
**UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH CREATIVE PERFORMANCE ARTS
OF JELILI ATIKU AND YUSUF DURODOLA**

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Abstract

Over the years, Nigeria's economy and socio-cultural activities have faced a series of negative challenges such as inflation, closure of companies, unemployment, banditry, and killings among other vices militating against the development of the average individual and the nation. The resultant negative effect of these challenges is brain drain among the youths that forms the bedrock of positive developments of a nation. In the same vein, the traditional socio-cultural values of the citizens are also gradually being eroded and replaced with negative foreign values. However, in attracting our youths to attain economic sustainability, the role of performance art practice, as a vocational option in national development, has not been fully annexed. The duo of Jelili Atiku and Durodola Yusuf have positively contributed to the nation's economy and socio-cultural development through their creative performance arts. Given the above, this paper aims to study the performances of the duo artists to project the benefits of their art to the economy and socio-cultural advancement of Nigeria. The paper engaged the qualitative method and it hinges on primary and secondary data sources. It also adopted the Performance theory pioneered by Wallece Bacon and popularised by Richard Schechner. Shepherd (2016, p. x) sees performance theory as a way of framing objects of study, viewing them as performances, thereby facilitating a new sort of thinking about them. To this end, this paper explains the term performance art, projects the biography of the duo artists, studies their performances, and discusses the advantages of their performances as a means of unlocking opportunities for the youths and general contributions to the development of the nation. The paper recommends that performance art be included in the curriculum of primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education, and also be accepted as a means to job creation and self-sustenance made possible with little amount as capital base among others.

Keywords: Performance art, Vices, Economy, Culture, Opportunities, Development

Introduction

Performance as an art genre involves live presentation that combines unique and dynamic forms of expression in both visual and non-visual art forms such as theater, music, dance, and fine and applied arts. On a broader scale, the use of the artist's body as a medium of expression in the form of action, gestures, and movements alongside the audience and the environment (Ward, 1997 p. 36; Rhodes 2024, para. 4, 5). It encompasses a wide range of styles and techniques in theatrical performance and interactive installations. Performance art

induces strong emotion in both the performer and the audience, thereby engaging audience participation, and interaction and granting the viewer more experiences. It does not need words to convey complex ideas (Stiftung & Usman, 2022 p. 83). It addresses and raises awareness on important and relevant social, political, and cultural issues as well as discussable topics that may spark dialogue as well as lead the artist to a new way of expressing himself or herself.

Performance art practices in Nigeria date back to ancient times when it functioned as an instrument of traditional cultural practices and rituals. It served the purpose of social commentary and entertainment. Performance art such as the Egungun masquerade especially the Gelede spectacle exists on a wide scale among the Yoruba and some other tribes. It serves as a corrective instrument for social misconduct such as theft, killing, and spiritual afflictions perpetrated by individuals or groups. These vices are often expressed and corrected through songs, music, and dance or acted in the open (Drewal and Drewal 1983, p. 1). In the same vein, social commentary in the form of open moral training embedded in rebuke and advice directed at projecting cultural values are often expressed in the same manner for different age grades, genders, social groups, religious bodies, and different occupations to mention but a few.

Today, corrupt practices such as banditry, killing, theft, robbery embezzlement, and unemployment, among other vices are increasingly working against the development of Nigeria. These vices have brought about consequential poverty. Yusuf Bala Institute and Rosa Stiftung & Usman (2022, p. 10) espouse that in the year “2019/2020 Nigeria living standard survey released by the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics, NBS shows that 82.9 million (40.1 percent) Nigerians are poor”. Rodney (2017, p. 14) sees underdevelopment as depriving societies of the benefits of their natural resources and labour which according to Rodney is an integral part of underdevelopment in the contemporary sense. The inability of the youths to endure consequential hardship has forced many to

migrate from their motherland especially Nigeria, to foreign countries such as Britain, France, South Africa, America, and Canada among other countries where greener pastures are sought. The resultant effect is brain drain and untimely death of many Nigerian youths who migrated to the so-called places of greener pastures.

Like in the olden days, modern performance art still serves as an instrument for identifying and correcting some of the vices militating against the development of Nigeria. Modern performance readdresses negative political activism, insensitivity of powers in government, and social injustices. Contemporary performance artists such as Jelily Atiku and Durodola Yusuf have contributed a lot in advocating for the rekindling of traditional cultural practices and correcting socio-economic and religious practices that work contrary to the development of Nigeria.

