

# A SURVEY OF THE TAXONOMY OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAMA

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## **Abstract**

This paper attempts at collating and presenting in one form several criteria for classifying Nigerian drama. No doubt, many studies have been done in the past in several areas of Nigerian drama and theatre. It is needful, however, that we visit the subject of the basic classificatory criteria scholars have suggested for Nigeria drama so that past and subsequent research efforts could be properly categorized or classified within their proper subset in Nigerian drama.

## **Introduction**

Many writers have attempted to classify Nigerian drama in the past. But no criteria seem to be adequate to explore the whole range of expression in the dramatic form in Nigeria. Obafemi (1988) admits the difficulty in classifying Nigerian drama. In his paper: "The Development of Nigerian Dramatic Literature" he notes the limitations that can be found in some of the principles of classification that critics and scholars of Nigerian drama have adopted in the past thus:

For instance, by classifying drama according to its structure, its spatial coverage or relevance, its content, its formal concerns, its temporal/ historical relationships, its playwrights' or groupal sources or systematic concerns, certain aspects are given expression to the exclusion of others (Obafemi, 1998:53).

Since there have been no absolute criteria to go by, every theorist/critic who has attempted to discuss the taxonomy of Nigeria drama has established some arbitrary schemes that would serve his purpose, it is the intention of this writer to do a survey of most of the schemes that have been adopted so far in the classification of Nigerian drama.

## **A Survey of Taxonomical Schemes**

We shall begin by looking at Rotimi's (1974) classification of Nigerian drama. In his essay "Traditional Nigerian Drama" in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature* he attempts to categorize Nigerian drama into four divisions namely: ritual drama, traditional drama, folk opera and Nigerian drama in English (36). Since his essay is limited to the exploration of the characteristics and possible origin of traditional drama, he does not spend time to provide any in- depth information about his concept or evaluation of the other forms of drama, he outlined. In explaining ritual drama for instance he says: "like Nigeria drama in English, the term ritual drama explains itself: drama that has to do with ritual ceremonies or ceremonies of worship" (36). Rotimi's explanation ends with ritual drama. He says nothing about the category "Nigerian drama in English" which according to him is self-explanatory.

If by Nigerian drama in English he means any drama written in English by Nigerians then his category traditional Nigeria drama is subsumed in it. In the same essay he confesses his inability to clearly demarcate between traditional Nigerian drama and Nigerian drama in English. He says, "of these, the second, traditional drama, is perhaps the most difficult to define, reason for this is that traditional elements can be found in all these forms in varying degrees. For instance, such plays as J. P. Clark's "Ozidi" and Wole Soyinka's "A Dance of the Forests" belong to Nigerian drama in English; their medium of expression is English and in the structure of the plays we can see the writer's awareness of the demands of modern theatre" (36). The qualities that make these plays traditional in any sense have to do with the use of legend as the source of the drama in "Ozidi" and the presence of ritual sources in the play like the Egugun in "A Dance of the Forests". Ordinarily, what Rotimi gives as the sole distinguishing factor of Nigerian drama in English is the factor of English as the vehicle of expression in the plays. Within his framework of Nigerian drama in English there are no spelt out factors distinguishing the plays that could come under the umbrella.

In the view of Taiwo (1985), Nigerian drama can be classified into folk opera, concert party, traveling theatre and new drama. Of all categories the last new drama is the least specific. About new drama; he explains: "this is an attempt by educated Nigerians to set up national theatres in which plays written by Nigerians can be produced by Nigerians" (71). He sub-divides drama into two divisions: the simple, short usually one-act play written in English, for example plays by Ene Henshaw, and the more complex works of J. P. Clark and Wole Soyinka. The works of these authors he feels have been of the greatest importance to Nigerian drama (71). But he is unable to deal convincingly with the overall definition of Nigeria drama. Taking Taiwo literally one can be tempted to interpret him as saying that new Nigeria drama, consists of the works of Ene Henshaw, J. P. Clark and Wole Soyinka. If Taiwo and Rotimi are taken together the confusion about the precise definition of Nigerian drama would become more obvious.

In his "Aspects of Nigeria Drama", J. P. Clark (1981) too attempts a classification of Nigerian drama. He first divides it into two broad groups: traditional and modern. He sub-divides the traditional drama into two subgroups sacred and secular. The sacred he further sub-divides into two divisions myth or ancestral plays and masquerade plays. The secular plays he groups into five categories namely: magic or trick plays, pastoral or puppet plays, civic plays, dance drama and narrative or epic drama. Modern drama he divides into two categories; folk theatre and literary drama (58-66). By literary drama Clark means dramatic works written in English but having general themes. In fact, at the time of his writing he and Soyinka were the only playwrights whose works he considered in depth. He mentions Mr. Aig-Imoukhuede in passing in connection with a play "Ikeke" that he credited to him (67). Talking about literary drama in Nigeria today would certainly encompass many works which represent several experiences within the country, some plays would come under the label Saint Gbilekaa (1988) gave as radical drama (215).

