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Research Article

Bunraku and Kwagh-hir: A Comparative Exploration of Cultural Dialogues and Identity in the Puppet Theatres of Nigeria and Japan

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Abstract

Ethnographical studies, cultural studies and historical narratives synonymously acknowledge preservation of national theatres as being fundamental to national identity and that national theatres serve as cultural databanks for nations. Dominant studies on Nigerian and Japanese theatre traditions have mainly focused on the examination of theatrical forms as national theatres and have examined thematic, dramaturgical and technical thrusts. They have not been concerned with possible comparative transnational and transcontinental study of these traditions as national treasures that reinforce the identity of peoples. This comparative explication of two selected Nigerian and Japanese puppetry traditions, the Japanese (Bunraku) and Nigerian Tiv (Kwagh-hir), is carried out with a view to advancing the significance of these art forms. Chikamatsu Monzaemon's works including The Love Suicides at Sonezaki represent the Japanese (Bunraku) and the Anor Gyura Kwagh-hir performance the Nigerian Tiv (Kwagh-hir) puppetry traditions.

Introduction: The Art of Puppetry

Puppetry is an art that entails anything and everything that concerns the creation, production manipulation, maintenance and use of puppets. The art amongst other activities includes the portraiture of a puppet as a theatrical character, playing with puppets or collecting puppets for display or religious worship. According to Malkin puppets typify artistic craft and are fashioned for a manner that suits the taste and the purpose for which is made. There are several types of puppets but most are made to assume the features of human or animate beings. Malkin, describes the most common types of puppets as 'string puppets, rod puppets, hand or glove puppets, shadow puppets and ventriloquist's figures (1).

String puppets are known as marionettes; these are controlled by strings that are attached to a puppet and a wooden control device held off stage by the puppeteer. Rod puppets are those puppets whose basic features, heads, botches and limbs are attached to a rod and controlled by it.

There are several dimensions to the art of rod puppeteers, some manipulators are concealed behind the drapes and flats of the stage or television sets while others are partially or fully exposed. This applies to glove or hand puppeteers who primarily operate the gloves with their wrists and fingers. Ventriloquists manipulate their puppets by hand and are usually in conversation with the puppet figures in shows, having perfected the art of manipulating and holding a double-sided dialogue with the puppet, shadow or silhouettes. These puppets are cast on a side of the screen with source of light while the audience watch from the other side (Malkin1-4).

Puppetry has inspired theoretical, historical and artistic studies and critical acclaim globally and several unique traditions of the form exist. Puppets are also used for didactic and functional purposes. In some traditions they are used as toys for children, for adult entertainment, and in others they are used mainly for religious and instructive purposes. The myriads of postures to the art of puppeting is influenced by the various perspectives of the users of the form. However, the origin of puppeting dates back to thousands of years and this has been proved by Plato's reference to shadow puppeting in his seminal book *The Republic* 4th BC. Jurkowski (1980) sums up the universality of puppeting in the following statement, "Wherever there are people, there is also a puppet theatre, no matter how humble it might be. Its aims differ: It may be religious or educational - for entertainment or therapy and its fulfilment is different in every country (qtd. in Hager (b)15)" Hager(b) argues that African puppetry (unlike the Western puppetry) has always 'occupied a venerated place as one of the high genres of theatre' (13). To him, in this art is tangible evidence which substantiates its universality of global puppetry as man's effort to 'animate inanimate objects' and by implication imitate life.

In Asia, the history and culture of puppetry is rich and is also considered as a high form of art. Most of these resist casual classifications because they are used for secular and sacred purposes (Malkin 3). The themes that preoccupy this genre of theatre varies according to its use, while in several nations the genre have developed national characters such as *Kasperle* in Germany, *Punch and Judy* in England, *Guignol* in France and others characters types that fit into the roles of heroes, villains, ladies, courtesans amongst others (Malkin 3). Puppetry in Nigeria and Japan do not differ significantly from the universal use in which the theatre tradition has been put, however, the social relevance of *Kwagh-hir* and *Bunraku* makes them unique among puppeting traditions.

Review of Literature

Comparative literature as a theory and practice is employed as theoretical framework and in engaging these national theatrical theatres. Comparative literature, a unique field that bridges and melds cultures, languages, and disciplines, is explored by several scholars. Sahin (2016) for instance, emphasises its interdisciplinary nature and its significant role in fostering intercultural understanding. While Brown (2013), interrogates the definition of comparative literature, urging a rethinking of its significance and scope in the light of global literary flows. Yue (2009) examines the challenges and prospects of comparative literature in the 21st century, particularly in response to globalization and digital transformation. Haun (2006), in his edited volume, situates the discipline within the context of globalisation, arguing for its adaptability to transnational cultural exchanges. Hilal (1962), a foundational figure in Arabic literary criticism, underscores the importance of comparative literature in bridging Eastern and Western literary traditions.

De Zepetnek, Louise, and Vasvári (2011) provide a synopsis of the current state of comparative humanities in the U.S. and Europe, highlighting institutional fragmentation but also the potential for interdisciplinary renewal. Bassnett (1993) offers a critical introduction that traces the historical development and theoretical debates within the field, advocating for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach. Collectively, these works affirm that comparative literature is not a static discipline but a continually evolving field that plays a critical role in understanding literature beyond national and linguistic boundaries. They underscore its capacity to serve as a platform

for cultural dialogue, critical reflection, and the reimagining of literary studies in an increasingly interconnected world.

Kwagh-hir and *Bunraku* are established forms of puppetry in Nigeria and Japan. The theatres have attained international acclaim within and outside both countries. The origin of both puppet theatres derives from the merging of cultural and traditional elements such as folklore, particularly storytelling, music and puppetry. These elements were established separate performances at some point in the histories of the peoples before being adopted or borrowed to make up the principal elements of the puppet traditions that now exist in Nigeria and Japan.

