

# Rethinking African Indigenous Ritual Festivals, Interrogating the Concept of African Ritual Drama

MORUFU BUKOLA OMIGBULE

**Abstract:** The postcolonial influence on the study of indigenous African culture is overwhelming. It is one out of many Western scholarly influences that colonial rule brought about in Africa. A good example is the description and evaluation of African indigenous ritual practices in terms of Western conceptions of dramatic experience at the expense of the peculiar character of the ritual experiences. Taken together the full range of the colonial influences reveal the abetting of the subordination of African thought to that of the West; hence, African scholarship remains an appendage of the Western scholarly tradition. Lately, many African and Africanist scholars see the tendency as an anathema that a committed African scholar must treat with abhorrence. This perception is needed in the interest of a more fully centered African scholarship in general and a respectable outlook of the African scholarly tradition in particular. African indigenous ritual performances, a major discursive category in African cultural studies, which have been hazily categorized as a form of drama, thus deserves to be retheorized and recategorized in the light of emerging insights and the ongoing mutating processes of African culture. The present study therefore draws upon postcolonial discourse in identifying modernity, which has subsequently culminated in globalization and the related rather complicated postcolonial condition of Africa. Drawing generally upon ritual discourse and specifically citing the example of the Yoruba, the paper identifies certain improprieties in equating African indigenous ritual festivals with drama while proposing “performance” so as not to stall valid engagement with the cultural phenomenon of traditional African ritual practices.

## Introduction

African rituals are components of, or “cultural sub-systems” of African cultures. We recognize them as such, as culture is taken to mean a body of systems into which lots of human experiences and conditions surrounding them are classified. Such cultural sub-systems, as Laitin enumerates, include “religion, traditions, customs, political practices, economic behavior, and so on.”<sup>1</sup> Considered as discursive subject, African rituals belong in the intellectual domain of African cultural studies. With growing concern and constant calls for a redefinition and securing the future of epistemological tradition in Africa, the humanities in Africa, and indeed, African cultural studies as a whole, should be seen as located at the nodal point of the entire African knowledge enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

The call for reconstituting and reorienting the African tradition of knowledge production relates to the earlier awareness of the colonial origin and postcolonial implications of the

**M. B. Omigbule** teaches literature courses in Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. His research interest cuts across oral literature, ritual studies, cultural studies and African literature. He is a fellow of the African Humanities Program (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS).

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i3a4.pdf>

contemporary African knowledge enterprise; that is, the call is more or less an extension of the struggle of the earlier African intellectual to define her/himself in opposition to the Western image created of her/him. Nevertheless, in light of the realities of the present modernizing-globalizing milieu, the very notion of “self” in any socio-cultural context has become obviously more complex. Indeed, knowledge productions, target audienceship, and means of knowledge consumption are now driven under the pressure of modernization-cum-globalization, so much so that the earlier visible walls for demarcating the self now seem to be less rigid.<sup>3</sup> Hence, cultural materials, which have been abundantly deployed in the service of projecting the African identity, can now be seen to have shed significant parts of their traditional features, unlike their treatment in certain earlier cases as materials and experiences permanently insulated against change.<sup>4</sup> The changes that they have gone through and the pressure of modernization and globalization under which they continue to exist have implications for the perception of the cultural materials. Though the cultural materials have now been reconfigured and continue to face reconfiguration, nevertheless we can still glean features of traditionalism with which the African identity is still constructed and maintained as part of the pervasive modernizing-globalizing realities.

To truly reshape the African knowledge enterprise, the foundation of the enterprise in the colonial experience as well as its sustenance as a postcolonial reality need be examined with a view to generating a superstructure of knowledge productions devoid of foundational challenges. The gamut of efforts in this respect can never be disregarded. While there is need to sustain the tempo with which efforts have been made towards this end, however, the deployment of specific African cultural realities in the articulation of the discourse of African knowledge enterprise need be more actively pursued. One way this can be achieved is to strive at attaining conceptual propriety. Hence concepts that had to be imposed on the discourse of African culture in response to the perceived postcolonial challenge of racial denigration should be re-examined for appropriateness of usage. The present study is therefore an attempt to re-engage the notion of African rituals. Two conceptions of African rituals are consequently being interrogated: the notion of African rituals as an equivalent of Western drama, and their contemporary conception as cultural materials for consumption within the globalizing space, which tends to reduce their essence within highly flexible frames of experiences.

In this sense, it is to be noted that the perception of African rituals by those “who live the rituals” differs from that of those who show interest in the rituals for reasons other than that of those whose lives derive fundamental meanings through acts of the rituals. On the contrary, the processing of the rituals as cultural materials for knowledge generation has been predominantly championed and dominated by academics whose lives are not viewed as connected to the essence of the rituals or defined by them. There has therefore been a playing down on the essence attributed to the rituals both in their use as knowledge materials and selection for advocacy. A good instance is the reduction of the African ritual to an equivalent of Western drama in academic discourses. In this reductive endeavor, so much is bound to be overlooked since so much would be assumed in the use of the borrowed concept.

The contention of this paper is that the need to equate the African ritual to the Western drama was probably a well-conceived counter-discursive effort. It is nevertheless a racial card whose relevance has been lost in the face of the realities of modernization and globalization

game. The present study therefore proposes “performance,” a broader concept as a replacement for “drama,” which is not adequate to capture the details involved in rituals. This is to allow for more objective engagement with the phenomenon of African rituals beyond their hazy deployment as postcolonial discursive strategy. In the light of broader insights provided by such scholars as Rappaport and Driver, and since “a peak of modernity” called globalization must push the discourse of African culture beyond the emergency postcolonial discourse of self-exorcism, African rituals need be reappraised and afforded the real valuation they deserve. The paper thus seeks to relocate the discourse of African rituals from the familiar corner of Afrocentric postcolonial discourse of self-exorcism to a broader plane of global knowledge enterprise; that is, a pushing of the discourse of African ritual traditions to where it will not be regulated merely by the fancy of self-identification, no matter the prompting. This will make possible the application of concepts without risk of reduction in the character and significance of a ritual subject and ensure the production of knowledge that stands the test of time.