Based on Clark's scheme which he feels is good but can be improved, Ogunbiyi (1981) attempts a classification of Nigeria drama into two broad groups: traditional and literary (10-11). The traditional group he further divides into three subsections as follows: dramatic ritual, popular tradition and Yoruba traveling theatre. He offers the following explanations about each of the sub-sections. About dramatic ritual, he speaks of traditional festivals, which are celebrated by cults in honour of ancestral heroes. Also included in the category of dramatic ritual are ceremonies with high dramatic content as well as masquerade plays.

The second category in the traditional division he likens to those forms of art that are commonly acceptable to the vast majority of the urban populace. Plays acceptable in his category must have amusement and entertainment as their primary functions. He mentions the Yoruba Alarinjo theatre, the Annang drama of the Ibibio, the Kwagh-hir and Bomu puppet shows and the Hausa comical art of Yankamanci as belonging to his sub-set.

The third category of the traditional division he indicates in the contemporary Yoruba traveling theatres of Ogunde, Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and several other such groups. The literary traditional according to Ogunbiyi would embrace all the literary plays written in the English Language since Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance* (1956).

In 1985 in his contribution titled "The Performing Arts in Nigerian Culture" in *Nigerian History and Culture* edited by Richard Olaniyi, Ogunbiyi modifies his position slightly. He maintains the two broad divisions of traditional and literary, which he first called non-traditional drama. Presenting his classification he says:

Still taking our cue from Clark's classification two broad divisions are proposed, traditional and non-traditional forms of performance (320-321).

His modifications are evident in his attempt to sub-divide the plays in the literary tradition into three subgroups, with the following explanation:

Finally, the second major classification of performing arts is Nigeria; the non-traditional form refers to the literary tradition. Although this is generally taken to mean the literary works that have appeared since Ene Henshaw's *This is our Chance* (1956), it ought to include any work written before that period. Again, three subdivisions are discernible under the broad classification of non-traditional performances, namely Onitsha market plays, Nigerian national language plays and the sophisticated Standard

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English plays of some of our enduring playwrights to date. The national language plays include the growing tradition of works in Yoruba, Igbo, Idoma and Hausa, for instance (Ogunbiyi, 1985:221)

Ogunbiyi's modification of his earlier position is of interest to us in that this classification accommodates three categories in which contemporary drama in Nigeria finds expression. Some plays dealing with topical issues are written in Yoruba, which Ogunbiyi identifies as one of the national languages. Some plays, however, are written by people who are not trained playwrights whose works could be classified along with those he groups within the Onitsha market plays. Other contemporary plays are written by Drama/ Theatre Arts graduates. Some of the plays have been published. They come under the category of sophisticated Standard English plays. Some of these playwrights teach in university departments of English and Theatre Arts.

Beck (1969) as we shall find out later in his own scheme of classifying African Drama within which Nigeria drama is subsumed does not want a consideration of African drama without attention paid to works in the Onitsha market tradition (8). He expresses the view that those works belong to the continental body of work that would constitute African drama. Saint Gbilekaa, however, does not see any artistic and literary merit in these works. He is of the view that:

These texts were mainly for pleasing and entertainment and therefore lacked literary merit. Although they lacked artistic finesse, they provided for the theatre historian and critic the cue to visualize the emergent forms of contemporary Nigerian theatre, particularly the language and style of this theatre in its fledgling days (Beck, 1969:64).

In his search for an adequate scheme of classifying Nigeria drama, Olu Obafemi adopts Raymond Williams' classification of cultural patterns and uses that as the base of his work. Raymond Williams categorises cultural patterns into three the residual, the dominant and the emergent. With the aid of Williams' cultural criteria, which he applies to our literary output, he hopes to overcome all the limitations that have been observed in the various ways of classifying Nigerian drama (54).

According to him residual drama in Nigeria would embrace many forms of indigenous dramatic forms like ritual and festival performance with dramatic elements, indigenous dramatic heritages of local communities such as the Alarinjo, Okura, Kwaghir and puppet, and the early contemporary indigenous theatres of the Ogundes, Ladipos and Ogunmolas of Nigeria.

The next category, dominant drama he considers as the main literary drama of English expression. Included in this scheme are all the plays written in the English language, even those of less complex structure, which arose in Onitsha, which are commonly referred to as Onitsha market literature. According to Obafemi, "the main distinguishing, characteristic of dominant drama is its language (mainly English) and its textual nature, as against the vernacular and mainly improvisational character of residual drama" (55-57).