According to Hagher (1987 and 2003) an understanding of the Tiv world view will enhance the understanding of *Kwagh-hir*. Though the form did not essentially emerge from the religions and cults of the Tiv, it is closely linked to the psychology and thoughts of the Tiv folk. The Tiv are said to have migrated from Southeast Africa (Hagher(a) 87) and from *Swem* in Central Africa (*Rov-Ikpa* 9) before settling in their present location in Nigeria. The presence of two forces, the *Adzov* and *Mbatsav*, (the spirits and the witches) is of great importance to the Tiv man and his universe. Amongst the Tiv, the art of storytelling is a communal art; it is from this art that *Kwagh-hir* evolved.

Hagher describes the storytelling art as one in which elaborate costume and props are employed to imitate characters about whom the tales are narrated. The presence of a spontaneous audience that participates actively makes for instant feedback and criticism. The critical comments and participation of the audience in the activities make up a significant part of the plot structure of these narratives which employ music, poetry and dance as accompaniment to the narration. The story line is usually often determined by crisis, renewed crisis partial and final solutions (Hagher(a) 46). Aguoru (2013) using *Kwagh-Hir* of Tivland employs a socio- political and cultural analysis of the indigenous the role and significance of national theatres in moulding and sustaining national identity shaping national identity. The Tiv people's indigenous theatre form, *Kwagh-Hir*, combines music, dance, puppetry, and storytelling, reinforcing the Tiv cultural values, history, and traditions with intentionality, promoting a sense of community and shared identity people. What is more striking is the role of *Kwagh-Hir* in preserving cultural heritage particularly the arts sculpting, mask-making, textile production among other values.

Documenting the origin of *Kwagh-hir* has had its niggling problems because of the non-literate society in which it developed. The earliest date of the form, as it now exists, is 1960. *Adikpo Songo* is unanimously thought to be the originator of the form which now has puppetry as its main form and all the other forms of storytelling or narrative techniques earlier discussed as its prime techniques. Hagher(a) (86) propounds a theory on the origin of the *Kwagh-hir* and he sums up his research efforts in this direction thus:

We have tried to prove that *Kwagh-hir* did not originate from one human being. It moreover, did not evolve from one art form. Rather the birth of the *Kwagh-hir* came at the opportune time when the development of the art-forms combined with historical development in Tiv consciousness with economic and political consequences. (86)

Songo, no doubt, is crucial to the development of *Kwagh-hir* amongst the Tiv people. In his account, he claimed to have witnessed a mystical performance at a clearing by Orkoor River, while on his way back from some weeks of self-exile, a result of the political crisis of the time. Songo claims to have seen two groups of people with bonfire as lightening, a chorus made up of female dancers and drummers and puppets performing on a platform. He watched from hiding; the two groups compete with their performance in the arena. *Adikpo Songo* is said to have realised that these were *Adzov* (Spirits) and not humans; he fell asleep watching the spectacle and woke up the next day to discover that there was no trace of what he had witnessed (Hagher(a) 40). Songo concluded that the spirits had chosen him specifically to entrust the assignment of developing the

Tiv art into the form he had witnessed. He thereafter returned home to carry out the task, thus influencing the form and content of the Tiv art.

The present form of *Kwagh-hir* no doubt takes root in innovations of Songo who did not only perform in the group but was also a domestic sculptor, one of those who were responsible for the carving of the puppets (41). The beauty and the marvels of the *Kwagh-hir* gave it its name which literally means a magical or mystical thing (Ama Doki 130). Other names with which the art is called are *Kwagh-u-Alom*, 'a thing of the hare' or *Kwagh-u-adzor-* 'a thing of the fairies' (130). Both refer to the mystical content and magical experience a *Kwagh-hir* performance offers.

According to Ama Doki (2006), there was a metamorphosis, in his words:

...*Kwagh-u-Alom* graduated from compound storytelling into wider groupings, involving into two or more compounds and even villages. *Kwagh-hir* in oral story telling continued in existence until it underwent a period of transformation where emphasis shifted to the dramatization and performance... (31)

Bunraku, the puppet theatre of Japan, is a combination of three art forms. These are puppetry, music and narration (Noma 58). The story telling art and love of the audiences for this art predates Japanese literacy. The earlier record of literary writings *Kojiki* (A.D. 712) is a documentation of the recitals of Hiedano-Are (59). Japan's history of narrative entertainments includes storytelling or ballads, which over time have been influenced by a variety of narrative performance like oral histories, preachments and ceremonial chants. An example of the chant is *Shomyo*, a Buddhist ceremonial song chanted by priests with deep textured voices. This religious chant influenced almost every aspect of the people's lives, to an extent that its influence on oral narratives birthed *Heikyoku*, a popular entertainment.

