

Elements of Theatre in Contemporary African Cultural Performances

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to evaluate theatrical elements evident in contemporary African cultural performances in a bid to demonstrate that elements of both ancient and modern African theatre existed prior to the introduction of western drama in the continent. The study analyses contemporary cultural performances to identify the dramatic and theatrical elements evident in the traditional performances. It deploys performance and theatre semiotics theory, and also relies on postulations of scholars like Solomon Obidah Yamma and Ruth Finnegan on the relationship between orature and theatre in Africa. It uses descriptive and analytical methods to underline important practical, philosophical, aesthetic, and psychological considerations in determining the artistic quality of traditional African performances. It relies on qualitative data obtained through participant observation and textual analysis of selected cultural performances, such as Sikhebo of the Bukusu, Koito of the Nandi and Okhusaba of the Bakhayo of Luhya. From the analysis, the study reveals that these performances depict elements of both ancient and modern African theatre, and that contemporary African theatre is a harmonization of both traditional forms that existed before the period of colonial contact and Western forms of entertainment. Therefore, African traditional theatre has been in existence since the beginning of African societies; because it is the society that gives birth to the theatre of a particular locality and period in history. Traditional African theatre is rooted in secular and sacred rites that exist in the form of festivals, myths/legends, narratives and other artistic practices which Africans created for themselves. These theatrical creative activities are the live-wire of drama and theatre in Africa. The study contributes to the curation and preservation of indigenous theatrical elements evident in traditional African performances as a bedrock of modern African theatre, and enriches discourses on the place and the role of traditional African theatre in African indigenous literary performances.

Key Words: *Elements of Theatre, Contemporary African, Cultural Performances,*

INTRODUCTION

Drama, as a genre of literature, originates from ritual. Therefore, ritual ceremonies can be examined for their dramatic structure and meaning. Rozik (2002) argues that traditional rituals constitute the roots of modern drama. As such, this study assumes that, to better understand modern drama, it is appropriate to examine its dramatic foundations of age-old rituals in the African context as an origin of African traditional theatre. Theatre in general entails the enactment of a written dramatic script. It also encompasses the spaces and the processes involved in the staging of a dramatic piece (Coddington, 2020). Subsequently, theatre is also the entire production, performance and experience of a dramatic piece. A successful production of theatre requires both the theatre crew and the audience

who are the consumers of the production. Therefore theatre, as a form of literary performance, also originates from ritual.

Ritual is understood as the unchanging and repetitive human actions that ascribe to specific or standardized rules. According to Brown (1991), rituals include “not only worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults, but also rites of passage, atonement and purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, coronations and presidential inaugurations, marriages, funerals and more”. Bell (1997) states that the performance of a ritual adopts a theatrical framework in which actions and events have a symbolic meaning to both the actors and the audiences or participants. Therefore, rituals can be examined for their theatrical structure and meaning. Rozik (2002) argues that traditional rituals constitute the roots of modern theatre and drama. For this reason, this study assumes that, to better understand modern theatre and drama, it is appropriate to examine their foundations in age-old rituals such as those of circumcision. While tracing the origin of African theatre, Eurocentric critics observe that African theatre developed due to the European influence, especially after the colonial invasion by colonial masters. Contrary to the Eurocentric school of thought, Afrocentric critics hold the view that the origin of African theatre and drama is rooted in theatrical dramatic rituals, festivals and magical practices, dances and songs within the African context that were in existence in pre-colonial Africa.

The African continent prior to the coming of the Europeans and their colonial hegemony, was rich with community-based cultural activities that related to their social way life that is culture, beliefs, taboos and traditional religion. These African performances re-enacted real events both creatively and imaginatively. These performances entailed community-based activities fulfilled and yet to be fulfilled in the future. For instance, during circumcision ceremonies in the Luhya community, the initiates (*basiinde*) and surgeons (*bakhebi*) would tell the society at large what happened in the previous years of circumcision rituals, the strength and the challenges, hence providing the possible solutions and expectations required by the initiates in the present circumcision rituals. The audience were thus extremely careful in imitating exactly what had happened. Whenever they wanted to communicate what would happen in a religious ceremony where they would request their gods to increase their harvest or children, they initially had to imitate whatever outcome they desired to achieve.