Obafemi's third scheme of classification 'emergent drama' parallels Gbilekaa's radical drama. It is Obafemi's contention that emergent drama departs from the residual and dominant in many practical ways. He cites the following as the distinguishing factors of emergent drama: treatment of societal problems in the light of historical occurrence, the adoption of materialist ideology in their works and the suggestion that society be structured along socialist framework in order to end societal ills (57).

Obafemi situates his discussion of the development of dramatic literature in Nigeria against the background of other principles of classification including those of Michael Etherton and Biodun Jeyifo. According to him, Etherton's scheme makes for three categories of African drama, within which Nigerian drama is included. The groups are traditional drama, the arts theatre (university based) and the theatre for development (community based)(54). As reported by Obafemi, Biodun Jeyifo classifies Nigerian drama along ideological lines, into the conservative, the reformist and the revolutionary (54).

In his own attempt, Amosu (1985:35), classifies Nigeria drama in Nigeria into three major groups as follows; popular drama in English and the more formal written drama in English. Though he shies away from defining the concept popular drama in English because "there are no pertinent

examples” he, however, draws a line of demarcation between popular drama and written drama. Popular drama according to him, is oral in nature, by that he means it is improvisational, without any formal script (35). In fact, the category he describes as being distinguished by its morality in form is the popular drama in the local languages which is really exemplified by the Yoruba traveling theatre plays. His category “more formal written drama in English” is akin to Clark’s literary drama.

Clark (1980: 76) in her attempt divides Nigerian drama into major types. She says, “There are plays written and produced in various Nigerian languages and plays written and produced in English”, in her discussion of plays written and produced in various Nigerian languages she pays attention to the works of Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya alias Babasala and Ojo Ladipo-Baba Mero, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola which she sums up could “could reasonably be described as Yoruba theatre”(76). She classifies the plays in English into two categories: “those written in so-called standard English which are at times very British, but performed in Nigerian English and those written and performed in pidgin” (Clark, 1980: 79).

Furthermore, Ogunba (1975:81) also does a classification of Nigerian drama. But he does it within a broader spectrum. In his essay “Modern Drama in West Africa” in *Perspectives on African Literature* he suggests three broad categories of play in the satirical play, the propagandist play, according to him has to do with the demonstration of a political or cultural point of view. The traditional play is devoted to the exploration of a traditional African idea. The satirical play, however, has as its sole aim, satire. It is important to underscore the underlying unifying factor in all the categories suggested by Ogunba. These are all plays “of English expression.”

Jones (1976) in his pan-African classification of drama notes the existence of two classes of drama in Africa. In his editorial comment on *Drama in Africa* (the 8<sup>th</sup> volume of *African Literature today* which he edited) he discusses two trends in African drama, which he points out as folk drama and literary drama. He notes, “Folk drama tends to employ the language of the people (an African language or a creolised language), and treats fairly basic everyday situations or basic beliefs in more or less primary form. Literary drama tends towards sophisticated language (usually a European language), and a more personal handling of the material, whether drawn from everyday life or from mythology (vii). Going by Jones’ classification, contemporary Nigerian drama could be classified into the two categories. This is because there are some plays in the mother tongue, which are based on the contemporary experience, while the predominant number of plays are in English, the plays written in English would therefore satisfy the characteristics that would fit them into the literary drama criterion. We would consider another pan-African criterion for classifying drama Nigerian drama is subsumed in this pan-African classification. Writing on the topic “Drama in Africa in *the Readers’ Encyclopedia of World Drama* edited by John Gassner and Edward Quinn, Beck (1969) suggests the existence of two types of drama that are native to the African continent south of the Sahara. The first type he asserts is the ancient rite of man in his natural world, a drama reaching back perhaps hundred million years” (5). The second type of drama, Beck observes, deals with man in the present society, which has all the characteristics, associated with developing nations which are in a state of flux. Man in such a society experiences economic, political and racial strife (5). There are more aspects to be added to Beck’s areas of frustrations that man encounters in the present day society in Africa upon which plays could be based. There is the problem of religion and morality, to be addressed, besides health hazards, drug addiction and war.

Gordon Beck’s paper is useful to our present exercise in surveying the several classificatory schemes adopted in assessing Nigerian drama. In his a section on “Drama in Nigeria” he pays considerable attention to the works of Soyinka, Clark, Henshaw, Ernest Edyang and Hubert Ogunde (8). He discusses the merits of their principal works. But before concluding the section on Nigerian drama, he recognize the existence of a body of plays, which he describes as Nigerian market drama. He observes it is impossible to end this note on Nigerian drama without mentioning the existence of a large body of drama written for the most part in English but not intended for theatrical production.” These plays he asserts are primarily written by authors he describes as hacks. They are paperback tracts in the pattern of dialogue but they do have the conventional division into acts and scenes. He lists the following as the purpose of the writers of the “closet drama” communication of history, political attitudes, counsel to people in need of love, advice on how to make use of social amenities and suggestions on how to attract people of the opposite sex. Some of the titles of the plays listed in

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his essay include, *The Trials of Lumumba., Jomo Kenyatta and Paul, the Joy of life and its merriment and sufferers of Africa* (8)

Gordon Beck cautions against the hasty evaluation of the body of work available in African drama.