Heikyoku, an oral narrative was based on the stories of the *Tale of the Heike*. The text of this work was written in the 13th century and is dominantly about the lives of the members and the rise and fall of the Hei-Shi clan. The family also known as the Heike or Taira family, ruled militarily for about two decades and the work focuses on the tragic downfall of this *Shogunate* between 1177 to 1185 (Tokujiro 17-19). Subsequently another form of narrative performance emerged from *Shomyo*. This form known as *Fushidan-sekkyo* was a preaching style in a singing form. It initially served as a means for teaching and explicating Buddhist creeds and sutras to lay person. This form became extremely popular and successful. Noma (1996) observes that:

The preachers, who were priests, used dramatic dialogue, gestures, songs and a special vocal delivery (a melodious and rhythmical chant like narration, to explain their doctrine. Over time some of the preachers became highly skilled and were known as specialists of *Fushidan-sekkyo*. Because *Fushidan-sekkyo* was missionary work and its preachers were Buddhist priests, they could travel all over Japan using numerous temples. Their preaching with its strong elements of public entertainments spread and became popular with the masses. (60)

The success and popularity of this narrative style became a dominant influence on the popular narrative culture and spawned other narrative performances such as *Kakugo*, *Kodan* and *Naniua Bushing* (Kazuo13). *Sekkyo*, a new art form therefore emerged from *Fushidan Sekkyo*. This completely secular form was accompanied by musical instrumentation. The performers were itinerant players who had no religious affiliation but strolled about the nation playing under umbrellas at strategic secular or religious places narrating tales as their source of livelihood. The instruments that accompanied the narrations were a whisk, to a bell or a drum and later a *Shamisen*. In the early 17th century - (after it had remained popular in the 16th century) - *Sekkyo* made its way to the theatres in the major cities and it was then performed with the *Shamisen* accompaniment. Narrative transcriptions were thereafter published as books the earliest being in 1631.

Textual Analysis

The plot and thematic preoccupation of the *Sekkyo* stories revolved around individuals who had fallen from the special positions and have to undergo strenuous journey which were dismal and often ended in death. These characters in the end were saved by gods and often assumed the status of gods. The tedious journey symbolises death and rebirth in the Japanese after world and also imply that the performances were originally prayers for the dead. From about 1591 *Sekkyo* performers used puppets in their performance (Noma 62).

In the 18th century (Noma, 1996:62) *Bunraku* became exceedingly popular and *Sekkyo* dwindled naturally because of the growing popularity and audience of the former. Both performance styles had striking similarities amongst which were the travel scene, and the portrayal of the mysterious powers of the gods. In addition, both texts are performed by one narrator; both are prayers for the enlightenment of the dead and are emotionally stirring performances that evoke the tears of the audience (Noma 62). The four narrative performances, *Shomyo*, *Heikyoku*, *Fushidan-Sekkyo* and *Sekkyo* influenced the style and technique of *Joruri Mai*, and *Nōh*. Japanese performances that included narrative, song and dance also influenced the form greatly. The precursors of *Bunraku*, *Kanajogo* and *Gidayu* refer to *Nōh* as *Bunraku*'s father. Gerstle thesis on *Bunraku* cites Kaganjo's observation in his art treatise which states that *Nōh* drama is a parent of *Joruri* (238).

Koutou Takino, a *Biwa-Hoshi* chanted the tale of the lady *Joruri* from a story book. He adopted a tune that was similar to the *Heikyoku* tune. This narrative style became instantly popular and the name it later began to bear, *Joruri*, was from the name of the character in the love and historical tale which centres on the love affair between *Yoshitsune* the most popular hero of Japanese history and lady *Joruri-Hime* (Noma 63). The popularity of this romantic genre was also because of its distinct difference from tales that had centred on warriors, virtues of temple or shrines or the gods that are portrayed from the Japanese pantheon. The huge success of the art made other professional narrators of other genres include it in their performance repertoire.

By the middle of the 16th century, the *Biwa*, a Japanese lute was used as a musical accompaniment to *Joruri*. Shortly after a three stringed instrument, the *Shamisen*, was brought into Osaka from Okinawa, one of the Japanese islands. Certain modifications were made to the instrument largely because the snakeskin used to cover the frame was not available on the mainland. The instrument which was rated better than the earlier instruments used had the ability to play varieties of tones with clarity and precision. This instrument came into vogue particularly because it could express emotions and passions passionately and became famous in the pleasure quarters.

Joruri, accompanied by the *Shamisen* became more popular, the combination was perfect because the music of the *Shamisen* complimented the sad themes that were the preoccupation of *Joruri*. Puppetry was included shortly after the successful combination of the two forms. Puppetry also has a long history in Japanese performance, as far back as the Eighth Century, *Sangaku* plays employed puppets. The importance of puppetry did not at any point dwindle as the *Sekkyo* narrators discussed earlier in this section had also used puppets. The earliest puppeteers in Japan are thought to have been influenced by the puppeteers in central Asia and Korea. They lived as itinerant members of the society, settling where they could find ample grass and water. Some of these puppeteers were found in the temples using their puppets for 'enlightenment' and 'propitiation' (Noma, 64) and they became principally attached to the *Ebisu* shrine in Nishinomiya (64).

The coming together of the three forms; *Joruri* recitation, *Shamisen* playing and puppetry, created a new genre *Ningyo Joruri* (Puppet *Joruri*). A fellow, Chozaburo, was said to have been the first to combine the forms on Awaji Island in 1590 (64). However, from the late 17th to 18th century, Uji Kaganjo (1636-1711), *Gidayu* Takemoto (1651-1714) and Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1653-1724) turned the fortunes of the form around.

Persona, Personification and Performance in *Kwagh-hir* and *Bunraku*

Characterization and creation of character types in *Kwagh-hir* and *Bunraku* are distinct, to the extent that *Kwagh-hir* characters are not fixed character types neither are the plays determined solely by characters. The characters are symbolic characters and archetypal characters that reinforce the beliefs and the collective of the Tiv people. The characters for instance are not given voices as it is practised in *Bunraku* or in most puppeteering traditions. The *Shuwa* narrates a tale about the character or gives background information about a character. This is usually based on history, culture, metaphysics, politics, science or even modernity. The characters are then ushered in with music and drumming while the manipulators from under the booth make the puppets perform the feats that had been earlier narrated by the *Shuwa*.