African rituals, dramatic performances in terms of theatrical stages, adopted open and found spaces for their re-enactment. They were held in open gatherings whose audiences were active, and whose imitation and the representations of these activities were loaded with vivid artistic and realistic features. These theatrical performances fulfilled a number of social functions of the communities such as cultural heritage preservation, education, religious practices, and for entertainment on various occasions. Accordingly, imitation, which is considered to be the basis of drama, plays a significant role in these African dramatic performances that are the combination of magical rituals, dances, songs and religious rites. Africans had to play act impeccably as their intention was either to change the undesirable or to maintain the desirable in their lives.

African theatre originated from these dramatic-cum-ritual performances, which were meant for live audiences and sought to fulfil authentic community needs. Thus, traditional African societies instinctively employed deliberate techniques in their performances. In narratives, for example, spoken theatrical performances were used. Hence features of theatre, such as music, dancing, mimicry, masks and costumes completed the oral tradition of storytelling. Songs and dances were central to all the practices celebrating battle, rain, birth, marriage, death or any other ordinary event in the community's social life. Songs were not only decorations of the event; they were integral parts of the conversation,

of the event or of the ceremony. Although African drama's theatrical roots are ancient, written African dramas are a 20th century phenomenon. The pre-colonial dramatic performances were meant to fulfil the community needs of the African societies. However, colonial encounters may have urged Africans to be propagandists in their dramas; modern African theatre is hence an amalgam of traditional dramatic theatrical performances and modern influences, especially due to socio-political changes in society.

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN THEATRE (TAT) VERSUS MODERN AFRICAN THEATRE

Prior to the coming of Europeans, traditional African theatre with its distinct elements were in existence. Unfortunately, some scholars, specifically the Eurocentric as summarised in the Evolutionist school led by M. J. C Echeruo, have argued that modern African theatre and drama is totally new to Africans. To them, "Africa has no culture or history or African history and civilization are nothing more than the story of European activities in Africa" (Ajayi, 2007). Cultural performances, festivals, rituals, among others, constitute some of the oldest forms of theatrical and dramatic performances in Africa. Much of past research into this genre has examined the musicality and dances together with the origin of traditional drama in relation to the performances (Ahmadu, 2018; Wasambo, 2014; Wantsusi, 2011). Such studies have treated modern African theatre as existing solely due to European influence. The theatrical elements that go into the production of these traditional performances are hardly considered during research. There is also a need to establish standards for critiquing the traditional cultural performances based, not on Eurocentric, but traditional African aesthetics and values. This study traces the elements of theatre in traditional African cultural performances in order to provide a framework for examining modern African theatre in ways more relevant to Africa. It specifically describes the origin, elements of theatre, theatrical themes implied in African performances and analyses the theatrical and dramatic elements as literary features included in the traditional African performances.

Available scholarly writings, such as Ahmadu (2018), Wasambo (2014) and Wantsusi (2011), have presented the theatrical and dramatic elements as traditional African rituals and festivals in general. Khamala (2009), in particular, has presented African rituals, namely the circumcision ceremony of Bamasaaba people, in an anthropological way, by preoccupying himself with the origin of circumcision rituals, reasons as to why the Bamasaaba people circumcise and so on. Yet African theatre has deep historical roots, often intertwined with religious and communal practices. According to Nwankwo, the origins of African theatre can be traced back to ancient rituals and festivals that served both secular and religious purposes. This blending of the sacred and the secular is a hallmark of African performance traditions, where storytelling is not merely entertainment but also a means of preserving history and cultural identity (Nwankwo, 2005). Other works in contemporary cultural performances in Kenya have focused mostly on issues of feminism (Otieno, 2000; Chetambe, 2012), child-centeredness (Tsikhungu, 2008) and narrative strategies (Kinya, 2008).