### **Plumbing the Depth of the Discourse**

The discourse of what is considered African indigenous drama takes place within the broad field of African cultural studies. This is so when our point of reference in time is specifically postcolonial; that is, when we engage with the issue in the learnt and acquired formal pattern of generating theses, processing and articulating thoughts as acts of knowledge production occasioned by the postcolonial condition. The so-called African indigenous drama emerged distinctively as a domain of intellectualizing in the colonial epoch that was marked by a certain preponderance of asserting the African identity. Shall we recollect the period for a moment, not as a repeat of the usual romantic longing for the (over-)glorified essential African self; that is, the kind of “hankering for” that animated the ideology of pan-Africanism with which the one-sidedly initiated and articulated colonial discourse of Africa was countered need be put on hold. This is to allow for an objective engagement with the subject of Africa and what it entails as a concept. In actual fact, African indigenous drama as an epistemological domain emerged with and belonged in the counter-discursive initiative of the early African elite, “a reactive enterprise” built on the various cultural and sub-cultural distillates assembled from cultures across the continent.<sup>5</sup>

The discourse surrounding Africa, at inception, had to be articulated based on the multi-cultural reality of Africa. The emergency need for African self-redefinition and social reconstitution in the face of the dominant imperialist project with dehumanizing implications for Africa was widely felt by the African elite. Incidentally the elite were colonially tutored and could not but exhibit Eurocentric sensibilities even in their commitment as advocate and defender of the oppressed Africa. The historic denigration of African humanity occasioned by colonialism, nevertheless, necessitated the assertion of the “African self” and, perhaps for the first time, a self-perception of the various peoples of the continent as one was distinctly experienced, reinforcing the known contacts that had been in existence among the peoples long before the colonial epoch.<sup>6</sup> The concept, African indigenous drama or African drama was coined as a referent for a major form of cultural practice that lent the discourse of Africa culture some of the essential materials for its articulation. So, African indigenous drama was mapped as a scholarly domain serving in the projection of the ideology of pan-Africanism. However, the

mapping incidentally injected into the body of knowledge generated from the new scholarly domain of Africa poignant doses of critical contentions that should presently demand unbiased reception and fitting application of the concept. Apart from those of conceptual applications, there are those bordering on “borrowed” European languages, Western scholarly modes and processes of thought among others. This is to claim that it is rather fortuitous that the discourse originally aimed at exorcising Africa, by ironic twist, interrogates itself by implicating the basis of its own formulation, processes of articulation, and the human agency involved. More importantly, it retains the very postcolonial contradictions coloring its own constitution as it continues to function and relate within the expansive field of African cultural studies. The contradictions are most revealed in the critical discourses of African literature as taught in many if not all African universities today. That literature remains a disciplinary domain that, on its own, is a postcolonial phenomenon with multivalency of paradigms of operation. It, particularly the segment called oral literature, often entertains the discourse of African indigenous ritual festivals as that of African indigenous drama or African ritual drama or African festival drama. One of the contradictions is revealed in the manner it is assigned the conceptual category “African ritual drama” or “African festival drama.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, “the self” ended up being defined in the uncritical terms of the “other,” thereby ridiculously retaining a superordinate-subordinate relation that opposes the relation between superordinates, or at worse, that between homologs as originally intended.

Ritual festival, a means by which humans express their sensitivity to the world as well as encode their actions/reactions to natural and environmental circumstances, have been shown to be native to Africa; but the African has had its discourse articulated in a way that the postcolonial imperative is dominant.<sup>8</sup> That is, rather than exploiting the resources of African indigenous ritual practices as cultural material for generating knowledge about Africa for Africa and the rest of the world, the ritual practices are constituted into arsenal for racial struggle. In a manner, the way of their articulation for self-definition exudes ethnocentrism of a kind in the final analysis. This we shall see in the sense of the politics behind the formulation of the discourse of African ritual; and could the propriety of considering the option of the political ever be contested given the obvious reason that it emerged as a counter-discursive initiative? Two tendencies can be noticed in the views that have been articulated under the subject of indigenous African ritual drama. On the one hand, there is the eagerness to debunk established Western bases of classifying no cultural phenomena of Africa as drama as we find in the studies of Ola Rotimi and Echeruo.<sup>9</sup> This led to the delineating and wedging of an African sense of dramatic tradition into the dominant Eurocentric sense of dramatic tradition. On the other hand, there is the felt pressure to constitute essential bases upon which a separate category under the concept of African indigenous drama could be determined. Both tendencies sum up as a direct or indirect result of caving in to the epistemological pressure exerted by the early Western scholars of African cultures in the course of apprehending African indigenous ritual festivals alongside other African cultural phenomena through academic discourses.

