

# **The Quintessential Oni: Language as Theatre and Theatre as Language in Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

The paper contains some aspects of the language of theatre in Nigeria from the perspective of the contributions of Professor Duro Oni. On the one hand, theatre in the Grecian time had different features from theatre today. It revelled, then, in the tripartite unities of time, space and scene within the playwrights' imaginative contexts. In relation to the operational essence of theatre, irrespective of time, on the other hand, is stage-lighting and scenic design – Professor Duro Oni's academic and professional engagements for about four decades running. Stage-lighting and scenic-design are, obviously, very indispensable support tools for theatre processes and the creativity of comprehensive meaning of the storyline scene-by-scene. The analysis is indicative, most importantly, therefore, of the theatrical and registerial language of stage-lighting and design - the oracular pedestal upon which Professor Duro Oni's enduring contributions to academic and professional lives of Nigeria and Nigerians are classified and analysed very clearly by using aspects of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Theory (SFT).

## 1.0-Introduction

Professor Duro Oni's contributions to the development of theatre in Nigeria is very significant.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, without any iota of exaggeration, he stands on a theatrical pedestal as a foremost leading light of a second generation theatre professional-practitioner and academician<sup>2</sup>. His publications speak volumes about his predecessors, with special reference to Professor Adedapo Adelugba, history and the theory and practice of the theatre with special reference to illumination and, of course, the practical processes by which the enhancement of the profession can be attained now and in the future. He tirelessly and timelessly visualizes theatre as the foremost intellectual pursuit in Nigeria.

Beginning with a general consideration of the Arts, Oni (2006:76) divides the Arts into the following compartmentalisations especially from the perspective of theatre:

- (1) Literary Arts (literature)
- (2) Auditory Arts (sound and audio)
- (3) Verbal Arts (oral poetry and renditions)
- (4) Visual Arts (plastic) and
- (5) Mixed Arts (all of the above Arts)

According to him, being a performing art, the theatre belongs to the mixed arts – a situation whereby all of the other arts (1-5 above) and their elements are embedded in it<sup>3</sup>.

Concerning his historical consideration (op. cit. 2006:77), the antecedents of the development of theatre in Nigeria, pre- and post Herbert Ogunde,<sup>4</sup> are deeply rooted in his early association with the *Egun Alarinjo*.<sup>5</sup> Ogunde featured in the plays as a dancer and drummer. Oni asserts that he, that is Ogunde, might have been influenced by the traditional (native) 'air operas' and the 'Christian cantatas' in Lagos having been brought up by a Baptist clergyman father. Regarding Ogunde, Clark (1980 in Oni op.cit. 78), perhaps the most authoritative scholar of Ogunde's theatre, asserts that 'he [Ogunde] nevertheless was responsible for withdrawing the theatre from the direct patronage of church and court'<sup>6</sup>. Oni's authoritative and dramatic view of the theatre in Nigeria regarding Ogunde is quoted below:

With Ogunde's production of his native air opera *The Garden of Eden* and the *Throne of God*, staged at the Glover Memorial Hall on June 1944, he directed attention away from a pure musical form and included dramatic action and realism to stage presentations (p.78).<sup>7</sup>

Ogunde's mode of theatre was exemplified in the productions of other theatre artistes such as Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya and Oyin Adejobi.

In his seminal work, Oni (2011a:225-233) situates the myriads of names often used for theatre in the Nigerian universities such as Theatre Arts, Dramatic Arts, Performing Arts and Creative Arts. All of these nomenclatures for the theatre are offered as courses in ten universities in Nigeria; namely, Universities of Abuja, Calabar, Ibadan, Ilorin, Lagos, Maiduguri, Port-Harcourt, Ahmadu Bello University, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (formerly University of Ife). Contextualising the Department of Creative Arts into the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, he asserts that there are three units. These are Theatre Arts, Music and Visual Arts. Of the three units, he asserts further that the Department's primary area of stress is the Theatre Arts. The area is further compartmentalized into Arts of the Theatre, Acting and Directing, Dramatic Literature and Criticism, Playwriting, Theatre Management and Administration, Dance and Choreography and Design, Aesthetics and Technology. Furthermore, it is the fact that the field of Design, Aesthetics and Technology is sub-divided into Set Design, Costume Design, Lighting Design, Sound Design and Stage Make-up Design. All of these sub-divisions have been carefully designed in the

Theatre Curriculum to demonstrate its length, width and depth – hence its prominence in the Department of Creative Arts of the University of Lagos.

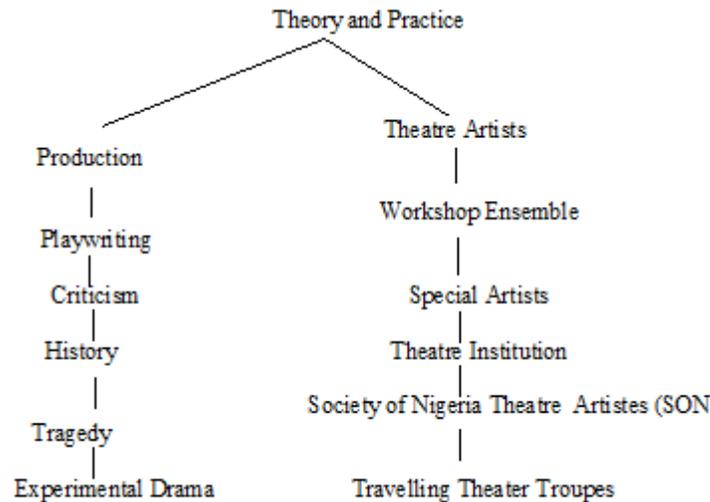
The paper contains some aspects of the language of theatre in Nigeria from the perspective of the contributions of Professor Duro Oni. On the one hand, theatre in the Grecian time had different features from theatre today. It revelled, then, in the tripartite unities of time, space and scene within the playwrights' imaginative contexts. In relation to the operational essence of theatre, irrespective of time, on the other hand, is stage-lighting and scenic-design – Professors Duro Oni's academic and professional engagements for about four decades running. Stage-lighting and scenic-design are, obviously, very indispensable support tools for theatre processes and the creativity of comprehensive meaning of the storyline scene-by-scene. The analysis is indicative, most importantly, therefore, of the theatrical and registerial language of stage-lighting and design the oracular pedestal upon which Professor Duro Oni's enduring contributions to academic and professional lives of Nigeria and Nigerians are classified and analysed very clearly by using aspects of Hallidayan Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) <sup>8</sup>.

