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‘*Naija* Halloween or *wetin?*’: *Naija* superheroes and a time-traveling performance

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On the evening of 31 October 2015, steady beats of drums and melodious chants pushed their way through the entrance door of the old and vacant Federal Government Printing Press building on Broad Street in Lagos. Wearing a black suit and a traditional mask, a ‘hybrid-looking’ masquerade (Figure 1) was moving inside the Printing Press building. While kids on the Victoria Island went out to ‘trick or treat’ in their superman costumes on the same night, audience members and passers-by of the performance could not help wondering, ‘Dis one na *Naija* Halloween or *wetin?*’ (Comment of Damilola, one of the audience members). The masquerade, understood by the audience as a ‘*Naija* superhero’, was performed by Segun Adefila,¹ director of a Lagos-based youth theatre troupe (named Crown Troupe of Africa) during the ‘African Futures’ festival which aims to explore how the continent is giving answers to global questions of the future.² ‘*Naija* Halloween or *wetin?*’, the provoking question from the audience member reminds us: is the masquerade with its modern contours a Nigerian version of a superhero that embodies the dominant influence of global modernity? Or does the ‘reanimated’ masquerade provide us instead with an alternative model to understand Africa’s engagement with the modern world?

Focusing on the performance events during the ‘African Futures’ festival in Lagos, this short essay examines how the *egúngún* masquerade tradition is re-animated by contemporary performance artists, in ways that reconceptualize the future, and that intervene in the contemporary processes in Nigeria. I argue that, rather than an exclusive embracement of global modernity, these artistic practices could be interpreted as the mutation of a local tradition to suit the new circumstances of the post-colonial situation. The reanimated masquerades embody a complicated conception of time and space in Yorùbá metaphysics, in which the imagination of the future world is always entangled with an interpretation of the past and the present. This relationship of past to present to future, embedded in the structure of the Yorùbá performance traditions, provides a kind of critical agency for the ‘*naija* superheroes’. During the performance, the deceased ancestors are ‘resurrected’ as heroes with special powers that could reach beyond the everyday lives of Nigerians and change the current social context. In this sense, these artistic practices with their agendas of political transformation provide examples of the powers of contemporary African art to investigate the place of tradition within the forms of modernity, as well as to understand the relationship between tradition, modernity and civic agency in Africa.

Wearing a specially designed costume, Segun Adefila performed his masquerade dance, moving from the area backstage, through an exhibition of works by Nigerian sci-fi writers and digital artists, onto the main stage. An invocatory singer along with several others (members

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Figure 1. Segun Adefila's costume during his performance titled 'Memoirs of a time-travelling masquerade'. Photo courtesy of Sanni Emmanuel.

of Crown Troupe of Africa dispersed in the audience) participated in the performance, responding to the movements of the masquerade with chants in both Yorùbá and English. One of the troupe members walked around and served the audience drinks from a bottle of vodka; a sense of 'commune' (personal communication with Segun Adefila) was established among the audience while everyone drank from the same glass. Adefila's version of the futurist masquerade took on a 'hybrid' outlook. The performer was wearing a western styled black suit with traditional Yorùbá ornaments on it (Figure 2): various Yorùbá òrìṣà names (such as Ṣàngó, Èṣù, Oya and so on) and masks painted in different colours on the back, and 'oṣé Ṣàngó' (the double-bladed axe representing the divine weapon of Ṣàngó) on the front panel of the suit. There were also long pieces of stripped cloth attached to the lower body, which is commonly seen in traditional *egúngún* performances, especially among the elder masqueraders (Aremu 1991). Perhaps what amazed the audience most is that the masquerader was holding a POS machine (point of sale terminal, a machine used to accept cards for payment of goods and services) in the hand (Figure 3). Normally during the seasonal masquerade performances, community members give some tokens to the masquerader; ironically, in Adefila's imagination of the future society, the *egúngún* would only accept card payment.