We would do well to note his contention that:

There are great many dangers in assessing the value and even the true existence of the total body of African drama. While many dramas are written and performed, a relatively small percentage is published. Still fewer are those available in European languages, although most published works appear in English. Some plays that are published have been written as radio dramas and never performed (Beck, 1969:6).

What Gordon Beck has said in connection with the evaluation of the body of African drama should be heeded as we consider Nigerian drama. In fact Wole Soyinka and Eldred Jones share Gordon Beck's position about the need for caution not to judge the true value and existence of African drama by the standard of published plays. Soyinka gives an insight into the places to look for drama in any part of the world. He observes:

Drama, however, exists on the boards; in improvised space among stalls in the deserted or teeming market, on the raised platform in a school or community hall, in the secret recesses of a nature fringed shrine among the push-buttons of the modern European stage or their equivalents in Africa those elegant monstrosities raised to enshrine the spirit of misconceived prestigiousness. It is necessary to look for the essence of the play among these roofs and spaces, not confine it, to the printed text as an autonomous entity (Soyinka, 1976:178).

Talking in the same vein Eldred Jones also says:

The list of the published plays of any country or region where there is dramatic activity thus gives only a limited idea of the total amount of its theatrical activity, almost certainly a misleading picture of the amount of popular drama (Jones, 1976:vii)

To validate his assertion, Jones notes the case of Raymond Charley, Sierra Leone's most prolific writer who between 1968 and 1975 wrote and produced nine plays in which he often acted. The play *The Blood of a Stranger* had been frequently produced in many venues. But until that Charley had never had any of his plays published. His experience is the lot of Christian playwrights in Nigeria.

The present writer has attempted to identify a corpus of Nigeria drama, which he has classified as Christian drama (Agoro, 1996:236-240). He defines Christian drama as a play in which there is the manifestation of Christian ethos, and which represents an authentic presentation of the Christian worldview as it is depicted in the Bible (Agoro, 2002: 195). He subdivides Christian plays into hardcore and peripheral plays. Hardcore Christian plays are plays in which the subject matter is presented from the Christian perspective with a high degree of fidelity. Besides, hardcore Christian plays show evidence of a consistent and in depth exploration of the Christian worldview in them. On the other hand, peripheral Christian plays present the Christian message but not so faithfully to the spirit of the Biblical story, which may have inspired it. Also, peripheral Christian plays explore Christian themes in them but not strictly from a theological perspective (Agoro, 2002: 200-201).

It is obvious from the classificatory schemes we have surveyed that two basic patterns of classifications have emerged. Some critics and scholars have classified Nigerian drama in terms of the language in which it is written while others have devoted time to classify the plays on the basis of their subject matter. Those who have done a linguistic classification have suggested literary drama (i.e. drama in standard Nigerian English), drama in the mother tongue and drama in Pidgin English as some of the ways of classifying Nigerian drama. Scholars who have classified Nigerian drama in terms of subject matter have suggested the ritual, traditional, popular, and the folk as some of the manifestations in which Nigerian drama exists. No classificatory scheme so far attempts a thematic

classification of Nigerian drama. The thematic classification of Nigerian drama should engage critics and scholars of the future.

Another taxonomical option critics could explore is the generic. Nigerian drama could be classified according to the main genres and sub-genres of drama. Besides, it is possible to determine the influence of the various philosophical and aesthetic movements in art upon Nigerian drama and attempt classificatory schemes along those lines. In this way the study of Nigerian drama would be enhanced.

What has been attempted in this paper is to glean together and present in one forum several ways in which scholars and critics have classified Nigerian drama. The writer has presented the views and positions of ten scholars on the subject of the appropriate classificatory schemes for Nigerian drama. His summation of their views he has presented in the last two paragraphs. He has also drawn attention to his own identification of a corpus of Nigerian drama which he has classified as Christian drama. What has been presented here could not be said to be the final word as the field taxonomy of drama is a dynamic and an emerging one. Contemporary Nigerian drama too is still an emerging field. With the growth of the literary output in the dramatic mode in Nigeria, more works are yet to emerge that would call for other schemes of classification. For now, we want to present the views expressed in this paper for further study that will enhance the taxonomical as well as semiotic study of contemporary Nigerian drama.

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