This paper aims to study two selected performances of each of the duo artists to project the benefits of their performances to cultural advancement and socio-economic development as well as a means of unlocking opportunities for the youth. The paper therefore rests on ‘Performance Theory’ propounded and popularised by Richard Schechner (b. 1934), According to Shepherd (2016, p. x) “Performance theory can be a way of framing objects of study, viewing them as performances, thereby facilitating a new sort of thinking about them”. Shepherd explains further that performance theory can invoke an idea of the performance that embodies particular values and rhetorically deploy this idea to

justify projects and positions, even facilitating adjustment to the same presiding structures against which earlier performance practices came into being. Thus, according to Shepherd (x) performance theory can explain how interactions work by, for example, drawing on analogies with theatre, ritual, ceremony, or play. This theory emphasizes performance art as a means of expressing one's ideas, feelings, and suppositions all of which the works of Jelili Atiku and Durodola Yusuf creatively capture. The duo artists dwell on issues of significance to individuals and the public from different expressive angles combining visual arts, music, and drama under a refreshed new thinking that projects both positive and negative aspects of issues, objects, and actions.

Biography of the two Artists.

Jelili Atiku and Durodola Yusuf are renowned performance artists who focus on the cultural pride of Africa, especially Yoruba culture and are advocates of justice. These two inspirational figures perform for the global audience aside from their loving local audience. They reflect and create

awareness of world occurrences such as Covid-19, climate change, and different forms of social injustices through their performances. They also dwell richly on Yoruba culture as a means of identity, promotion of moral values as well as socio-cultural justice.

Jelili Atiku was born in Ejigbo in 1968. He is based in Lagos. He is an academic artist who trained at Amadu Bello University, Zaria where he bagged his B.A. in Fine Arts, and University of Lagos where he graduated with a Masters in Visual Arts. He has produced several artworks expressed in the form of drawing, installation, sculpture, photography, video, and performance (live art). He has series of exhibitions and performances to his credit. He took part in Manifesta 12, Palermo, in 2018, and the International Exhibition – Pavilion of the Shamans, 57th Venice Biennale, Italy, in 2017. Some other performances include 'Alaagba', a performance with Larissa M. Araújo, 15th November Square and Centro Cultural Banco do Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, and 'Ọlọmọyọyọ', performance, St. Matthäus - Kirche, Matthäikirchplatz, Berlin both performances were staged in 2018 (Imago Mundi collection 2018, para 1& 2)



Fig. 1 Jelili Atiku. Performance Artist

Referred as a quintessential artist is Durodola Yusuf. He was born in Ibadan, Oyo State in 1979, but lived and worked in Lagos. He is a lecturer at the Federal College of Education (Technical) Akoka. He is a painter, performance artist, sculptor, graphic artist, and curator of outstanding excellence. He is a creative artist who interprets his point of view through discarded objects inculcated into paintings and brilliant performance art. He explores issues bordering on environmental pollution, echo system, socio-political imbalance, festivities, culture, and sensitization. Durodola Yusuf is a graduate of the Federal College of Education (Technical), Akoka where he bagged an NCE certificate in painting and graphics. He had his first-degree programme at the prestigious University of Lagos where he finished with B.A in Visual Arts, painting option. Durodola is a prolific and versatile artist whose genre of work blurs the boundaries of painting, recycling, and up-cycle, performance, video, and photography art. While expressing his passion for his chosen career, he espouses that his work serves as a “requisite to stimulating discourses on our political and



Fig. 2 Yusuf Durodola. Performance Artist

social challenges that jeopardize our collective reality. It also serves as the voice of the voiceless within the community” (Enyadike 2022, para. 7). Durodola in Enyadike (2022, para.4) explains he employs African symbols and draws inspiration from Yoruba cosmology with emphasis on language, philosophy, adages, oral tradition and moral expressions. He points out that he uses his body as a mobile object in public spaces and to bring the healing power of art to the consciousness of the populace. The artist, Durodola, has participated in several exhibitions and performances both as solo or group. Among his Solo-exhibitions are *Atupa* at Lagos Book and Art Festival, Freedom Park, Old Colonial Prison Ground, Lagos in 2021, *Abakadabra* performance was held in 2020 at Lock Unlock, Glimpses behind Isolatio (Webinar) India. As of 2019, he performed *Abiyamo*

Selected Performances of the Duo Artists

One of the two performances of Jelili selected for this study is titled “*Aragamago*

will rid this land of terrorism” performed at Ejigbo in 2016. The performance exposes the violent nature of the local king who

threatens and naked three women as a result of a trivial theft accusation. He likened this act of violence to exhibited terrorism ravaging the country and Jelili’s action and confrontation of the king led to his arrest and imprisonment which lasted till 2019.