These studies highlight some of the theatrical features that render contemporary cultural performances as educational theatre. Consequently, they have focused on theatrical topics around students' education theatre in Africa, but they do not provide a link between modern theatre and traditional African performances. This study revisits the Afrocentric school of thought with regard to the existence of African theatre in pre-colonial Africa. It argues that African traditional theatre has been in existence since the beginning of African societies; because it is the society that gives birth to the theatre of a region and period in history. African theatre is rooted in secular and sacred rites that existed as festivals, myths/legends, short stories and other artistic practices, and which Africans

created for themselves. Okoye (2019) avers that African theatre is deeply rooted in oral traditions, which have evolved into diverse performance styles, including storytelling, dance, and masquerades. This evolution is documented in works like *African Theatre 18*, which highlights the complexity and richness of African performance culture. Traditional African theatre serves as a medium for expressing cultural identity and fostering social change, therefore, African cultural theatrical performances engage with cultural narratives and community issues, reflecting on the transformative power of theatre in both local and diaspora contexts (Igweonu & Okagbue, 2014).

Contemporary African theatre has significantly impacted global theatre practices by challenging Western norms and introducing new aesthetics. Research by Emmanuel Dickson-Bonney illustrates how African performance styles influence storytelling methods worldwide, fostering cross-cultural dialogue (Dickson-Bonney & Oliver, 2023). Many studies focus on the participatory nature of African performances, where audience interaction plays a crucial role in shaping the experience. This aspect is often contrasted with Western theatre's more passive audience roles (Dickson-Bonney & Oliver, 2023; Banham, 2022). Much of existing literature has employed interdisciplinary methodologies to analyse cultural performances, integrating perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to understand the broader implications of African theatre practices (Okagbue, 2007). Dickson-Bonney and Oliver (2023) affirm that traditional African theatre was characterised by key elements that are still visible in contemporary cultural performances. These include the integration of oral tradition and community engagement. They note that oral storytelling is fundamental to African theatre. Performances often include proverbs, folktales, and myths that convey moral lessons and cultural values. The oral nature allows for flexibility and adaptability, making each performance unique to its context. Dickson-Bonney and Oliver also aver that unlike Western theatre, which often emphasizes a passive audience role, African theatre fosters active participation. The audience is integral to the performance, influencing its direction through their reactions and interactions. This participatory aspect enhances communal bonds and collective experiences.

Another important element of African theatre is aesthetic diversity. According to Okagbue and Kasule (2021), African theatre showcases a wide range of aesthetic expressions influenced by regional cultures. This diversity includes various performance styles such as dance-drama, physical theatre, and puppetry, each serving distinct cultural functions while contributing to a broader theatrical repertoire. Contemporary African theatre, along with other cultural performances, are also imbued with social commentary and satire, which is not a recent feature of African performances in general. Traditional performances also reflected societal issues and political contexts. Scholars have noted that African theatre historically serves as a platform for political action and social critique, using satire and allegory to address contemporary challenges faced by communities (Gillespie, 2011).

This study analyses three contemporary cultural performances and how they reflect elements of traditional theatre in Africa, namely the Kalenjin and Bakhayo marital engagement ceremonies of *Koito* and *Okhusaba*, respectively, and *Sikhebo*, the Bukusu circumcision ritual. In a recent study, Kangogo (2020) has examined elements of drama in *Koito*. She describes such features as song and dance, integration of community imagery and symbolism, community engagement among others as key theatrical features of the ceremony. However, Kangogo does not trace how these features reflect the existence of African theatre before the introduction of western theatre. Khaemba, Magak and Bwonya (2019) have examined *Sikhebo* as an acculturated drama, and noted that the rite of passage is structured in a dramatic form, with distinct characters, conflict, plot, spectacle and characterization, but have fallen short of linking these features to traditional African theatre, as this study has attempted.

PERFORMANCE AND THEATRE SEMIOTICS THEORY IN AFRICAN THEATRE

Performance theory involves the total framework of the interaction between the oral piece, the artists, the occasion and the audience that work out a total achievement of the aesthetic realization. The proponents of this theory are Schechner (2003) and Austin (1962). Schechner's key argument is that drama is not merely a segment of the stage, but of daily living, and it cuts across societies. As he puts it, "It is important to develop and articulate theories concerning how performances are regenerated, transmitted, received and evaluated in pursuit of these goals, (since) performance studies is insistently intercultural, inter-generic and inter-disciplinary" (Schechner, 2003). The performer's dramatization of the various moods and actions give life to the performances in Africa. The origin of theatre is therefore fully contextualized in regard to the story or plot, the participants, and the features of language use, as well as the integration of performance in the African context that resonate well with the theatrical elements. Indeed, it is quite hard to trace African theatre without looking at the African traditional performances, rituals and festivals, which, when staged, embody elements of theatre.