We easily come to terms with the imperative to map the African domain in the global conception of the idea of dramatic traditions most outstandingly in Wole Soyinka’s treatise *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Soyinka takes African rituals to be a form of drama. He conveniently refers to them as “drama of the gods” and describes them as “cleansing, binding,

communal, recreative force." The African world of Soyinka's mind is constructed on three of the numerous archetypal beings known to Yoruba mythic history when several other mythic accounts exist among other Africans.<sup>10</sup> The treatise on the whole embodies a complication in the sense that it attempts to establish the African regional identity by rather weakly assuming too much for a constituent culture (Yoruba) in an attempt to explain the African cultural mosaic. There exists in the treatise, as the case is with known attempts in engaging with the concept of African indigenous drama, evident ironic yielding to the discursive command of the early Western scholars. By way of exemplification, whether wittingly or otherwise, views of distinguished scholars such as Oyin Ogunba, Ruth Finnegan, Ulli Beier, and M.T. Drewal among others are significantly inspired by the postcolonial necessity and, of course, the concomitant postcolonial sensibility characterized their discursive attempts. For example, Finnegan's description of certain African practices in which rituals form a prominent category as "quasi-dramatic" is inspired by her Western cultural background and scholarly orientation.<sup>11</sup> Though her reluctance to qualify the cultural practices as drama is in line with the present call for proper recognition of the character and essence of African rituals, the reluctance is more of the result of her working within Eurocentric standards of dramatic practices. Her study, like those of others in the category she is presently put, is part of the range of intellectual efforts to grapple with the realities of the African cultural space since Africa became a major subject of Western intellectual enquiry. The enquiry continues today as a more open knowledge enterprise for all across the world.

Now, on colonialism, which the presently study implicates, Bell informs that it "reshaped existing structures of human knowledge," leaving no aspect "untouched."<sup>12</sup> One could argue that the early Western scholars were "incidental agents" and could not have done more than justify the intent to dominate on the part of the colonialists and "legitimize" the imperialist mission. Really, could it have been otherwise at inception given that the condition necessitated the discourse as a knowledge paradigm of the mission to subjugate? Can it ever be any different given that the intent to perpetuate the domination by the West still endures? Reactions (direct or indirect) to the major thrust of the body of knowledge generated through the involvement of the Western scholars constitute, in part, what is known as "postcolonial discourse," "postcolonial studies," or "postcolonialism." Postcolonialism, as Hulme describes it, is "a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and is probably inescapable for all those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena."<sup>13</sup> Again, postcolonialism, as Rusell Jacob informs, has "declared intentions [...] to allow the voices of once colonized peoples and their descendants to be heard" even though as a theory, critical engagements with it have brought about a lot of confusion and controversy rather than serving the need for which it is meant.<sup>14</sup> Yet, can the use to which the theory has been put and the gains that have consequently been recorded be denied? Postcolonial studies afford knowledge of the history of colonialism in different parts of the world. For instance, it is stimulating to know that the anticolonial struggles of the leading imperialist of the world today, the United States, were a reaction to its experience of colonial domination even though they did not involve the indigenous Americans. More exciting it is to know that it treats colonial domination as a "general process with some shared features across the globe."<sup>15</sup>

The point on the altering of the structure of knowledge globally must, in a sense, inform that the postcolonial reception of the notion of African indigenous drama has not just been trans-culturally articulated within Africa; that it has, indeed, been a transcontinental discursive focus implicating “the metropolis” and “the colony” even in their most recent outlooks. Craig, a Western scholar but an enthusiast of African rituals comes to mind here. His passing defensive comment on and enthusiasm about African indigenous ritual performances is worth quoting at some length for the rare illumination it offers the present study:

In Asia, too, the forgotten masters of the temples and all that those temples contained, have permeated every thought, every mark in their work with this sense of calm motion resembling death...glorifying and greeting it. In Africa (which some of us think we are but now to civilize) this spirit dwelt, ...the essence of the perfect civilization. There too dwelt the great masters, not individuals obsessed with the idea of each asserting his personality as if it was a valuable and mighty thing, but content because of a kind of holy patience to move their brains and their fingers only in that direction permitted by the law – in the service of the simple truth.<sup>16</sup>

His reference to the Asiatic dramatic form alongside Africa ritual performances should inspire a rewarding trans-cultural discourse of traditional or ritual performances that must implicate Africa and Asia either at the higher level of inter-continental cultural evaluation or the lower level of inter-cultural and inter-sub-cultural appreciation.<sup>17</sup> The Nietzschean lauding of the cultural phenomenon of ritual, which predates Craig’s, was inspired by the perceived failure of the European of the modern scientific mentality to appreciate the spiritual moor that Greek ritual served. That certainly is reminiscent of many people with a similar mindset in today’s world, for science, in spite of its global dominance as a supposedly most useful and refined intellectual enterprise, has not been able to satisfy the spiritual yearnings of the modern human.<sup>18</sup> The different cultures on the continent of Africa presently experiencing a seizure of the indigenous culture should particularly be interested in the idea of total theatre, which the essays of Craig, Kernodle, Kirby, and Lyons embody.<sup>19</sup> We recall the maiden African Studies Association of Africa’s (ASAA) Conference held in 2015, where many of the positions expressed, including those of the first and second keynote speakers, the former president of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo, and Professor Toyin Falola, favored a return to the appreciation of worthy African cultural values as well as a re-generation of the African knowledge system.<sup>20</sup> Again, as Ogaga Ifowodo similarly recalls, “The theme of a ‘return to the past’ constitutes a key trope of postcolonial discourse. This theme is as established in the poetics of the decolonization struggle that saw to the emergence of the post colonial state as it is in the literary acts of self-representation that flourished alongside that struggle.”<sup>21</sup>

In the light of the repeated call, the studies of Craig, Kernodle, Kirby, and Lyons provide essential bases for the valuation of cultural experiences such as African rituals. The processes of the new knowledge system canvassed at the conference cannot but show interest in traditional African ritual practices.