Plate 1 . Jelili Atiku. “Aragamago will rid this land of terrorism”
Performance at Ejigbo, Lagos, Nigeria
Courtesy Jelili Atiku.

The second performance in consideration is titled “*Alaagba*” which was conducted in Brazil. It emphasises the collective resistance of the Yoruba ancestors against colonialism and redirects people’s attention to issues of the past and activates the rethink of the content, reshapes the present, and reinvents the future, hence the performance *Alaagba* (Atiku 2014, p. 3). This performance (installation) brought back to memory lane the historical records of European organised influence and consolidation of domination of African continent as the scramble for and partition of Africa as legalised at the Berlin conference of 1884- 1885 organised by Otto von Bismarck (Rosenberg 2019, para. 4). The arbitrary boundaries created by this

conference has brought upon Africa disastrous consequences such as racial inequalities, unending civil wars, abject poverty, mass starvation, devastating ethnic cleansing, violent and conflict over fundamental issues of human survival and progress (Artiku 2014, p. 2). He underscores the fragmentation of the Yoruba people as propelled by the Berlin conference. He observes that the rate of healing and unity of people as a result of the Berlin Conference in Africa is slow despite the freedom and independence gained by Africans today. Africa remains heavily dependent and under the effects of neo-colonialism and neo-liberation.(Atiku 2014,)



Plate 2. "Alaagba" performance at Richardplatz Berlin, Germany

Photo by Chiara Cartuccia. Courtesy of Jelili Atiku

The protest performance titled *Opakopa* plates 3, 4, 5 & 6 held on the 9th of August 2020 in Bariga Lagos State by Durodola Yusuf is symbolic of the on-going reckless sexual oppression of the female gender especially the children by some male gender who refused to mind the age grade

of the oppressed (plate 4). The performance which focuses on the incessant rape of the female gender. The artist, Durodola observed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, many children were sexually molested and rapped.



Plate 3. *Opakopa* Performance



Plate 4. *Opakopa* Performance

Photograph Source: Courtesy of Durodola Yusuf



Plate 5. "Opakopa" Performance



Plate 6. "Opakopa" Performance

Photograph Source: Courtesy of Durodola Yusuf

Plate 3 shows the molester or the rapist named *Opakopa* (translated by the artist as "Wrong Manhood"); that commits a crime in society. It is described as a tool designed for procreation but criminally used as a tool for violating the precious innocent temple (body and soul) of the gender that is meant to be protected and valued (plate 6). The rapist has been declared wanted and must be arrested (plate 3). The artist notes that the world is destroyed the more, by those who watch the criminals perpetrating evil. The artist asks several questions such as "Who is to be blamed?" "The victim, the culprit, or the society?" "What morals are we raising for our fashion display?" on this reality that engulfed our society, and to which genuine answers have not been provided. He finally submits that silence on this societal problem is nothing but a virus (Durodola, 2020).

The second performance of Durodola selected for this study is "*Agbegilere*" (the Carvers). The performance was staged at Tejuosho

Market, Lagos Nigeria during the Iwaya Community Art Festival Artist in Residency 2018. The performance interrogates the relationship between the carver who sculpts new forms from wood. The sculptor and the carvers were used as a metaphor to interrogate current issues between the government, here referred to as the carver, and the workers referred to as the wood from whom the government expects extraordinary performance without due remuneration. Durodola upholds that the minimum wage as of 2010 was N18,000 but by 2019 workers were still pursuing the payment of N30,000. Other challenges such as lack of sound education, good health facilities, and treatment, lack of power supply, and insecurity among others abound. The carver therefore determines the shape he carves out of the wood. The government determines what the workers are made up of in hard work, reasoning, integrity, consistency at work, and rate of

migration to other countries in search of greener pastures.