Characters in *Kwagh-hir* are either animate or inanimate. These derive from Tiv folktales which, according to Hagher(a) (51), are divided into three to correspond with the Tiv worldview. These include humans, animals, spirits, supernatural phenomenon and characters and unreal animals with unusual characteristics. Inanimate puppets in the *Kwagh-hir* repertoire include cars, motorcycles, cranes, cement factories, aeroplanes to mention a few. The sculptor wanders in the woods, identifying the suitable types of wood and falling them for his work. It is metaphorically, assumed that inside the deep forests the sculptor comes in contact and communes with the spirits (*Adzov*), enlisting their help for the benefits of mankind. This is why the role of the puppet sculptors *Mbagban kwagh* is a revered one in Tiv land.

New masks and puppets are celebrated as successful encounters in the *adzov* world and a reflection of the mysteries of this world. It is the penetration of this unseen world and mind that collaboratively creates the images and characters in the sculptor's hand. The sculptor's air of importance is attached to this supernatural level of creativity. The *Mbagban kwagh* is an exalted position in the art and the sculptors claim that 'it is from their inspiration that the creative images are formed which they then translate to actual works of art' (Hagher(a) 84). This is the real situation because even when a sculptor or an artistic director conceives a new art, image or design, the sculptor and no other member of the group, makes them and brings it into reality (84).

There are, however, distinct archetypal character types worthy of mention in the *Kwagh-hir* repertoire. The first is the Tiv ancestor. Two persons are identified as patriarchs of the Tiv folk, Takurudu the father of Tiv and Tiv himself. Takurudu sired Tiv who migrated from Swem Land usually depicted in *Kwagh-hir* as Swem Karagbe to settle in the present habitation of the Tiv people (Hagher(a) 161). A reflection of the influence of this ancestral pattern is also depicted in Yion, the father of Mbayion people, one of the Tiv clans (Hagher, 1987:168 & 2003:111). These characters are portrayed wearing the traditional Tiv attire, 'anger', a stripped black and white outfit traditionally woven and used by the Tiv folk. Tiv and Yion are often portrayed carrying the traditional Tiv bag *Ikpa abor atar* (169) and smoking a pipe, a custom that still exists amongst the Tiv till date. The characters also wear facial marks though this is no longer a feature in Tiv culture.

Significance of these archetypal ancestral characters is that they are figures that foster Tiv nationalism reminding the Tiv folk of their historical antecedents. In Hagher (a)'s words, "This serves to remind the Tiv to be proud of their common origin as a people with a single language and the same rich historical background as sons of Tiv who in turn was Takuruku's son (161)." Puppet characters that also have symbolic functions are the characters that feature in mobilization plays. These celebrate the *Ijov* being by exposing the physical attributes of the *Adzov* to the *Kwagh-hir* audience. Two plays *Bar Adzov* and *Ber Awuna* portray these characters vividly. Characters in *Ber Awuna* are the inhabitants of the *Awuna* Lake which actually exists in Tiv land and is said to be the largest town of the *Adzov*. Mystery shrouds the lake and this is the origin of the numerous myths developed around it. One of such implies that mere hovering around the banks at any time guarantees an encounter with the fantastic, particularly the tangible presence and being of

the *Adzov*. According to Hagher, it is commonly believed amongst the Tiv folk that supernatural manifestations which are highlighted below are visible at the lake:

- (a) A woman grinding corn on the surface of the water.
- (b) Mounds of food bobbling up and down on the water surface.
- (c) Children in a classroom on the water.
- (d) An old man smoking his pipe sitting on his chair on top of the water.
- (e) Several snakes whose heads would rise up and measure several yards above Water level. Amongst these is the most fearful of all great snakes, Kijin Kijin... The subduer of the hippopotamus'...
- (f) Various forms of human activities are re-enacted on the water surface.

(157 and 158).

The dominant characters here are the fishes, crocodiles, mermaids and mermen that make up the mer-folk. An archetypal mermaid symbol in the repertoire is called *Aju* 'half woman, half fish' (159) and she is featured in both *Ber Awuna* and *Bar Adzov*. The *Gungun* snake is another archetypal character in *Ber Awuna*. The characters portrayed in *Bar Adzov* also follow this pattern of portraying the collective existence of the spiritual world. The significance goes beyond the episodes in which they are presented and this Hagher(a) reiterates in his work:

The *Ber Awuna* show seems like a metaphor of the *Kwagh-hir* booth, while the actions on its surface represent a curious exhibition of the simulated human and spirit *Adzov* world. The *Adzov* in their city under the lake can be compared to the manipulators of the *Kwagh-hir* puppets... sitting inside the booth. (158)

A peculiar feature in *Kwagh-hir* is the archetypal animals portrayed. Most of these animals are not operated from the constructed rostras but are operated by the manipulators from within the frame of the animals. The *Ajikoko* animal, a huge deer is an example of this character type. It is so important that every *Kwagh-hir* group is expected to have the character types in its repertoire. Animals like *Degenyi*, *Atsuetumekpu*, (Rov-Ikpah, 1982:7) *Haa*, *gedege*, *Dabuluma*, *Damakeereke*, *Gbulututu* and several others are in this category (Hagher(a)144). Most of these imaginary characters are portrayed with great similarities. According to Hagher, their names, instead of having specific functional meanings rely on sound to create curiosity and awe and has no meaning in Tiv (144). Real animals such as baboons, horses, monkeys, eagles and domesticated ones like chickens are portrayed. *Gaga gyuve* is a play that depicts the *Gyuve* - eagle as a predator catching chicks and chickens as its prey. The thematic idea is a portrayal of the evil forces bent on destroying a man's livelihood in this case his poultry (154).