### Between the Ideas of Drama and Performance

We need briefly engage in conceptual clarification over the terms African indigenous drama and African indigenous ritual performance in order to capture the proper form the cultural phenomena should be apprehended in contemporary scholarship. African indigenous drama is a coinage intended to capture what many a scholar has taken to be dramatic embodiment of African indigenous ritual performances. It represents one of the potent reactions to the Hamitic hypothesis, which confers outright the genius of high culture on the Westerners and rules out the innate possibility of the same in Africans. Recall that the hypothesis is traceable to the ethnocentrism of the eighteenth-century philosophers such as Voltaire, David Hume and Montesquieu, which allows for the description of Africa in such derogatory terms as “brutish, ignorant, idle, crafty, treacherous, bloody, thievish, mistrustful, and superstitious.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the use to which the coinage, African indigenous ritual drama, has been put cannot be denied. Yet it is bedeviled by certain conceptual ambiguity in respect of the subject to which it serves as referent. This is in addition to the fact that it aids misplacement of essence/meaning with regard to the discourse of African indigenous rituals. By way of interrogation, are we to accept with sufficient conviction that African indigenous ritual performances are a pure drama and their essence is the same as that of conventional drama inherited from the Western culture? Perhaps, we should uphold it as the truth that “African rituals” have been interpreted to correspond to the Western conception of the dramatic enterprise, so that as the effort serves in countering the Hamitic hypothesis, it cannot but invite an interrogation of “the validity and/or the adequacy of its epistemological formulation.”<sup>23</sup>

Ritual, as Rappaport strongly contends, is more than mere drama since what ritual embodies is more than the total summation of the conventional drama.<sup>24</sup> In Tom F. Driver’s treatise, we are even persuaded to hold a view of ritual that points to the past and that which points to the future, and of course, a totalizing impressions of it:

Ritualization is a way, an experimental way, of going from the inchoate to the expressive, from the sheerly pragmatic to the communicative. Hence, in humans it is a close relative of art, especially the performing arts. In fact, we had best think of it as their progenitor, and as the source also of speech, of religion, of culture, and of ethics. It is not as true to say that we human beings invented rituals as that rituals have invented us.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, Driver distinguishes between ritual, a combination of tradition and creativity, as “a mode of performance” comparable to “religion and liberative action” in which an alternative world is constructed, and “performance in the ritual mode” that is:

theatrical, or quasi-theatrical: [in which] something is ‘acted out’ within a definite frame that sets the action apart as the kind of event that is, in the English language, usually called a ‘performative’, whether it be a play on the stage, a game played on the field, a piece of music played in a concert hall, or a service attended in synagogue....performances contrived for special occasions, including many kinds of play (certainly sporting events), play-acting (in theatres or elsewhere), and the performance of music and dance as well as religious and secular rituals.<sup>26</sup>

The foregoing submissions on ritual are somewhat sufficient to reveal the lots that are missed out in the simplistic equation of African indigenous ritual performances with drama of the European mode or any kind at all. This is because the differences that set ritual apart from drama are not denied it and the extent to which ritual and other performance modes, including drama, could be related in discourse is mapped out. We therefore propose a clear-cut epistemological issue rather than the type polluted by overwhelming postcolonial concerns. The kind of thinking that was confused on account of the haste brought about by the social quagmire of the Hamitic hypothesis may be understandable but to allow it to endure or for it to be deliberately sustained is no doubt an assault on intellectual integrity. Even if the Hamitic hypothesis still endures, it no longer flagrantly stares anyone in the face. And who dare insist it does not? Robin Law's observation which lends credence to the suspicion being expressed about the enduring influence of the hypothesis is worth quoting: "Although the overt racism of the 'Hamitic Hypothesis' was repudiated by the academic historiography of Africa which developed from the 1950s, the model of state formation through invasion and/or cultural influences from outside continued to exercise a powerful influence."<sup>27</sup>

Be it as it may, no one dare contest the valid claim that "[h]uman beings are in all aspects bio-cultural."<sup>28</sup> The high tendency of Eurocentricity in many an African today can though be argued to be an aftermath of the regime of the hypothesis, but that it is largely internally induced is well known.<sup>29</sup> What perhaps was deliberately suppressed in the bid to respond to the hypothesis and stem its tides of influence is the fact which any serious cultural worker must follow Driver in affirming: "No one can become human in a universal way; everyone does so in ways specific to this culture or that."<sup>30</sup> And this appears to be the big omission that could have mediated the reactive awareness then; that is, the cultural material of African indigenous ritual performances could have been better categorized. This would have guarded against the consequence of over-simplification such as seeing African ritual performances simply as drama with the implication that they primarily focus on entertainment as does drama.

Indeed, a lot needs to be sieved out of ritual to enrich contemporary scholarship. A major line of action to take could be spotted in Nasidi's prescription for the condition of the quagmire of the African postcolonial discursive enterprise: relocate ritual out of "the historical context of the still active desire by a stigmatized people to counter-define themselves."<sup>31</sup> Assuming this is given, we should first interrogate for the purpose of the appropriateness of the assigned category: African indigenous ritual drama. In doing this, we appeal to Driver as we avoid the myth-ritual controversy which Driver's totalizing sense of ritual may attract. Hence, we choose to opt for two of the criteria upon which ritual as a mode of performance and performance in the ritual mode could be categorized as enunciated by Driver: religiosity and secularity.<sup>32</sup> Invariably, African indigenous ritual festivals, for example, are both religious and secular in terms of essence and function. These two qualities are but a simultaneous presence in African indigenous ritual festivals. Applying the criteria of religiosity and secularity would then qualify African indigenous ritual festivals as ritual performances in the way Rappaport has enunciated.

What scholarly gain would then accrue if the concept of African indigenous ritual drama or the often-used African ritual drama is substituted for indigenous African ritual performances? We argue that there will be an immediate avoidance of glossing over the metaphysical quality of the practices, for the recommendation that ritual should be forced to yield its messages for

the enrichment of our acquired sense of conventional dramatic enterprise constitutes a dismissive presumption.<sup>33</sup> It is this dismissive tendency that characterizes the lending of African indigenous ritual festivals to the discourse of the tourism potential of African cultures that has now become so fanciful across the continent. If, as Soyinka and others have shown that Africa could lead the world in making culture assure a harmonious world, the dismissive approach to ritual should be addressed, for ritual constitutes the core of those cultures upon which so much hope is being placed.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, let the mind-set of the would-be attendee of an African ritual performance, particularly those in the festival category, or any scholar at all interested in studying a particular African ritual performance be prepared for an experience that goes beyond mere entertainment. Only then would ritual's sanctity be maintained and its custodians accorded the respect that would facilitate their "body and soul" involvement in the performance act; only then can the would-be scholar of the ritual practice be able to approach the performance act with original curiosity that would lead him or her, at the least, to the path of discovering the hidden beauty and messages of ritual if not straight to them.