Paralleling with Adefila's live performance on stage, a video recording of an earlier protest performance outside the Printing Press building, by Jelili Atiku, was projected onto the screen and projected over Adefila's body.³ Atiku's performance was titled 'Kill Not This Country – Letters to Boko-Haram' and in it there was a strong statement against the menace of Boko-Haram in the northeastern part of Nigeria. The whole body of the performer (Atiku himself) was covered in green. According to Atiku, the green costume represents the vitality of the future, the white cellophane nylon worn over his body and dragged along on the floor represents the troubled peace of the country, and the skulls refer to the large numbers of the helpless casualties (Figures 4 and 5). The whole performance (that is the combined effect of Adefila and Atiku's works) was understood by one audience member who shared his insights with me as showing that the country is at greater risk as a result of the activities of 'the monster neo-god called Boko-Haram' (personal conversation with one audience member, Adeola Goloba).⁴



Figure 2. Segun Adefila explains the detail of the costume. Photo courtesy of Sanni Emmanuel.



Figure 3. Segun Adefila's futurist masquerade holding a POS machine in the hand. Photo courtesy of Sanni Emmanuel.

Although marked by modernity and futurity like the popular superheroes in western contexts, the special power of these *naija* superheroes performed by Adefila and Atiku is rooted in the structure of Yorùbá performance traditions. I suggest that, to better understand the political agency of these contemporary Nigerian artistic practices, one need to go to the deep structures



Figure 4. 'Kill Not This Country (*Maanifesito II*)', Jelili Atiku's performance on Saturday 31 October 2015. Photo courtesy of Sanni Emmanuel.



Figure 5. 'Kill Not This Country (*Maanifesito II*)', Jelili Atiku's performance on Saturday 31 October 2015. Photo courtesy of Sanni Emmanuel.

of these public performances, especially the deployment of time-space structure and its relation to traditional Yorùbá metaphysics. Both Adefila's and Atiku's works were adapted from the Yorùbá *egúngún* masquerade performance in which the masquerader often appears as 'a robed figure

which is designed specially to give the impression that the deceased is making a temporary reappearance on earth' (Idowu 1962, 208).

While the costumes and rituals for *egúngún* masquerades are distinct and usually quite diverse within each region, they invariably commemorate the ancestors who founded the lineage and continue to affect the daily existence of the living. The *egúngún* ceremonies help to keep the moral order in the society and are often performed when the community needs guidance or correction. The chants and the choreography of Adefila's stage performance were based on a seasonal masquerade ceremony which he had recorded in the *Qba* (the King)'s house near Bariga area in Lagos.⁵ According to Adefila, the Yorùbá chant titled '*Orelópé*' (meaning 'kindness is good') in his performance delivers a moral message to those in power nowadays: 'Doing good (to the people) is good and rewarding, while doing evil is bad' (personal communication with Adefila on 5 November 2015). In this sense, the masquerade tradition is animated and endowed with immediate political meanings.

Atiku's masquerade performance embodied an even more direct and specific political agenda of protesting against the atrocities performed by Boko-Haram. Walking with plastic human skulls, the performance shared with the audience 'the burden of the collective pain and lives lost' (Jelili Atiku in his post-performance talk) and made statements on the experiences of desperation, fear and anger caused by the diffuse terrorist group.⁶ In another parallel with the seasonal masquerade ceremonies, Atiku's modern masquerade performances often take place on the streets of Ejigbo community, Lagos State where the artist lives. Like the proverb quoted by Adefila in his post-performance talk – 'The king will never be spared the scathing tongue of the griot if he steps out of order', Atiku's reanimated masquerades bring to life a discussion of contemporary violence, crime, social injustice, national consciousness and humanity in the community. Some of his powerful performances have offended the *Qba* and his chiefs in Ejigbo and caused continuous harassment and threat to the artist's life and that of his family members.⁷

In contemporary Nigerian performance art practices, the time-traveling Yorùbá performance traditions have been constantly quoted to furnish a discursive space to explore the questions of the present and the future. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the name of the deceased Afrobeat maestro and political maverick Fela Kuti was brought up several times in the discussions after Adefila and Atiku's performances. Almost 20 years after his death, the deceased Fela has been repeatedly 'resurrected' in contemporary artistic practices and social interventions. In these artistic and social practices, the deceased Fela was constantly reanimated and celebrated among the artists and their audience as superheroes who have the power to discipline the wrongdoers and help solve the immediate crisis. For instance, during the Occupy Nigeria Movement⁸ in 2012, Fela was 'resurrected' by Segun Adefila and other Crown Troupe members 'in a masquerade fashion' (personal interview with Segun Adefila in February 2015) to join the national protest.

