Barber (1995), Spivak (2014), Gikandi (2017), Wa Thiong'o (2014), Soyinka (1976), among others. Their efforts and attempts are not different from Were's exploration of the educational duties and pedagogy of Imbalu ritualistic practices of the Bukusu of Western Kenya. Every scholar pays attention to what they deem relevant to the objective of their inquiry. We have established the preponderance of drama in the imbalu ritual of imitation and have further ascertained that this practice is also an instrument of education for the Bukusu people of Western Kenya.

Before Were's seminal work, Opiyo John Mumma (1994) had studied the possibility of applying the concepts and understanding of educational drama in a Kenyan setting. Were and Mumma have not added anything new to what is contained in Kenya's orature or the performative heritage of Kenya. However, they have succeeded in exposing the larger world to the profound presence of traditional drama in Kenya. It may not be written, but it exists in abundance, even before the Europeans or Arabs, referring to the incursions of Arabs around the Mombasa region.

Postcolonial theory calls on scholars in Africa to work towards de-robing Africa of the remaining vestiges of imperialism. Part of this duty is to identify the riches in Africa's artistic heritage and place it in its rightful place.

4. Assessing the Changing Patterns of African Performance Aesthetics

The essence of smashing an uncomfortable context that people have accepted lies in exploring new possibilities embedded in Africa's cultural heritage. Every continent whose countries share the same experiences of imperialism from the years preceding the present moment has been grappling to unearth the great potential of its indigenous performative resources.

Aesthetics, whether as a collection of principles or as a philosophy (Obidah, 2022), has come to mean a kind of judgement, attitude, experience, and value accorded to works of art that distil beauty, lending themselves to a variety of interpretations and meanings. It is this understanding of aesthetics that projects the objective of an article like this.

For these principles that accompany works of art in the form of judgement, attitude, experience, and value determine what is called aesthetics; it comes in a

pattern(s) that are identifiable when close attention is paid to works of art from Africa. As identified by Mofefi Kete Asante (1996), in his article titled, 'Aspects of Afrocentric inquiry'. These identified patterns are infused into creative production amid the prevailing situation of globalization, with its attendant trappings, such as consumerism, nameless pastiche, and eclecticism. The implication is that the terrain is replete with patterns and trends that clash, overlap, and intermix to coexist, giving rise to new synthetic patterns.

Wasambo Were, driven by his intention to present the traditional ritual ceremony of the Bukusu people of Kenya as some form of edu-drama, invariably highlights the unique patterns of the performative and plastic aspects of that tradition, consciously or otherwise. His work exposes the Bukusu Imbalu as a folk art.

This is why folkism is the first pattern to be given attention in this paper. It is a tradition shared and practised by a community. Folkism was coined by Sam Ukala (1993) to refer to an indigenous dramatic aesthetic principle possibly derived from the theatre of folk linguistic, structural, and performance styles. It also manifests a deep connection to folktales. It refers to a tendency to base literary plays on indigenous history and culture and to perform them in accordance with the aesthetics of African folktales, including their composition and performance, drawing on the music, dances, speeches, and instruments used during Imbalu. They also denote the tradition of a particular people doing these activities in unity, whether in a pure atmosphere or in their liminal aura. It is therefore folkish when older men and women offer their teenage sons to be circumcised and initiated into adulthood, marking the beginning of an age grade.

The change that is preponderant in the incursion of what used to be pristine, practiced by a community that has now been affected by influences from the West. Others would include the deliberate penchant for hybridizing most works of art to satisfy the fastidious tastes of contemporary audiences. This implies that practitioners of the Imbalu and other performance forms are altering performance patterns. The question to ask is: Are the movements in Imbalu dances the same over the years? Are the costumes or regalia used during the ritual ceremony still the same? How about the music and other key performance aesthetics? If none of these are the same as they used to be, it is simply because they have been affected by modernity, colonialism, and, now, globalization.

Peter Nazareth (1978), in his paper, 'East African Drama', while citing David Rubadiri, refers to the experience of East African dramatists who were greatly influenced by colonial masters, who made sure that they abandoned their indigenous cultural forms only to face dramatic ideals which were "totally alien and not the best and relevant that Europe had to offer". Colonialism was a generally sad phenomenon in Africa, but it exerted more negative impact on East Africa than on West Africa, as pointed out by Rubadiri.