There are portrayals of modern and contemporary characters like the medical doctor who performs a caesarean session on a woman with complications in pregnancy, in the open view of the audience. This play undermines the powers of the *Mbatsav*, the witches, who are held responsible for all evil and death in Tivland. It acknowledges 'the lifesaving skills of the Western trained doctors' (155) who have negated the traditional medical verdict that gynaecological complications in pregnancy almost always endangered the life of the foetus and the mother. When such a mother or a child dies during delivery, witches are unanimously assumed to be responsible and the witches also do accept the responsibility. Other topical character portrayal include the execution of an armed robber by a firing squad (163&165) this play, *Anum lor*, is often performed with the executioners, the robbers, his sad relatives and a priest who offers his final prayers. The *Fada* play is one in which a catholic priest conducts a mass and has members in attendance. In all, characters portrayed are universal and archetypal in coverage; the super human, the human and the animals are mythological beings.

Characterization and characters in *Bunraku* is distinctly different from characterization and characters *Kwagh-hir*. The puppet characters are absolutely all animate beings and in only very rare cases are there animal puppet characters. *Bunraku* puppets are mostly human or superhuman puppet characters that enact the stories of the lives of men and women in Japanese tales or *Joruri*. Social stratification is a distinct separation marker amongst the Japanese society and in the period within which *Bunraku* attained its theatrical height there was the clear distinction between the average folk, the military and the political class and the complex structures. Thus, the plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon were clearly divided into two genres *Jidaimono*, the five-act historical plays and *Sewamono* the short one-act, three scene contemporary plays. The characters in these plays were based on the inhabitants of the socio- political and historical settings of Japan.

Sewamono plays are concerned with the lives and ways of the average folk, their economic concern and social, domestic and moral challenges. These are predominantly expressed by the speech, skin tone and costume of characters. (Brazell 106; Shirane 240-241). Plays like *The Drum Waves of Horikawa*, *Love Suicides at Amijima* and *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* are examples of the *Sewamono* genre. Here, employees of merchants, dealers, merchants, host of brothels, courtesans, apprentices, servants, relations and extended families' members, wives, sons, children, in-laws and so forth make up the protagonists and antagonists. There is usually no mention made of supernatural characters but domestic tragedies that the *Bunraku* audience are familiar with or can identify with. *The Drum Waves of Horikawa* combines certain features of *Jidaimono* because one of the lead characters *Hikokuro* is a *Samurai* (Keene 260).₁

Jidaimono usually features characters that portray the lives of individuals whose endeavour are political or have royal backgrounds *The Battle of Coxinga*, and *The Heike and the Island of Women* are examples of this genre. Princes, members of royal families, *Samurai*, captains, officials of the ruling sovereign and their associates are often the characters portrayed in *Jidaimono*. In *The Battles of Coxinga*, Watonai, also known as Coxinga wrestles with a tiger in what he describes as a Chinese tiger hunt. *Coxinga* is able to conquer and tame the tiger with a charm handed over to him by his mother (Brazell 329).

Plotal Episodes, Elements and Symbolic Performances in *Kwagh-hir* and *Bunraku*

The plot in *Kwagh-hir* portrays the Tiv worldview as most of the storyline depict the existence and solidarity of their nationhood. *Kwagh-hir* is an episodic performance with each of the episodes symbolically reinforcing a social, ethnic, political, historical, cultural and spiritual value of the people. The story is usually accomplished by the setting and the imagery which are symbolically correlated in the sub-conscious of the audience who, if we do not forget, are essentially Tiv folk and who have been indoctrinated with the cultural and traditional values and forms which make up the component parts of *Kwagh-hir*. According to Hagher, these comprises the story telling art, the Tiv poetic traditions; riddles, proverbs and songs, the music art, the dance art, dramatization art and puppeteering art (Hagher(a) 44& 54).

The setting is, therefore, cultural because it unequivocally gives meaning to the plays. From the archetypal point of view one can trace the Tiv origin from *Swemland* and the play *Swem Karagbe* apart from pointing the people to their nationalistic ideologies; mythologically symbolizes Tiv nirvana or paradise. To the Tiv, it is a land of great fruitfulness and the abode of the *Tiv* god-head. In reality *Swem Karagbe* is a mountain and the Tiv had to migrate because the location could no longer accommodate the population explosion. The soil and plants of *Swem* in a pot is sacred to the people and even in contemporary jurisdiction it is used as a totem and emblem of justice, truth and pride (168).

The play depicts the setting of *Swem Karagbe*, a huge cave within the mountain. The inhabitants of the cave come out contentedly representing in this context symbols of good life

which is attainable in *Swem*. Evidence of richness and fruitfulness is seen in the wild game that parades the land as well as the good health and vitality displayed by the youth of the land. Though the production lasts for a short while, it is clear that it evokes a ‘semiotic world’ that transcends several decades into Tiv history and also stirs the patriotic feelings and nationalistic ideologies. *Ber Awuna* play is set on the Awuna Lake. The lake represents certain mythological ideologies in Tiv land. According to Hagher (157) the lake can be found about 30 kilometres east of Gboko, a town in Benue state. In the same vein, Rov-Ikpa, a *Kwagh-hir* artistic director, describes it as 10 kilometers from ‘*Bukuru*, upstream along River Katsina-Ala’ (9). The set is portrayed by shrubs and bushes on the bank of the lake while the mythological characters thought to inhabit the lake move out to perform.