Theatre semiotics lays a foundation to argue that the African theatre and drama festival is an activity involving performance embedded in systems of signs and significations that help pass messages to a particular audience. This study utilises the semiotics theory propounded by Keir Elam (1980) in his publication *Semiotics, Theatre and Drama* and as modified by Marvin Carlson (1990) in his work on *Theatre Semiotics, Signs of Life*. Elam (2002) and Minishi (2019) define semiotics as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in the society using the different sign systems and codes that are at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby. Their views resonate well with that of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of semiotics in linguistics, who argues that theatre and performing arts in general have simply appropriated what the linguists developed to explain the processes of generation of meaning in linguistic communication. This theoretical perspective mirrors Oliver Minishi's (2019) idea of semiotic signs in the modern African theatre. Theatre semioticians, like Elam (2002), argue that the transaction between the audience and the performer warrants and amounts to what can be termed as 'theatrical communication' which is just a variation of communication. This theatrical communication is embedded in theatrical systems which are equivalent to the Saussurean linguistic systems.

This study was conducted in Western Kenya, it was qualitative by design, and it targeted traditional African cultural performances performed locally for both social and cultural competitions. It purposively sampled three cultural performances, namely one circumcision rite (specifically *Sikhebo* of the Bukusu), two cultural marriage engagement performances (*Koito* of the Nandi and *Okhusaba* of the Bakhayo of Luhya community). It used descriptive and analytical methods to underline important practical, philosophical, aesthetic, and psychological considerations in determining the artistic quality of African cultural performances. It relied on qualitative data obtained through participant observation and textual analysis of selected cultural performances. Field research was carried out from Nov 2023 to April 2024. Through participant observation and close reading and textual analysis of performance scripts, the traditional performances were examined to identify elements of modern African theatre.

African traditional theatre is an expression of the people, institutions and experience of the communal society. It is a creation of the African person's social and historic experience that attempt to explain the relationship that exists between humans, the gods and the environment. Africans constructed meaning and gave interpretations from their daily interactions. Nwosu and Uchegbu (2015) state that: "Evolutionary trend of African theatre shows evolutionary indices similar to that of the Western theatre. Therefore, this is similitude of a ritualistic beginning, precisely from religious worship and rituals." The African traditional theatre is ambivalent as it expresses the traditional historic thought

encased in the totality of the culture evolved in attempts to meet with challenges of the environment. It lifts the circumstances of existence in a conflictual environment into entertainment. This implies that it does not only give mimetic impulse but also expresses a unified design that is perceivable by the people for whom it is meant. It expresses all aspects of the traditional society and gives meaning to the people and their institutions. It presents the culture, which comprises of institutions, people and civilization. According to Duruaku (2015), “Traditional African drama refers to indigenous African performing art forms that have not been corrupted by modernization over the years. They include those found in festivals, which combine dance, song, music, chant, speech/dialogue, spectacle etc.”

African’s pre-colonial history, the subsequent colonial experience and the complexities of its postcolonial realities exert enormous influence on the continent’s theatre. Thus the uniqueness of African theatre stems from the colonial encounter and other African experimental issues. Historical and politico-economic factors have also affected the nature, theory and practice of African theatre. Nwosu and Uchegbu (2015) opine that “Traditional African theatre is the pre-colonial ‘nature theatre’ which has its roots in African religious rituals and is modelled after the Agrarian, egalitarian and communal African society.” Man saw the environment as filled with unpredictable and implacable forces. Therefore, Nwosu and Uchegbu affirm, “Traditional African theatre evolved out of the struggle by the African to gain mastery over nature and understand the phenomenon of the nebulous cosmos.” The processes that seemed to have the desired result were accepted and repeated as the role of the behavioural ritual while those on the contrary were discarded. Eventually, stories arose that severed the mysteries of these rites and natural events. These rites were performed in their places of origin or taken to other places depending on the purpose. Thus, the place of occurrence became the shrine. It is germane to state that all types of traditional rites drew audiences. The audiences were participants and observers of the rites. They would always be found in such rites as circumcision ceremonies, marriages, burials and chieftaincy installations. But the passage of time and the increasing social interaction may necessitate the performance of certain rites out of the context of origin which might compel moderation to suit the purpose. Again such rites may be abundant but the stories around such rituals harden into myths which provide another source for the theatre. As such, African dramatic performances are total or ensemble in nature, they are theatrical and communal in character.