Another pattern/aesthetic/element is polyrhythm, which refers to several rhythms emanating from different instruments and performers in a performance. The Bukusu Imbalu consists of different stages of the initiation practice. The initiate of the Bukusu Imbalu is expected to dance from his paternal uncle's house to the river. He dances to music; this music is polyrhythmic because it is not just an accompanying song that serves as embellishment to the performance, but an instrument central to the ritual practice of the Bukusu people. It has a deep connection to their ancestors, who descend to dwell with their people at the festival in the world of the living. Music is a determining force in such a performance because, without it, the circumcision or initiation itself would not hold for the young initiates who are transiting to adulthood.

Polycentricism, as pointed out by Welsh-Asante, implies the presence of several colours in a painting or the abundance of several movements in a dancer's body occurring in the context of a presentation. The initiate cannot deviate from the indigenous dance patterns the Bukusu people are accustomed to during Imbalu initiation. This dance always aligns with general African dance patterns emanating from several concentric points. It is a community asset; it distinguishes them from those of other ethnic groups within Kenya, but the general African dance position cannot be separated from that of the Bukusu people of Western Kenya, though with its own peculiarities.

Curvilinear refers to the lines that are curved in art, dance, music, poetry, among others, which are normally known as indirection in the spoken or written form (Asante, 1994). This also applies to both the plastic and performative aspects of the initiation or circumcision process of the Bukusu. This is if we are operating within the context of Wasambo Were's work, which has served as a reference point in this discourse.

Other aesthetics, including, but not limited to, dimensional, repetition, epic memory, and wholism, as

identified by Welsh-Asante (1994), are the true qualities of Afrocentrism. To look at these remaining aesthetics glibly, in order to assess their intersections with prevailing phenomena in the entertainment industry globally, is imperative. Dimensional being is the spatial relationship that shows depth and energy. This is conspicuous in performances and also in plastic arts. Repetition implies the constant occurrence of a theme in a presentation. This runs through a festival or an indigenous practice, such as the Imbalu of the Bukusu. Epic memory refers to the idea that indigenous works or performances bear the imprint of the historical memory of the people who own the traditions being practiced (Obidah, 2022). Wholism implies the organic unity of all the collective parts of an artwork. This is despite the art's unique aspects. Wholism is identified when all other aesthetics or qualities mentioned unite to give a synthetic, complete work.

5. Intersections of Globalization, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, and African Performance Aesthetics

“I do not want my home to be walled in all sides and its windows to be stuffed. I want cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. However, I refuse to be blown off my feet by any” (Mahatma Gandhi, cited by Ruston Bharucha, 1993).

This quote about Gandhi is a suitable opening to this section of the chapter, as it indicates the world's drive toward the interconnectedness of cultures and peoples. However, Gandhi demonstrates his refusal to succumb to the hegemony of any foreign culture. The world has been pulled together by the winds of globalization, which have exerted far-reaching negative consequences on smaller and weaker nations and their cultures. This brings to mind the famous statement by Roland Robertson that “Global cohesion does not imply global consensus”. This sets the tone of the interplay of the aforementioned phenomena within the vortex of African socio-cultural, political, and economic discourse.

If one takes postmodernism to the hilt as a starting point, one finds a disruption to what used to be a state of orderliness. The phenomena that characterize postmodernism are not easily acceptable to conservative minds, whether as scholars or artists at whatever level, because of the unprecedented and radical changes to what one might call the normal. This is why Fredric Jameson (1984) calls postmodernism a force field, in the sense that several other phenomena come to play on it. In the age of globalization, characterized by strong elements of late

capitalism, several aesthetic persuasions come to play as a result of the compelling drive toward consumerism and profit-making.

We will not mistake postmodernism as “another stage in the West's Crisis of consciousness” as Dennis Ekpo (2004) would put it. However, a calculated attempt to have Africa, with all the richness of its cultural and performative heritage, enmeshed in the hazy terrain of globalization and the trappings that accompany it. This is why Wasambo Were (2014), in the realization of the need to preserve and protect the artistic and educative reserves of the Bukusu people with Imbalu at the forefront, says:

African education aimed to preserve the heritage of the Bukusu people, encompassing beliefs, opinions, practices, religion, and customs. This conversation was at the clan and ethnic levels. (73)

It should be realized that as crucial as this conservation obligation is to a contemporary cultural scholar like Were, the effort must transcend over it to the stage of utilization in other forms of art within an era of uncertainty and consumerism where normless pastiche, bricolage, aporia among other forces that have exerted their dominance and have become part of the artistic credo of most artists.

Smashing the context of style that is alien and heavily ideological would imply, beyond conservation of cultural heritage, the extrapolation of artistic materials for the pitching of other products, be it in contemporary drama, film, music, dance, plastic arts, digital arts, skits, and all the other performing arts. African artistic production spaces are beginning to be diffused and saturated with local content alongside foreign and global styles and patterns. This seems to many as a positive indication that the continent is on the right track toward cultural independence and supremacy.