Most of the scholarly discourses conducted under the heading African indigenous ritual drama or African ritual drama are configured by the shadow cast by the general postcolonial condition of the African knowledge production system. In fact, there is a major preoccupation with the shadow rather than the object of study in many ritual studies. As Nasidi contends in respect of African literary discourses in general, African scholars have "merely been involved in the unheroic task of reproducing bourgeois discourses in an African guise."<sup>35</sup> We therefore propose that the shadow be recognized as such and abandoned for African epistemological efforts to really count in the struggle for African social transformation through investment in her cultural heritages. The pithiness in this proverbial proposition must be recognized for the intent to affect that informs its deployment; that is, we intend this would provoke interrogation as to how the shadow may be abandoned.

### **Dimension of Modernity/Globalization**

The concept of ritual has engaged intellectuals across space and time, and the engagement has yielded bases for recognizing and appreciating ritual drama as some form of old artistic practice carried over into contemporary times. But then how is knowledge (re)generated with a view to enriching society and humanity in the circumstance? We could interrogate this way with particular focus on a major African culture, the Yoruba culture, which still boasts a good number of ritual practices. The complexity of the postcolonial Yoruba perhaps like other major cultural formations of Africa could be explained under the concept of Yoruba modernities. The concept should then suggest, among other things, the Yoruba experiences of the processes of cultural merger taking place across Africa as a postcolony, and of course, the world as an increasingly "borderless" human habitation. While the phenomenon of cultural merger may have been as far back in history as the primitive stage of humanity, hence a phenomenon predating colonialism, its ongoing monumental, global dimension is ultimately historically connected to colonialism and its aftermath which, in some "sharp" postcolonial discourse, is often termed "neocolonialism" or "neoimperialism."<sup>36</sup> Globalization equally goes into capturing the experience in question. The term "globalization," however, seems to enable a less indicting or, perhaps, an all-indicting discourse of culture, for no way and nowhere can it still be affirmed

with validity that domination, or better put, exploitation is a one-sided experience in contemporary times. We should note before further discussion that the Yoruba example comes within the reach of the present scholar. Therefore, it is not pontificating on Africa by displaying a cultural case in point; but merely citing the example of an African cultural condition to reflect the modern tendency experienced across Africa.

Yoruba ritual practices that offer age-long sites of artistic performances are now attractions to peoples in locations far away from the Yoruba cultural dominion. This is not to merely indicate that the cultural-cum-social space of the Yoruba is very accessible to all for this is a given, but that it is an active site of cultural interactions in which various agencies of cultural (re)production participate. Alas, the unwary, the mere cultural enthusiast is often easily persuaded to recognize the activities of the agencies as laudable forms of promotion of the indigenous Yoruba culture. How is this sometimes experienced? A complete stranger or a half-informed intending to access aspect(s) of indigenous Yoruba culture could be seen holding a video-recorder or photo-camera, while standing very close to a ritual practitioner held as most venerated by the indigenous ritual congregation in the course of an intense ritual exercise, one upon which the community in question is, by indigenous traditional belief, expected to lean for its survival. It might even be the case that a group or groups of non-natives (both in the local and the foreign senses) have come to witness a ritual event as a form of relaxation. There are even extreme cases of extension of authority to “perform” as a core ritual practitioner when the individual in question is not of the particular lineage bestowed with a right to a ritual act. And many more! Does this serve in promoting the indigenous Yoruba ritual practices in the interest of the sanctity attached to the practices by the indigenous practitioners? Does it serve the security of their indigenous belief system strongly connected to the practices, particularly as ritual events have become attractions to globalization? The answers to these are certainly in the negative.<sup>37</sup>

As Mattelart observes, globalization “aimed at the construction of an unrestricted global arena.”<sup>38</sup> In the context of this understanding, humans irrespective of their location on the globe are to be understood as members of one decipherable community. In this understanding, all social distinctions and cultural particularities must dissolve for the broad outlines of the global space to gain visibility – the only un-partitioned space for humans in their global community. Hence, the discourse of culture in general is to be constructed in global terms, for every form of cultural practice must be globally transmittable; in the transmission, cultures are transposed to new social contexts such as the (re)generation of forms of indigenous Yoruba culture in overseas places like Cuba, South Carolina and Brazil among others. That is, as van Staden posits, “African contexts themselves may not exclusively constitute the site of African culture, since post-colonial/expatriate communities often articulate a so-called ‘black’ culture.”<sup>39</sup> Further, as Featherstone more clearly explains, blacks in such communities constitute cultural communities with certain practices that can neither be limited to the “nation-state in which they reside” nor easily “integrate” the peculiar practices or “limit” such practices to their immediate location of residence.<sup>40</sup> But shall we hold on a little to critically observe: supposing the ongoing cultural regenerations taking place further afield, outside of the “original location” would not permit any reconfiguration of the indigenous cultural practices being adapted to new social contexts, the wide latitude of “cultural nativity” extended to cultural strangers in matters of

core aspects of Yoruba rituals certainly does. Whether on account of the trendy necessity for globalization of knowledge or the now fashionable unrestricted exchange of cultures across the globe, or any reason whatsoever, there is need for caution. Yoruba rituals, indeed, are inherently elastic in terms of granting allowance for participating in them; but certainly not to the extent of endangering their sanctity as an act that is of serious communal implications.