Others settings include: the Benue Cement Factory where in contemporary times cement is being manufactured and heavy-duty equipment like cranes are used to lift weights, the hospital theatre where the medical doctor in the *Ortwer* play stands and nods his head in appreciation before performing the surgery. The drip stand for transfusion of blood and a transfusion bay are the props used to enhance the setting as well as the operation table upon which the pregnant patient lies (155). Another is the football field; the football play is a match with puppet footballers and a goalkeeper and ball. The play depicts the solidarity of the *Tiv* for their famous football club the BCC Lion Football Club of *Gboko*. Among other topical settings is the *Amokaa* where the setting is the civil war era. The *Amokaa* is the hybridization of the clause ‘Armoured Car’ and the setting is realized by a puppet soldier dressed in army camouflage and sitting on an armoured car taking an aim at a certain distant object. Other puppets that make it appear real include the bomber jet and the anti-air craft used during the wars and these are manipulated as though pilots were in them to fly them (172).

The plot structure of the *Kwagh-hir* is strikingly different from that of a *Bunraku* play. As earlier mentioned the performance is essentially a string of episodes arranged to suit an occasion and often a competition between two groups. *Kwagh-hir* is performed as part of wedding programmes, funerals and other rites of the passage. None the less, a *Kwagh-hir* event is structured into the three sections; the beginning which is similar to the opening glee, the string of episodes and the declaration of the winner of the event. The opening glee, *kwagh yaren* is thought to be extremely popular. It involves all the artists and establishes the tempo of the event, capturing the attention of the audience and those who perhaps would not have been in attendance. There are no special costumes for *kwan yaren*, the group calls the event into being with their dance and straight away usher in *Inder Alom*, ‘the wooden ritual drum which is also a symbol of unity and power amongst the Tiv folk. Taking positions on either side of the large drum, the players commence a mock tug of war, music is produced by the musicians and the rhythm is deliberately infectious to lure the audience to join in the dance. After the troupe covers the expanse of the arena, they retreat back stage to prepare for the second phase of the performance (Hagher(a)105).

The episodes that follow the opening glee follow diverse patterns, some *Kwagh-hir* performances begin with the ancestral puppet character proceeding on the archetypal migratory journey. In other *Kwagh-hir* plays, masquerade shows which consist of animals or other beings are incorporated with the puppet characters. According to Hagher, this is a deliberate strategy to beat time during the performance:

In order to enable faster scene changes, masquerade shows are interchanged with puppet shows. This is because each of the shows require extensive costuming, make-up and arrangement of props in performance position. While the masquerade performance is in progress backstage, the production staffs are mounting newer puppets and rehearsing the production mechanisms like rods, rubber straps, and rehearsing tubes. (106)

However, the *Shuwa* (narrator) sets the pace of the *Kwagh-hir*: darting off stage and on stage guarantees that the programme harmoniously progress, He also prepares the audience for the episodes by making full use of the arena, in his movements and rendering, unscripted but inspirational lines that combine Tiv riddles, proverbs and wise sayings that further inform the audience about the characters, settings or theme to be performed. This is similar to the role of the first actor that informs the audience about the play in *Bunraku*. The *shuwa* thus ushers the characters in with what Hagher describes as the ‘narrator-audience interjection’.

The chorus, made up of the drummers and dancers, pick up the ‘thyme rhythm’ for the particular episode to be seen. It is important to note that each puppet character and event has specific tunes which are popular folk tunes in the Tiv oral literary corpus. The audience is familiar with this as it is a requirement in Tiv culture for all the people to be grounded in the rich literary culture. Hence, the *Kwagh-hir* songs are led by one or two lead singers while the chorus and audience sing the refrain or if it is in a call and response mode, they respond to the calls of the lead singers. The puppets are manipulated with the puppeteers out of sight and the actions, music and song continue until the performance is completed. The stage, which is a mobile booth, is made to glide round the arena and the performances are repeated to guarantee that the entire audience have seen it at a close range. An example of this is the *Ioravaa* show where a couple is featured. The wife uses the traditional mode of blending with a grinding stone while her husband looks on contentedly while smoking a pipe. (Hagher(a)109).

All *Kwagh-hir* performances follow this structural sequence and the episodes vary according to the plan of the *Tor-kwagh-hir*; the artistic director. However, they usually range between an opening glee and seven episodes (*Leo Agats Kwagh-hir*, 1977) or an opening glee and thirteen episodes (*Anor Gyura Kwagh-hir*, 1982). The episodes or skits are often selected to represent a central motif or pattern that is embellished by other elements that emphasize this central theme. This is typified in the episodes that make up the *Tiv Zurum*, the Tiv ancestral journey in a bid to settle in a new land. Other *Kwagh-hir* performances that follow this pattern include *Kende Kaase Kwagh-hir* June 15th 2003 and *Anor Gyura kwagh-hir* 14th June 2003 (Hagher (a) 228). The form and organisation of *Kwagh-hir* gives great insight into the activities of the performers, the puppeteers, the sculptor and the *Kwagh-hir* schools that exist.

While the plot structure in *Kwagh-hir* is episodic, the *Buranku* plot structure follows a simple narrative line which is fleshed out by the personality of the characters and the narration of the incidents that are developed. The *Buranku* plot structure is usually elaborate and is the cause for the fragmentation of the acts which became popular in *Bunraku* history. In the earliest period of the theatre, plays were divided into six segments called *dan* or acts and with one *dan* taking approximately forty-five minutes. Kaganojo, reused this and reduced it to five, with the one *dan* divided into three parts, the opening, the middle and the close (Cavaye *et al*,107) The *Jo,ha, kyu* structure used in *Nōh* and *Gagaku* was adopted by Kaganojo. *Jo* is the introductory prelude to the drama, the development of the storyline which may be in several acts and *kyu* in the end (107). The pattern of the plot can be categorized mainly into the contemporary and the historical plays. These contexts determine the shape and sequence of events.