In the chapter written by Mboya Kivai and Wasambo Were (2012) in *African Drama and Theatre: A Criticism* edited by John Mugubi and Charles Kebaya, the pair makes a profound statement about African aesthetics, thus:

Africa has diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, so it would be wrong to imagine it as a homogeneous entity. Despite that, certain standards of beauty and correctness are manifest in artistic expressions and upheld among African people.

From the quote above, one realizes the continent's enormous artistic heritage, which is diverse yet shares many similarities. This assertion of commonalities in

African cultures and languages can be ascertained through traditional drama/theatre, dances, linguistic elements, and other art forms. This assertion can further be buttressed by even the ritual practices of such people, like the circumcision of candidates for the initiation festival in terms of the removal of the foreskins of the genitals of the initiates, the spilling of blood, among other common aspects of the practices in Africa. Africa may be heterogeneous in terms of culture (performative) and language, but the trajectory of our history of hegemony and oppression is the same.

In discussing traditional drama, Kivia and Were (2012) identify the theatrical aesthetics of worship, traditional ceremonies, dance, music, oral narration, masks, puppetry, poetry, acrobatic display, incantation, mime, and pantomime as those that characterize the uniqueness of traditional African drama and theatre. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2012), in his book, 'Gloablectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing', argues that even though the drive toward a global appeal of literature stands out as an expectation of most works of art, writers carry with them strong elements of their local experience and culture and idiosyncratic aspects of such elements. The implication is that the form may be global, but the content ought to be local. Attributing or appropriating this understanding to African performance aesthetics, one would say that artists in Africa, particularly in East Africa, with Kenya on our minds, must be swift in extrapolating this rich traditional aesthetics from those socio-ritualistic bases that may look sacrosanct to contemporary artistic and frequently functional art forms like music, dances, films, drama, theatre, poetry, among others. By this deliberate act, we would say. A new one is created in which traditional, familiar content is transformed by the artists into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility, thereby smashing context. A new one is created in which the artists transform traditional, familiar contents into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility. A new one is created in which traditional, familiar content is transformed by the artist into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility, smashing the context. A new one is created in which the artists transform traditional, familiar contents into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility. A new one is created in which traditional, familiar content is transformed by the artist into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility, smashing the context. A new one is created in which the artists transform traditional, familiar contents into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility. A new one is created in which traditional, familiar content is transformed by the artist into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility, smashing the

context. A new one is created in which the artists transform traditional, familiar contents into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility. A new one is created in which traditional, familiar content is transformed by the artists into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility, thereby smashing context. A new one is created in which the artists transform traditional, familiar contents into the realm of the unknown and continuous utility. This means that when the audience watches a dramatic performance in Kenya or a film, they are confronted with strange yet spectacular content woven into a story that brings them closer to home and addresses their existential issues. African artists must be able to liberate their imagination to a profound level. Their products of art must bear contents whose thematic preoccupations may be easily known, but the distillation or presentation should carry something unfamiliar. People should wonder where the artists got the dance steps, the conflict at the nucleus of film and theatre, the strange verse in music, etc. Such an approach will be part of Africa's artistic genius. While analysing Lamming's Aesthetic of Decolonisation, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (2014) draws our attention to the fact that: Imagination is the supreme sovereign (sic) for it is not bound by time and space and authority. No authority can enforce a command: Do not imagine. Do not do a dream. In that sense, even within an oppressive system, they can still exercise the sovereignty of their imagination to dream of new worlds. The artist and the worker are allies in the quest for freedom.

If freedom of imagination is sequestered from the artist, art will die, the tree of life will blight. Humans will roam in the abyss of groundlessness, forlorn. We will not be able to stare into the depths of the abyss confidently and generate renewed substance of vitality and further existence. The artist from Bukusu land should be able to draw on some aspects of the Imbalu for contemporary use. One cannot be the driver of such imagination and creativity. Such an artist must be able to imagine for himself/herself what to take from such a heritage, and how to deploy it in his/her artwork.

6. Conclusion

The first step in engaging a scholar who seeks to expose the rich cultural heritage that offers strong aesthetic appeal to contemporary artists has been taken by Wasambo Were. What is therefore left is the deliberate exploration of this rich heritage by audacious artists who understand the performative trends of today's entertainment world. Exposing the deep processes of the Imbalu initiation ceremony, in itself, upends the context ascribed solely to the Bukusu people. Going further to extrapolate the materials into

a contemporary creative production of art is another step toward smashing the context of original performance aesthetics of the people with one of broader scope, acceptance, and recognition.

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