Oral performances were done as part of social events that brought people together and inspired commitment to common goals and community spirit. It was a platform of social interaction, and encouraged a spirit of communalism and participation, and also served religious functions. Much of modern African theatre traces its origin to traditional rituals in the continent. These rituals included religious rites in which theatrical performances were used to explain the spirit world and its connection to the world of the living. More importantly, the performances served the function of delighting. Children’s games and songs enabled children to experience fully their moments of childhood. The performances also had an educational value, since they were a means for passing down important virtues across generations.

The modern African dance, dubbed the ‘Creative Cultural Dance’ in drama festival competitions, has all the hallmarks of Traditional African Theatre. In its execution, all movements must be danced, all scenes and theatrical movements must be acted, and it must tell a story through the dance motives, the synchronized dancing styles, and the well harmonised songs in a clearly well-choreographed dance outline. The three cultural performances analysed here depict these distinct theatrical elements. The engagement ceremonies of *Koito* of the Nandi and *Okhusaba* of the Bakhayo of Luhya begin with two intending couples (main characters) and gradually morph into community affairs in which

two families are introduced and united. This process leads to inter-family and inter-community engagement. In *Koito*, for example, the song *Iyoni Ng'o Tumi* (Who Welcomes this Rite?), is a call-and-response exchange that invites the entire bridal entourage to participate actively in the celebration. In *Okhusaba*, the song *Mbao Vengira Abakhwe Mudala* (Here Comes the Son-in-Law in the Compound) is intended to welcome the son-in-law back home and culturally integrates him into the family of the bride.

Similarly, *sikhebo* breaks into the scene with a single individual (a young man informing his father of the intentions to face the knife) and then gradually evolves into an acculturated drama with several characters playing distinct roles. In *sikhebo*, the song *Omusindee eeh... okhabona mukhebi wekana* (Yes the initiate, don't be afraid when you see the circumciser) is intended to instil courage on the initiate; it also mocks and encourages him to face the knife. The ceremonies are also uniquely punctuated with various songs and dances that enhance the tempo and dramatic plot and structure. They are situated in specific locations or stages of performance and follow distinct programmes or scripts. However, there is a lot of improvisation that is visible in the actual renderings of these performances, especially the engagement ceremonies. Dance (1932) defines dramatic action as that which reveals a character or rather reveals thoughts that go through the mind of a character and determines his/her overt acts, which in turn reveal what kind of person he/she is. Thomas (2005) and Minishi (2019) view plot and structure in theatre production as both a scriptwriter's work and the director's headache, since the actions are supposed to be done in such a way that they reveal the thoughts that go on in a character's mind on stage. Styan (1960) observes that elements of drama are those that build the events on stage (the score), the way these events may be put together (orchestration) and the reaction of the playgoer (values). The score has dialogue and use of words. Orchestration has sequence, tempo, characters and continuity. Values entail audience participation and judgment. Sanger (2001) also holds that plot has an exposition, rising action, climax and falling action. According to Brockett and Ball (2009) plot is the overall structure of a play and dance and it has a beginning, a middle and an end in the Aristotelian fashion. The beginning establishes some or all of these: place, occasion, character, mood, theme and the internal logical that will be followed. Exposition is the setting forth of information usually about earlier events, the identity and relationship of characters and the present situation (p. 39).