But, who dare make such a claim as to the need to protect the sanctity of such things as Yoruba rituals within the all-pervading Yoruba modernities? Might anyone assert any serious relevance for ritual as a cultural category beyond the fact that it is an antiquarian subject of discourse or an instance of ancient dramatic experiences in the face of the command of the modernities? Even in Ile-Ife, “the religious capital of Yorubaland” where there is a large concentration of the ritual performances, modernity holds sway.<sup>41</sup> Yet ritual should now appeal to anyone who is truly concerned about the survival of the world. And why not? We are informed in a most disturbing manner by Driver that the twentieth century is:

an age in which the decline of ritual sensibility, particularly in the Western industrialized nations, has become a threat to the survival of life on earth; [that] the life-threatening pollution of the earth’s oceans, streams, and atmosphere is partly due to the neglect and decline of rituals that once regulated people’s relation to their habitat. At any rate, the attempt of modern civilization to live in a de-sacralized cosmos is coming more and more to look like the making of a catastrophe.<sup>42</sup>

We might need to add to the foregoing Marguerite A. Peeters’ observation about the Western cultural revolution to which globalization is often connected:

Having attacked the very structure of the human person, the revolution has provoked an anthropological cataclysm [which has resulted in the] “shift[ing] from the family to couples and individuals, from spouses to partners, from marriage to free love, from happiness to well-being and quality of life, from parental authority to children rights, from self-giving to ownership of one’s body and control over one’s destiny, from conscience to free choice, from interpersonal communion to the fusion of nameless and faceless individuals, from complementarity of man and woman to a contract between the sexes, from parents to reproducers, from procreation to reproduction, from all forms of legitimate authority to individuals’ empowerment and experimentation.”<sup>43</sup>

Should we see globalization in the light of what Bourdieu considers as the “false universalism of the West,” any enthusiastic embrace of it by an African cultural worker might simply need to be seen in light of Onoge’s idea of “mellifluous universalism” that takes for granted the cultural potentials of Africa which humanity might need for its security and sustenance.<sup>44</sup> This precisely is where Peeters’ concern for the protection of Africa against the imposition of “decadent agenda” must be well appreciated.<sup>45</sup> Any ideology wrapped up in and promoted through the concept of globalization needs to be held suspect.

## Conclusion

Contemporary discourses under the heading African indigenous ritual drama or African ritual drama should rather be conducted under the heading African indigenous ritual performance. It should also be considered an “inherited mandate.”<sup>46</sup> This is because scholarly interest in African indigenous rituals dates back to the colonial era of Western anthropologists before the advancement of the interest by Africanist and African scholars of African culture. And African literary enterprise (both as critical and creative engagements) has striven like other allied disciplines to deliver this mandate. As a duty, its discharge has been in line with the demands of specific postcolonial African socio-economic-cum-political conditions. Like other categories of cultural practices of diverse African peoples, the discourse of African indigenous rituals often finds easy accommodation within any cultural project aimed at African historico-cultural restoration, both politically informed and otherwise. In Nigeria, such latitude was provided for the discourse of cultural matters such as ritual festivals in the Festival of Arts and Culture sponsored by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1977. The Centre for Black Culture (CCBAC), the Centre for Black Culture and International Understanding (CBCIU), centers and institutes for the study of African culture, and related matters located in our higher institutions of learning are also parts of the scholarly enterprise through which discourses bordering on core cultural matters such as rituals are sustained.

The general recognition of ritual as a noteworthy cultural phenomenon in the early nineteenth century need be factored in when African rituals like other vital indigenous cultural forms are being discussed. That is, the debate surrounding it often framed essentially in what may be termed “exclusionary” postcolonial mode cannot be said to be appropriate in extending the frontiers of knowledge along the axis of the worth of cultural practices inherited from the past.<sup>47</sup> In other words, that scholars of Western origin have given commendable appraisal to rituals, particularly African rituals, should confer a cross-cultural deracialized status on rituals as a subject of scholarly discourse. The “essentialist” postcolonial mode of reception of African indigenous rituals should therefore first be subjected to critical examination. Generating an accretion of the fragments of knowledge of indigenous African ritual practices may be difficult given the gamut of scholarly outputs that exists in respect of its explanation and understanding within the postcolonial circumstances. There is, on the whole, the need to consciously safeguard African rituals. The need to properly reorganize discourses surrounding them across all the allied disciplines must be recognized. Perhaps, we are at a most crucial point in time when the world’s attention must shift to Africa. Certainly, African cultures such as the Yoruba that have numerous ritual practices in their sphere of cultural control have a prominent role to play if rituals would appeal as some possible panacea to global socio-cultural and ecological crises that the world continues to face.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the form of intellectual discourse that rituals could attract would be shaped by the discursive property of the cultural modernities, which the contemporary African cultures now have to tolerate. These cultural modernities are an offshoot of the postcolonial predicament of Africa. It is of necessity that the entire African contemporary epistemological systems *vis-a-vis* ritual practices in particular, and other ancient cultural forms in general are carefully interrogated. This is with a view to ensuring a thorough democratization of African epistemological systems to the extent of disinfecting them of all forms of fallacies and

unqualified anathema. That is, the African subject to discuss, who to discuss it, and how to discuss it should not just be determined within the knowledge enclosure of racial pride or an enclosure framed with the excessive emotion triggered by racial denigration. Doing this will enhance the disclosure of the true value of indigenous African rituals. It will help to discourage undue equating of cultural phenomena and conditions, reductive inferences and assumptions, over-assumptions, conceptual ambiguities and impropriety among others. African scholarship must be bold. What is at stake is ultimately an inward movement to re-addressing “the African self” rather than merely or even critically engaging with the “other.” As the cultural affairs of Africa are increasingly made complex and complicated by modernity and its newest manifestation—globalization—African scholarly tradition still conveniently exists as a shadow cast by the Western epistemological tradition when it should be in the active re-constitutive process. To be seen to be active in this sense is to be seen taking on the challenge headlong. In this way, our conceptual application must be well informed as African cultural matters are engaged for intellectual purpose. The present proposition that drama be replaced with performance in the discourse of African indigenous ritual performances might be a paltry reaction to a very engaging challenge, for the whole of the contemporary African epistemological approaches vis-à-vis African indigenous cultures is no doubt in dire need of total overhauling.