During the protest, one of the young performance artists put on Fela Kuti's signature mask and outfits and imitated his typical gestures; singing Fela's masterpieces such as 'Original Suffer Head', 'Shuffering and Shmiling' and 'Zombie', hundreds of people followed the 'resurrected' Fela, and the procession swept the street like a wave. In the troupe's 2014 adaptation of Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1963), the spirit of Fela is summoned as one the venerated ancestors whom the celebrants would really welcome to their party.⁹ Moreover, it is worth noticing that Fela had also resorted to traditional forms of authority while expressing his ardent expectations of changes and transformations in the society: after his mother's death, Fela began performing with white spiritual powder on his face, which he saw as an aid to communicate with the deceased spirits; his public music performances were often stopped for a prayer or the pouring of libation of ancestral spirits, in front of an altar bearing the portrait of Malcolm X, Fela's mother, and totems of various deities (for a discussion of this phase of his life see Teju Olaniyan's (2004) *Arrest the Music*).

These artistic and social practices invariably adopt a model of ‘re-traditionalization’ that features a recuperation of traditional forms and their incorporation into forms of Western modernity (modern theatre stages, political protests and demonstrations and so on), or what Garuba (2003, 265) calls ‘a manifestation of an animist unconsciousness’ operating through a process that involves ‘a continual re-enchantment of the world’. According to Garuba, in consonance with the animist logic of ‘continually re-enchanting the world’, human activities, social relationships and political actions are often cast over with an otherworldly veil, and may be overdetermined by animistic meanings that often legitimate or delegitimize them.

As embodiments of the ‘African Futures’, these *naija* superheroes walking on the stage (or the street) had one foot planted in the traditional spirit world and the other in the present social reality. They represent a liminal, indeterminate state of being. I suggest that the liminality of the *naija* superheroes (a status between deceased ancestors and national heroes) illustrates an alternative understanding of Africa’s engagement with the modern world. First, by recalling the ancestors from the past to the future, these modern masquerades embody an animist conception of time different from the linear, positivist time encoded with notions of progress and development. Soyinka (1990, 144) also interprets the fluid time scheme in his classic article ‘The Fourth Stage’:

Past, present and future being so pertinently conceived and woven into the Yorùbá world view, the element of eternity which is the god’s prerogative does not have the same quality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture ... Life, present life, contains within it manifestations of ancestor, the living and the unborn.

In this cyclical and layered Yorùbá time scheme, there is a contemporaneous existence of different aspects of time within human daily experience: the deceased ancestors are still part of the present, the present is not an abstract node in the continuum of time, and the future is fluid and subject to interpretation and manipulation. In the words of Garuba (2003, 271), the animist culture ‘opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities, *prepossessing the future*, as it were, by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented’. That also explains why in Nigerian popular life, the deceased Fela is so often quoted and consulted by ordinary people as a ‘political philosopher and prophet who had said everything about Nigeria and his music is still going to be relevant in the future’ (interview with one audience member Adegbite).

Secondly, the model of ‘continual re-enchantment of the world’ in these modern artistic and social practices challenges the perception of ‘retraditionalization’ in Africa as simply a reproduction of ancient mores. As is summarized in the title of Christopher A. Waterman’s paper in 1990 – ‘Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition’, scholars in African studies (and many outside academia too) have argued that cultural traditions in Africa have been adapting and changing like a continuous flow as they encounter local forms of modernity (Barber 1987; Rea 2008). Take the *egúngún* masquerade for example, the masquerade performances ‘honor ancestors and at the same time serve as important symbols for the living’ (Drewal 1978), and they are often ‘very adept at picking up on and transmitting new notions to their communities’ (Rea 2014, 56). In their performances, Adefila and Atiku adapted the masquerade tradition to respond to the immediate social context in Nigeria. One sees in their performances a number of elements and materials that are unlikely to appear in any traditional community-based masquerade ceremonies. We see a business suit, vodka, a POS machine, an industrial gas mask, cellophane nylon, an electronic projector and screen, the Internet and so on. According to Garuba (2003), animist cultures actively resist the goal of Weberian rationalization and secularization by cornering the instruments and technologies of the modern world and bringing them into their orbit of operation. Rather than an appropriation of the western superhero trope, these hybrid-looking *naija* superheroes seek to interact with the everyday life and death of the ordinary Nigerians and urge the viewers to examine their individual and collective social behaviours, and to take

a critical view of aspects of the modern African world where consumption, industrialization and globalization are worshipped.