According to Noma, prior to 1703 when the *Love Suicides at Sonezaki* was written, *Bunraku* plays centered upon legendary or historical characters and events (72). The plot of the historical plays, that came to be known as *Jidaimono*, assumed the five-act structure advocated for by Gidayu and which took the following pattern, “... the first act (love), second act (warriors and battles) third act (tragedy), fourth act (*michiyuki*/poetic journey), and fifth act (celebrating speech)” (Shirane, 283).

A striking feature of *Bunraku* is the ability of each of these acts to be a complete play in its own. This makes it possible for acts to be premiered or performed separately from the entire

work. For instance, *The Heike and the Island of Women* (*Heike Nyogone shima*:(1719) is a five act *Joruri* play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon. The script is based on historical and legendary figures of the Japanese classic, *The Tale of The Heike*. Shortly after the play was written, the second scene of act 2, Devil's Island (*Kikaigushima*), was premiered and performed as a single play. This psychologically deep Act 2 has remained in the *Buranku* and *Kabuki* repertoires as single plays till today. This is a significant feature of the plot structure which, in Shirane's words, follows the formula outlined by Gidayu for the overall theme of each of the fire acts. "In this scheme Act 2 is set symbolically in the Buddhist realm Shura (Ashura), a sphere of never-ending fighting and revenge" (Shirane301).

Though in contemporary times *Sewamono* (contemporary life) plays have received much more critical acclaim and is more frequently performed, *Jidaimono* (the history plays were regarded as having greater importance in Chikamatsu's lifetime. This perhaps, explains why he wrote triple the number of plays he wrote as *Sewamono* as *Jidaimono*. The most successful of the plays *The Battles of Coxinga* was a long running hit and is the most performed of his plays. The plot of the work seemed to have earned it its popularity. Shirane observes that 'The exoticism of the drama, the setting in China and the incorporation of a number of foreign details contributed to its popularity...' (283).

Out of the five acts, the tragic third act is rated as the most important in *Jidaimono* and therefore the chief chanter performs this act in which *Migawari* (the tragic substitution of one person for another) was almost customary. The ill-fated figure assumes the role of an archetypal carrier, who could be a servant or relation of the protagonist or some important character who is saddled with the responsibility of tackling severe obstacles in a bid to restore social order. This often portrays the triumph and return of the forces of good over the forces of evil. Though the historical plays temporarily provided an alternative world for the audience who could relive the glorious days, they were also indirect comments on contemporary socio, political and administrative issues in Japan. Plays in the *Jidaimono* are written with multiple plots and supernatural elements, and set over extensive space and time (Gestle 240).

Chikamatsu's *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* (1703) pioneered the *Sewamono* genre in *Bunraku*. According to Noma (72), *Sewamono* literally means 'tales of the towns or rumors'. The plot of these plays necessarily revolves around the lives of common people or contemporary peasants and persons of the lower strata in the society. Two plays in this genre *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* and *The Love Suicides at Amijima* received great critical acclaim. While *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* is thought to be the most famous *Bunraku* play (Noma 72), *The Love Suicides at Amijima* is considered to be Chikamatsu Monzaemon's best contemporary life play (Shirane 313). The plot of the first was based on an actual double suicide committed by two lovers in Osaka in 1703, (Noma 72), the historical source of the second is unclear but has inspired the writing of several other *Sewamono* (Shirane 313).

The plot of *Sewamono* plays takes the form of a single act although there are a few exceptions to this style. According to Gerstle (240):

(*Sewamono*) plays conceived as one act dramas equivalent to the intense third act of a five-act history play (*jidaimono*) - maintain tight unity of place and time and are usually realistic without any of the fantastic elements of the period dramas. This temporal and spatial unity, together with realism, has earned praise in modern time for *sewamono*. (59)

Both genres of *Bunraku*, *Sewamono* and *Jidaimono* are based on extremely dissimilar theatrical conventions and basis. From Gestle's views it is clear that:

Whereas *Sewamono* engage with contemporary society directly through depictions of an actual incident of the time, *Jidaimono* use complex interaction and dialogue with an array of texts from both the Japanese and Chinese traditions to portray contemporary politics (240).

A special feature in *Sewamono* is the inclusion of *Michiyuki*, the poetic travel, as the last scene of the play. The *Michiyuki* is traditionally an element of the *Nōh* drama and a convention that exists in medieval religious writings. The poetic travel scene in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* serves as *Chinkon*, a pacification of the spirits of the dead characters who had been portrayed in the work and literarily recalled to the stage (Shirane 243). However, critics observe that in the suicide story of *The Love Suicides in Amijima*, where characters portrayed are thought to be fictional, the *Michiyuki* functions in two ways. First, it functions as a downward movement in the Buddhist cycle of *Samsara*, of birth and death, of suffering which leads to death; and an upward movement leading from hell to possible salvation (Shirane 315). Secondly, it functions as a prayer for spirits of the dead roused shortly after their tragic deaths in performance and are sent back into the world of the performance after such performances. It is in this light that the *Michiyuki* scene in *The Love Suicide at Sonezaki*, is a prayer for the spirits of the dead they portray.

Noma (82) avers that the work has ritualistic elements that pacify the dead souls who were miserable when they were on earth. Noma strengthens his argument further by stating that the first month anniversary of a person's death in Japan is an important mourning day. The playwright and his theatrical crew must have had a strong consideration for this because it was performed on 7th may 1703; exactly a month after the lovers' death (82). Subsequent versions of the play were written to commemorate other significant anniversaries of the deaths of the lovers. The *Michiyuki* is also used in *Jidaimono* though not as prominently as in *Sewamono* and a typical example is the travel scene in *Yoshitsune Sebon Zakura*. The setting of the plays necessarily reflects the structure of the plot to indicate time, place and mood. Titles of the plays often betray the place or the mood of the work; The Devil's Island, Amijima, Sonezaki and Horikawa are the names of the places where the events take place. In the suicide plays the suicides are committed in Amijima and Sonezaki.