## Notes

- 1 Laitin, quoted in van Staden 1998, p.17.
- 2 This, in addition to similar calls at other fora, was a central concern of the maiden edition of African Studies Association of Africa’s (ASAA) conference held at the University of Ibadan in 2015.
- 3 Globalization cannot be divorced from modernity. This is the point Tomlinson makes with the phrase “the complex and multiform interrelations, penetrations and cultural mutations that characterize the globalization of our current stage of modernity.” For further reading, see Tomlinson 1999, p.105. Giddens’ definition of globalization, which aligns with Urry’s, is also relevant here: a process by which happenings in one place affect those in other places that are remote in time and in terms of geographical location. See Giddens 1990 and Urry 2003, p. 39.
- 4 An important point pertinent to adopting a “culture-specific” approach in the study of indigenous practices like rituals in this milieu of globalization is made by Christo van Staden: “Being ‘culture-specific’ may easily become a strategy of harnessing knowledge of cultural difference to the end of cultural hegemony. Being ‘culture-specific may [...] become a means of appropriating local knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and practices for global information markets, at the risk of essentialising such local information in neat packages that makes consumption easier and more attractive” See van Staden 1998, p. 20.
- 5 Mudimbe 1988 and 1994, provide explanations on the several and often disparate cultures that the concept “Africa” refers to.

- 6 For a fuller discussion, see Ali, Asiwaju, and Oloruntinmehin 1988, especially the chapters by Ajayi, Nukuna, and Osanyin.
- 7 Ogunba 1969, Soyinka 1976, and Ibitokun 1993, among others favour this manner of applying the concept in scholarly discourses.
- 8 Omigbule 205, p. 159.
- 9 For further reading, see Echeruo and Rotimi 1981
- 10 Soyinka 1976, pp. 1-36.
- 11 For further reading, see Finnegan 1970.
- 12 Bell 1992, p. 7.
- 13 Hulme 1995, p. 120.
- 14 Jacob quoted in Loomba 2005, p. xi.
- 15 Loomba 2005, p. 19.
- 16 Kirby 1969, pp. xiv-xviii.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 See Driver 1991, p. 32 for the opinion that “twentieth [...] an age in which the decline of ritual sensibility, particularly in the Western industrialized nations, has become a threat to the survival of life on earth.”
- 19 For further reading, see Kirby 1969.
- 20 The need to rescue African societies from the “seizure” predominates in the various presentations at the recently held First International Conference of the African Studies Association of Africa Conference held in University of Ibadan, Ibadan. Lots of emotion was expressed by many presenters and discussants on the situation. The pathos that marked the observations and submissions of some paper presenters including the present writer was deep. The theme of the conference “African Studies in the Twenty-First Century: Past, Present & Future” seems to have attracted these.
- 21 Ifowodo 2013, p. ix.
- 22 Biakolo 1998, p. 2.
- 23 Omigbule 2015, p. 159.
- 24 Rappaport 1999, p. 38.
- 25 Driver 1991, p. 31.
- 26 Driver 1991, pp. 80-82.
- 27 Robin 2009, p. 294.
- 28 Driver 1991, p. 23.
- 29 In Adefuye 2011, p. 10, we are told that “Ethnocentrism [is ] the source of such historical practices as the Hamitic hypothesis [...] African historiography has, of course, largely overcome the major effects of European ethnocentrism, but must turn their attention to ethnocentrism within their own continent and individual nations.”
- 30 Driver 1991, p. 24.
- 31 Nasidi 2002; Omigbule 2015, p. 159.
- 32 Driver 1991, p. 82.
- 33 This recommendation appears in Echeruo 1981, pp. 137-50.

34 For further elaboration, see Soyinka 2007, pp. 31-50; and Kukah 2007, p. 41 contains a pertinent submission that is noteworthy here.

35 Nasidi 2002, p. 84.

36 van Staden 1998, p. 23 and Yakubu Nasidi 2002, p. 117 are some useful references on the use of these terms. While van Staden uses the term neo-imperialism in his articulation of the discourse of African colonial experience and "Africa's current marginalized position within globalized economies," Nasidi's Marxist discourse of African literature as a postcolonial subject makes use of terms such as "neocolonialism" and "bourgeois hegemony" among others to recommend to the African-centered creative artist a countering of "deleterious effect of globalisation [...] through cultural action," which "will require a massive rejection of current practice, and a reorientation of our fundamental values, and with it a questioning of our basic goals, and over-all educational policy."

37 For one very pertinent line of thought on globalization, see Nasidi 2004, p. 10. Indeed, we should think along the same line with Nasidi so that we are wary of not just the "deleterious effects" of globalization but those posed by modernity in other guises in order to be able to re-orientate African fundamental values, set basic African goals, and overhaul the African educational policy.

38 Mattelart 2000, p. 1.

39 van Staden 1998, p. 23.

40 Featherstone 1995, cited in van Staden 1998, p. 23.

41 Walsh 1948, pp. 231-38.

42 Driver 1991, p. 32.

43 Peeters 2007, p. 4.

44 Bourdieu 1998, p. 19; Onoge 1985, p. 21.

45 Peeters 2014, p. 6.

46 George 2007.

47 See Armand Mattelart 2000, p. 1 for the use of the word "exclusionary" and further reading.

48 See Walsh 1948, pp. 231-38, about the numerous ritual festivals of the Yoruba.

## References

Adefuye, Ade. 2011. *Culture, Diplomacy and the Making of a New Nigeria*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization.