The question quoted at the beginning of the essay – ‘*Naija* Halloween or *wetin?*’, by the audience response to the modern masquerade performance constructs a link between the ancestor worship and superheroism within an African worldview. The *naija* superheroes could be interpreted as embodiment of the time-traveling masquerade tradition, ‘reanimated’ in order to influence the immediate social context and the future of the country. These *naija* superheroes argue for a complex, ever-changing, metaphysical notion of the relationship between past, present and future. For contemporary Nigerian artists such as Adefila and Atiku, the critical agency of traditional performances provides the core legitimacy of the eternal relevance of theatre performance in the future of super-modern Nigeria, no matter how its appearances are adapted or transformed. Rather than being everyday communications that might pass by unremarked, these ‘time-traveling performances’ have become and will remain ritually significant interactions with the ancestors, the immediate audience, and the future world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Segun Adefila is also an actor in Tunde Kelani’s film *Arugba*, discussed in the essays by Rotimi Fasan (2016) and Nomusa Makhubu (2016) in this same issue.
2. African Future festival was organized by Goethe-Institut Lagos from 28 October to 31 October 2015.
3. After the live performance, the video was also uploaded onto social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Watch the video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP_mG8zMcUs.
4. Some audience members, for instance, Pelu Awofeso, read it as Ebola, the disease that resurged and ravaged parts of West Africa in 2014 and killed several thousands.
5. According to my personal communication with him, Adefila used to be a masquerader in his hometown Omu Aran in Kwara State for many years.
6. The performance is part of the artist’s ‘Maanifesito’ project – a project that makes a critical analysis and review of 100 years (1914–2014) of Nigeria’s political experiences, which are characterized with multi-lateral forms of imperialism, colonial and neo-colonial manipulation, military dictatorship, corrupt leadership, pseudo-federal system, ethnic domination, mass poverty, lack of political manifestos and the people’s will to hold on.
7. On 18 January 2016, the artist was arraigned and subsequently remanded in prison for allegedly conspiring with four other persons to commit felony, to wit public disturbance with his artistic performance ‘Aragamago’ on the 14th day of January 2016 at about 5.40pm along Ifoshi Road, Ejigbo in Lagos. <http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/2016/01/drop-charges-against-jelili-atiku-now/>. Accessed on 31 January 2016. The work titled ‘Aramagamo Will Rid This Land of Terrorism’ explores a masquerade motif that he proposes as a campaign against the reign of executive terrorism, at the heart of his current challenges. In parts, it is an attack on rentier tendencies in Nigerian communities; it bears similarity with many local artistic productions that assail the extremes of the rentier economy in Nigeria, including Benson Tomolaju’s *Jankariwo* and Wole Soyinka’s *Alapata Apata*.
8. This is a scene observed during the 2012 ‘Occupy Nigeria Movement’. On 2 January 2012, the day after Nigeria’s President Goodluck Jonathan announced that he was removing government subsidies of fuel costs, protests against the removal of fuel-subsidy started in major cities of Nigeria, such as Lagos, Kano and Abuja. On 9 January, a nationwide general strike was called, and larger groups of protestors poured into the street. The demonstrations continued until 16 January, when President Jonathan announced that he would cut fuel prices by about 30% and provide 1600 diesel-powered mass transit vehicles to cushion the effects of the subsidy removal. This movement was estimated as the largest and most sustained short-term protest in sub-Saharan African countries in a long while.
9. The play was a commissioned work for the Nigerian Independence celebrations in 1960. Starting with a community preparing for a jubilee aptly called ‘The Gathering of the Tribe’, the play uses the masquerade

tradition to dramatize the social reality after independence: half the characters are either spirits or gods, and the play juxtaposes a mythical glorious African past with a prescient vision of a corrupt post-colonialist society.

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