This is a view supported by Wilson and Goldfarb (2002) who note that dramatic structure is the framework of the dramatic action that includes conflict, pace and tension; all within time and space. They argue that the essential elements of dramatic structure are story, plot, action, conflict, and lastly, a balance being struck between the opposing forces. Minishi (2019) concurs when he points out that the plot is what actually happens on stage and not what is talked about; that opposing forces are people determined to achieve their goals. Thus, a dramatic structure has obstacles and complications that are occasioned by the movement of characters through a series of steps alternating in between achievement and defeat, hope and despair, so that the moment they accomplish one goal, a new hurdle or challenge is thrown up, which they must strive to overcome. These hurdles that block a character's path, or outside forces introduced at the inopportune moment, are what leads to crisis and climax as elements of dramatic structure. Minishi also observes that crisis results from conflicts, obstacles and complications that characters are involved in. Resolutions of one crisis leads to another until a final and most significant one, which is the climax. All these observed features are found in the 'Cultural Creative Dance'.

The performances of *Koito* of the Nandi, *Okhusaba* of the Bakhayo and *sikhebo* of the Bukusu are imbued with oral narratives, proverbs, riddles, epic narratives, songs and dances. They have distinct

characters that play unique and important roles. The characterization processes involve aspects of language such as register and dress code. Characters involved both the performer or performers and the audiences. The modern-day aspect of casting was strictly followed. In traditional theatrical African oral performances, participants were cast/selected based on their ability and their appearances. Regardless of the method used in casting these characters, type casting and casting against the type, they serve the African theatre for different functions. Different types of performances were undertaken for different purposes with different characters. It is the type of the performance that dictated the gender of the characters to be used. For instance, in traditional Africa, storytelling activities were gender-based; so that men told stories to boys and women told stories to girls. However, women, especially the grandmother, were the natural storytellers; they were the custodians of oral narratives. The age of characters in African performances varied depending on the age functionality of African ritual and festivals being staged. Modern African theatre draws from these casting techniques of traditional African orature performances. In *Koito*, the main cast comprises the bride and the groom and their respective families. In *Okhusaba* the main character is the son-in-law, then the mother of the bride, and the bride's family members. These characters are brought together to share in a theatrically symbolic meal in the house of the mother-in-law. In *Sikhebo*, the major characters are the initiates (omusinde), the circumciser (omukhebi), the 'chearers' (vekhuminya) and the extended families of the initiates. In all these ceremonies, kinships are cast together to partake in culturally scripted dramatic narrative. The selection of the casts involved in these cultural performances are predetermined by the function and cultural norms.

Koito, *Okhusaba* and *sikhebo* are scripted both in writing and verbally. They follow well laid-down programmes of activities that contribute to the overall dramatic and narrative experience of the people involved. In many cases, theatre exercise begins with script. The script in traditional orature performances existed in the collective memory and consciousness of the people. Orature is living literature; hence, performance is at once the process of scripting and enacting the script. The orature performances in traditional Africa were carefully staged. Rituals had order and were measured according to duration and functions. Just like in traditional performances, the script in modern African theatre is the blueprint for stage presentations and is provided by the script writer or playwright. The script is the starting point of the theatrical performance and it always begins from simple to complex. With regard to African traditional oral theatre, the script is what the oral artist chooses as the blueprint to build a production. In the script, the oral artist dramatizes issues, concepts, ideas, by transforming them into actions.

Dramatizing an African performances entails creating a dramatic structure that brings a story to life. Though the African script could not be written, the oral artist had it in his mind. In coming up with the script, the oral artist was influenced by a number of factors, such as the intended audience, the oral artist's current views about human conditions, social, political and economic and how the performer perceived the truth around him or her. Similarly, in modern African theatre, when developing a script, the performer must understand the established artistic and theatrical conventions of the stage. For African theatre to be purposeful, the script needs to be rich, it must have its internal laws and some kind of framework which will give it shape, strength and meaning. In traditional African oral theatre, the script was revealed orally in the event or social situation which formed the context of performance.

The director is the nerve centre of the theatre experience and brings together and coordinates into an organic whole the various elements of the production such as the script, the performer, the design team and lighting crew. In traditional African oral theatre, the director was represented by the head of

the social event in which the performance was undertaken. In a ritual, for example, the diviner or priest of the gods, provided guidelines on the steps to follow during performance. Therefore, the directional concept derives from a controlling idea of the performances, vision or point of view which the director feels is appropriate to the production. The dictates of this traditional director in African oral theatre were embedded within performance, just like the ideological orientations of the director in modern African theatre are infused into a staging of a play. The goal of directing, in both modern African theatre and traditional African oral performances, is to generate a unified theatrical experience for the audience and the community at large. In African oral theatre, therefore, the directors were responsible for ensuring that the oral artistic idea (script) was re-enacted fully. The directors in these ceremonies are the cultural masters and mistresses of ceremony who understand the rituals and guide the processes towards the fulfilment of the dramatic plot.