Pathos, as earlier stated, is a dominant mode of the mood and psychological setting of *Bunraku* even in the instances where the protagonists do not die, there are unmistakable tugs on the emotions of the characters and the audience. Chikamatsu's suicide scene in *The Love Suicide in Sonezaki* is thought of as being cruel but having a cathartic effect on the audience. Noma thus writes:

It is a cruel scene...This scene is indeed grotesque, But it is not unbearable. Audiences like to watch something grotesque as long as it does not exceed the bearable limits of feeling. In this scene Chikamatsu takes advantage of the puppets to make the grotesque bearable. This scene is so violent and so brutal that it also disperses the energy which has accumulated on stage and leaves a peaceful stillness at the end of the play. There must be a sense of peaceful serenity at the end of the play or the audience will not believe the lovers can attain future Buddhahood, and will not pray for their dead souls. (89)

The setting of *Jidaimono* plays is archetypal whether historical or political. It is often a satire of the agents of tyrannical rule or asserting the victory of good over evil as it is portrayed in *The Island of Women* and *The Battles of Coxinga* respectively. The geographical setting is also of great significance. References are made to natural phenomenon as symbolic and archetypal settings particularly in the *Sewamono* plays with the *michiyuki* scenes. The protagonists in *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, for instance, journey through lonely and symbolic spaces where their suicides take place, they pass the Umeda bridge and embankment to arrive at the thick woods of Sonezaki. In *The Love Suicides in Amijima*, they cross twelve bridges, from Tenjin Bridge to Onari bridge on their way to Amijima. The bridges and waters they pass are so symbolic that the journey is subtitled: *The Farewell Journey of Many Bridges* (Keene 342). The Amijima suicides take place by a stream beside a bamboo thicket while the Sonezaki suicide takes place in the thick woods of Sonezaki.

Other natural phenomenon like mountains, volcanoes, sea and islands are portrayed as settings in *The Heike and the Island of Women*. Most *Sewamono* settings revolve around Osaka/Kyoto, Edo and its environs. Other countries are also depicted particularly in *Jidamono*'s plays like *The Battles of Coxinga*. The *Michiyuki* is also used in *Jidamono* though not as prominently as in *Sewamono* and a typical example is the travel scene in *Yoshitsune Sebon Zakura*. Another point worthy of note is the significance of the conflict between *Jo* and *Giri* to *Bunraku* plots. According to Ikan (348) Chikamatsu uses *Giri* as reason in the service of the plot, which at another, level may be driven by the conflict between *giri* as duty and human feelings. *Jo*, human feelings is employed as the link between the audience and the play while *giri*, one's obligations and duty to others and the society is a major thought in the development of the plot.

There are three stages to the art of puppeteering in *Bunraku*. The handler spends about ten years in mastering the operation of the feet, after which he progresses to the left hand, which requires another ten years before progressing to the head and right arm making up thirty years of training. In 1963, an association, *Bunraku* Association, was established in Japan to examine and manage the various phases of the art. The opening of the National *Bunraku* Theatre in Osaka in 1984, secured the *Bunraku* theatrical enterprise. The exquisitely equipped theatre plays host to a *Bunraku* troupe that performs six to eight months a year. The troupe's home theatre is in Tokyo while the troupe tours other cities in Japan and abroad.

Kwagh-hir has enjoyed more unity of purpose and therefore promoted the Tiv ethnic identity. It is for the marginalised Tiv in the northern Nigeria a means of nationalistic and social identity and loyalty to the Tiv common origin, Swem Karagbe. It is a theatre of resistance transcending entertainment, family business or theatrical vocation, and participation is practically evidence of commitment and loyalty for Tiv folk. This is seen in the large *Kwagh-hir* groups and the social support the people lend to their sustenance.

Conclusion

The art of puppeteering in Nigeria and Japan have been subjected a comparative analysis, with emphasis on universal dramatic elements. Convergences in both traditions present in in their unity of thought patterns in distinct deployment of characters, symbols, imagery, and scenery, while divergences occur in responses to certain universal themes such as loyalty, honour, chivalry, death and suicide. These universal themes are largely determined by cultural and religious beliefs which are pointers to the authenticity of the principle of universalism and the existence of archetypes in world literature. The preservation of culture, as a mark of national identity, influences the responses of both nations to local and global problems explored in the performances.

Endnotes:

- i The Tale of the Heike has been referred is as a resource for the Nōh play an example is Atsumori.
- ii Biwa Hosi is a narrator who told stories with emotionally stirring melodies produced by a Biwa, a flute or four stringed Japanese lute. They were called Biwa priests because they were also attired like priests.
- iii The pleasant quarters are the sections separated within the Japanese cities for expression of pleasure exuberances here the tea houses and brothels abound.
- iv The narrator or storyteller in *Kwagh-hir* is known as the Shuwa or the Orpasen (Hagher, 1987:106 and 2003:230).
- v This is true of the sculptors but most *Kwagh-hir* practitioners are resentful that the sculptors are unduly arrogant and cost so much to maintain. See details under organization and form.
- vi See Hagher (2003:121) for the picture of the puppet character Takurudu, and same text for reference on Tiv ancestry.
- vii See Hagher (2003:111) for Yion puppet also of Tiv ancestry and patriarchs will be significance of the rivers, lakes and water ways have been extensively discussed.
- viii Other works that marked the anniversary of the lovers include Yuujomakotogusa, Shinju Nimaiezoushi and Tenmaya shinju, Ikudama shinju and Sonezaki shinju. Juusannenki and Ohatsu tenjinki, performed on the first, third, thirteenth and thirty third year anniversaries respectively.

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