Adelugba, Dapo. 1981. "Trance and Theatre: The Nigerian Experience." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 203-18.

Amankulor, James N. 1981. "Ekpe Festival as Religious Ritual and Dance Drama." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 136-47.

Beier, Ulli. 1955. "The Historical and Psychological Significance of Yoruba Myths." *Odu* 1: 17-25.

Bell, Catherine. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bourdieu Pierre. 1998. *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myth of Our Time*. Translated by Richard Nice. London: Polity Press.
- Clark, J. P. 1981. "Aspects of Nigerian Drama." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 57-74.
- Craig, E. Gordon. 1969. "Übermarionette." In by E. T. Kirby (ed.), *Total Theatre* (New York: E.P. Dutton) 33-57.
- Drewal, Margret T. 1992. *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Driver, Tom F. 1991. *Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Communities*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Echeruo, M. J. C. 1981. "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Rituals." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 136-48.
- Enekwe, Ossie. 1981. "Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 149-163.
- Featherstone, Mike. 1995. *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*. London: Sage.
- Finnegan, R. 1970. *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Oxford Univ. Press.
- George, Olakunle. 2007. "Inherited Mandate in African Literary Criticism: The Intrinsic Paradigm." In Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (eds.), *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticisms* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Horn, Andrew. "Ritual, Drama and the Theatrical: The Case of Bori Spirit Mediumship." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 181-202.
- Horton, Robin. 1981. "The Gods as Guests: An Aspect of Kalabari Religious Life." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 81-112.
- Hulme, P. 1995 "Including America." *Ariel*. 26.1: 117-23.
- Ibitokun, Benedict M. 1993. *Dance as Ritual Drama and Entertainment in the Gelede of the Ketu-Yoruba subgroup in West Africa (A Study in Traditional African Feminism)*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University.
- Ifowodo, Ogaga. 2013. *History, Trauma, and Healing in Postcolonial Narratives: Reconstructing Identities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kernodle, George R. 1969. "Wagner, Appia, and the Idea of Musical Design." In E. T. Kirby (ed.), *Total Theatre* (New York: E.P. Dutton): 9-19.

- Kirby, E. T. 1969. "Introduction." In E. T. Kirby (ed.), *Total Theatre* (New York: E.P. Dutton): xiii-xxxi.
- Kofoworola, E. O. 1981. "Traditional Forms of Hausa Drama." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 164-80.
- Kukah, Matthew Hassan. 2007. *Religion, Culture and the Politics of Development*. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization.
- Law, Robin. 2009. "The 'Harmitic Hypothesis' in Indigenous West African Historical Thought." *History in Africa* 36: 293-314.
- Loomba, Ania. 2005. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. "Introduction." London: Routledge.
- Lyons, Charles R. 1969. "Gordon Craig's Concept of the Actor." In E. T. Kirby (ed.), *Total Theatre* (New York: E.P. Dutton): 58-77.
- Mattelart, Armand. 2000. *Networking the World, 1794-2000*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Menegbe, A. D. 2011. "An Analysis of Jigbe as a Traditional Dramatic Performance." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*. 8.1: 27-31.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. 1994. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1988. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nasidi, Yakubu. 2002. *Beyond the Experience of Limits: Theory, Criticism and Power in African Literature*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*. Translated by W.M.A. Hausmann. New York: Gordon Press.
- Nzekwu, Onuora. 1981. "Masquerade." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 131-35.
- Ogunba, Oyin. 1971/72. "Studying Traditional African Literature." *Black Orpheus*. 2. 7: 42-51.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1967. "Ritual Drama of Ijebu People." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ibadan.
- Okondo, Ikechukwu. 2012. "African Traditional Drama: The Igbo Experience." *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3.2: 131-36.
- Olúpòṅà, Jacob K. 2011. *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination*. London: University of California Press.
- Omigbule M. B. 2015. "Discourse of African Rituals: Evaluating Selected Critical Perspectives on African Ritual Drama." *Ife: Journal of the Institute of Cultural Studies* 11: 159.
- Onoge, Omafume F. 1985. "The Crisis of Consciousness in Modern African Literature." In George M. Gugelberger (ed.), *Maxism and Modern African Literature* (London: James Currey): 21-49.

- Peeters, Marguerite A. 2014. *Twenty Years of "Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights" in Africa: Achievements of their Transnational Agents in African Political Institutions since Cairo, and Their Post-2015 Strategy: Challenges for the Church*. Brussels: Dialogue Dynamics on Human Identity and Global Governance. (<https://awestruck.tv/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Twenty-years-of-SRHR-in-Africa.pdf>).
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *The Globalization of the Western Cultural Revolution: Key Concepts, Operational Mechanisms*. Translated by Benedict Kobus. Brussels: Institute for Intercultural Dynamics.
- Rappaport, Roy A. 1999. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rotimi, Ola. 1981. "The Drama in African Ritual Display." In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine): 77-80.
- Soyinka, Wole. 2008. "The Tolerant Gods." In J. K. Olupona and Terry Ray (eds.), *Orisa Devotion as World Religion* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press): 31-50.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1976. *Myth Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Stratton, Florence. 2007. "Exclusionary Practices in African Literary Criticism". In Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (eds.), *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticisms* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
- Tomlinson, John. 1999. *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Urry John. 2003. *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- van Staden, Christo. 1998. "Using Culture in African Contexts". In P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge): 15-25.
- Walsh, Michael J. 1948. "The Edi Festival at Ile-Ife." *African Affairs* 47.189: 231-38.