Plate 7. *Agbegilere* Performance. At Tejuosho Market, Lagos.
Photograph Source: Courtesy of Durodola Yusuf



Plate 8. *Agbegilere* Performance. Tejuosho Market Lagos
Photograph Source: Courtesy of Durodola Yusuf

Benefits from Performance Art

The Performances titled “*Aragamago*” (plate 1), “*Alaagba*” (plate 2), “*Agbegilere*” (plate 7& 8,) selected for the purpose of this paper direct observers' attention to traditional objects such as calabashes, cloths, and style of dressing, ropes, wood used. The performance titled *Opakopa* (plates 3, 4,5. 6) exhibits the use of doll, a representation of a female child, a chain, and a knife among other objects of violence. These objects recall one's attention to the traditional society and the

traditional use of some of the objects mentioned. For example, the calabash in traditional society is used as a container of palm wine and the flat one as a container of goods and foods, as well as a serving of foods.

The performance also exposes social challenges that have befallen Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. One of the challenges is the abuse of female gender especially during COVID-19 and its associated lockdown (plates 3,4,5 & 6). The female has been endangered because many

were raped by the male gender which is a complete social crime ravaging the whole world today. Levels of inhumane of man to man as observed by Jelili in the performance titled *Aragamago* (plate 1). It reflects injustice even from traditional rulers to three female subjects who were naked and punished for trivial offenses. Another injustice of one superior race to another weaker one is historically recalled in the performance titled *Alaagba* (plate 2). It exposes the power play of the Western world against Africa at the Berlin conference of 1884-1885. The partition of Africa by the world powers has created an African world of crisis and injustice yet to be resolved in contemporary Africa.

The performances of the duo artists project African cultural values. They recall and teach observers the different aspects of African cultures and philosophies. The *Aragamago* (plate 1) by Jelili projects African intolerance to injustice, it pursues the love of one another as well as unity and oneness. The *Opakopa* by Durodola seriously condemned rape and advanced that the male gender involved in rape be seriously punished especially rapists of children. Rape could cause mental disorders in the victim. These performances are eye-openers for research into the various topics performed. They remained a wild field for research. More research would advance various solutions to some of these problems that could be resolved.

The creation of job opportunities for Nigerian Youth (male and female) is another benefit of performance art. In the face of unemployment ravaging the country, creative youths can be employed in performance art. The performance titled *Agbegilere* (plates 7 & 8) by Durodola

shows the involvement of youths in the performance. Their mood remained a joyous one, which is an indication of their satisfaction with the job. Performance art, if properly annexed, would reduce the rate at which both youths and elders migrate from the country in search of greener pastures. In the same vein, the rate of poverty resulting lack of employment opportunities would be reduced and the economy would receive a boost. More still, the cost of performance in practice is highly reduced compared to other area. With a little amount of capital in the hand of a creative individual performance art could be embarked on as a profession.

The exposition of talented Nigerians to the outside world is another advantage of performance art. Performance has taken the duo artists around the world through the practice of this profession. Jelili Atiku and Durodola Yusuf are renowned names in international and local circles. They have brought glory and honor to Nigeria and themselves.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward:

Performance art should be included in the curriculum of primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. This will enable both the pupils and the students to develop the mind of critiquing and passing judgment on personal and national issues which are strength of performance. These strengthens arts to be exposed and harnessed in day-to-day activities. The larger society should be educated to accept

and view the modern performing art as an offshoot of the traditional performance of masquerade especially Gelede spectacle structured to expose evil willed and good willed members of the society. Government and private individual should give priority to old and young performing artists in both local and foreign sponsorship. This will project the innate talents and image of Nigerians at the international level. Performance art should be accepted as means to job creation and self-sustenance made possible with little amount as capital base. This if well harnessed through sponsorship by government and private individuals will certainly reduce the percentage of unemployment which is one of the vices militating against national development.

Conclusion

Performance art, though not new in Africa remains a corrective measure of corrupt practices such as banditry, killing, theft, robbery embezzlement, and unemployment, among other vices that

have brought about consequential poverty and brain drain that further underdeveloped the nation (Stiftung & Usman 2022, p. 10; Rodney 2017, p. 14). Performance art as a corrective measure is now activated in a new dimension through artists whose profession in the contemporary era is performance. These artists identify challenging issues, creatively express them, criticize the same, and submit with provision of possible solutions through performance, installation, and creative artistic writings. Adopting Performance Theory (Shepherd 2016, p. x) for this write-up, the works of duo artists Jelili Atiku and Durodola Yusuf were discussed. Some of the benefits of the performances of the artists to the nation include the reawakening and projection of African culture and values, providing education on some challenges ravaging Nigeria, Africa, and the whole world, opening doors for further research on issues raised in the performances, creation of job opportunities and income for youth who engages in such performances and finally, performances expose talents of Nigerian youths to the outside worlds.

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