In *Koito*, *Okhusaba* and *sikhebo*, costumes take the form of well-selected and distinct ceremonial attire that is both culturally and contextually appropriate. Costumes are terms used to denote the items and clothes used/worn by performers during the actual performance. In traditional African oral performances, masking or masquerades served the costuming function. Costumes and masks aid in the characterization process, transforming the actor to the character in the script. Props in traditional African oral performances were determined by the social context of the performance. For examples, whenever harvesting rituals were staged, characters in these rituals could be costumed in the costume that reflect the bumper harvest made. Props included real objects such as gourds, spears, pots, huts, animals, forests, religious objects, etc. Old men hold the *rungus* or walking stick as symbols of authority, women hold the flowers to represent tenderness associated with motherhood. Women also gift the newly married woman with cooking wares in preparation. Modern African theatrical performances in still imbibe these features. Often, performances are done at the backdrop of traditional instruments, houses or features of African life in the past. In both traditional and modern African theatre performances, the costumes, masks and props serve to heighten the message and the mood of the performances. Costumes in *Koito* and *Okhusaba* are often a mix of traditional (mostly kitenges/kitenges) and modern wear. They help to enhance the beauty of the bride, transmit cultural messages and define the roles of the various characters. Contemporary body make ups and decorations constitute the costumes. *Sikhebo*, the initiate is adorned with face smearing with mud, *ekutwa* (hat), leopard skin, which emphasize his central role in the theatrical rite.

Koito, *Okhusaba* and *sikhebo* are performed in distinct locations. These locations, which represent theatre stages/spaces, are decked with unique props and carry symbolic meanings relevant to the events in question. Modern African theatre performances have open air or proscenium, thrust arena theatre stages. These spaces mirror the various platforms of performances of oral theatre in traditional Africa. Traditional venues of theatrical performances in Africa took the forms of shrines, open spaces in forests, river banks, circumcision sites, market places, play fields and social and religious gathering spaces. Modern African theatre performances simulate these staging areas. The nature of the traditional performance dictated the type of the theatrical venue to be used for the performance. The seating arrangement was also designed to encourage theatre communalism as a collaborative experience. This is an aspect that is also realized in modern African theatrical arrangements. Clearly, theatrical spaces were in existence in Africa prior to the coming of Europeans. The choices of the theatrical venues were also determined by the number and kind of audiences taking part in the performance. As theatrical performances, these ceremonies conform to open-air stages or theatre-in-the-round (thrust stage). Contemporary marital engagement ceremonies have adopted the proscenium stage, where the space of performance and auditorium are distinctly defined. *Okhusaba* often takes place in the house of the mother-in-law, often adopting the thrust stage, which brings a sense of

communalism and theatrical intimacy. Similarly, the pen-surgery of circumcision, *sikhebo*, also conform to the open-air stage where the initiates are at the centre of the stage surrounded by other casts.

CONCLUSION

The study has examined the three cultural performances of *Koito*, *Okhusaba* and *sikhebo* as signalling distinct elements of ancient African theatre. In so doing, these performances attest to the claim that African theatre is not a product of European influence but existed within ancient African civilizations. Therefore, African traditional theatre has been in existence since the beginning of African societies; because it is the society that gives birth to the theatre of a region and period in history. Europeans did not impose theatre on Africans. Granted they may have given us the terms for analysing, classifying and describing theatre in modern-day Africa. Moreover, European theatrical traditions have influenced modern African theatre, but Europe certainly did not originate it. As such, African theatre is rooted in secular and sacred rites that exist as festivals, myths/legends, short stories and other artistic practices which Africans created for themselves. The study has also demonstrated that modern *Koito*, *Okhusaba* and *sikhebo* performances uniquely carry elements of traditional African theatre, such as characters and characterization, performance stages, costumes, production and direction among others.

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