## **2.0-Adelugba's Theatrical Model**

As a well-deserved coinage, Oni (o.p.cit. 2011, p. 231) defines Adelugba's Model as follows:

It is important at this stage to reiterate the Adelugba' Model, which we have summarized as a practiced-based training with sound theoretical base for productions that stretch the production capabilities of staff and students utilizing productions at national and international levels. In interrogating the lessons from this model of theatre training, it is important to examine the current situation of training theatre artistes in the Nigerian university system. From our experience, we have observed that a school of thought has been centred on the staging of only Nigerian and African plays while another has advocated a diffusion of local as well as foreign productions. Some have in fact recommended works by only established playwrights, while others have promoted works by new playwrights.

The above quote is very explicit of the characteristics of Adelugba's Model at the incipient creativity of a distinct Nigerian and intellectual theatre. The model combines theory with practice and learners were fully engaged in the specific art. Productions were not delimited to Nigerian or African plays and theatre alone. He, Adelugba, did not delimit his productions to only the old school of thought but also the new ones. His model was, therefore, pragmatic and a very good standard and representation of what theatre looked like during his time at the universities of Ibadan, in particular, and a few other universities in Nigeria and overseas. Below is a schematic representation of theory and practice that may be associated with Professor Dapo Adelugba.



**Fig. 1- Adelugba's Theatrical Model**

Apart from Adelugba's Model above, Oni puts on record that Adelugba was obviously one of the earliest scholars who engaged in the training of theatre artistes in the Nigerian university system (Oni, op.cit. 2011, p. 225; Adelugba, 1969, 1972). As a student in Government College, Ibadan, according to Oni, Adelugba also engaged in dramatic and poetic presentations. He played significant roles in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and as Lord Fancourt in Brendon Thomas' *Charley Aunt etc.*

As a quintessential lecture, Oni (2011a, 2011b) claims that for more than four decades, Adelugba taught many courses in the discipline. Some of them are represented on Fig. 1 above. Introduction to Drama, Introduction to Theatre, Acting and Production Styles, Directing and Production, Playwriting and Criticism, Production Workshop and Workshop Ensemble and History of Drama and Theatre. From specifically international perspective, others are Oriental Theatre, Modern European theatre, The Anglo-Irish Theatre, Repertory in Theatre Arts, Bibliography and Methods of Research, dissertation supervision at all levels, etc.

Up till the moment, Adelugba is still engaged in lecturing theatre and its processes.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.0- Oni's Theatrical Model

Of stage-lighting and scenic design, Oni's Model operated by viewing an actor as being separated from his background by three-dimensional lighting of *key*, *fill*, and *back-lighting* (italics mine). All of these three dimensions are very important because of visibility or illumination. Poor illumination can lead to loss of attention on the part of members of the audience. Lighting affects all that light falls upon; that is, how one sees what he sees and how one feels about what one feels and hears what he hears as well. In other words, a dramatic piece has to be seen in order to appreciate it.

Stage-lighting, in his professional protestation, also involves two basic changes namely; *conscious* and *sub-conscious* (italics mine). Conscious Change occurs when an actor switches on a light source while Sub-conscious change is subtle and hardly noticed by members of the audience. Yet, it contributes to the emotional effect of members of the audience.

Lighting can be used, therefore, to create a desired atmosphere or mood in a stage presentation. Style or stylistic meaning of lighting affects, very much indeed, production. It does, for instance, the range of the emotional expressions often associated with tragedy. On the one hand, an emotional expression of tragic works cast shadows that reduce the face of members of the audience to simple sculptural element.

On the other hand, high comedy calls for visibility of a kind that reveals the tiniest flicker of subtle emotion on the actor's face.

Modern lighting, Oni asserts, (2010: 9-11) is a flexible tool in the production of theatre, dance, opera and other performing acts. Beyond stage-lighting of key, fill and black-lighting as explained above, its design involves *line, shape, measure, position, colour* and *texture*. By all of these design patterns, it is meant that its general rules must conform to the rules of *composition, harmony, contrast, variation, pattern and gradation*. In this regard, that is the conformity rules, the designer must go beyond these physical considerations by considering aesthetic factors. He does not seem to be happy, however, that theories are not often derived from many years of theatrical practice. Similarly, the theories preceded technological practice by twenty years. He relates the idea to production in the following way:

The theories and principles of a modern aesthetic of theatre production, particularly in stage-lighting and scene design, have formed the bedrock of contemporary stage-lighting practice. They include the idea of plasticity in lighting as well as an inter-relationship between the parts of an artistically successful theatrical production and the relationship between creativity and human progress. (op.cit. p. 14)

Oni, in a similar way that Clark remarks that Herbert Ogunde draws music away from the church, he draws a line between Ogunde and drama on the one hand, and old and dramatic presentations on the other. He observes, furthermore, that plays no longer bear the Grecian unities of time and space; scenes jump through place and period as rapidly as the imagination of the playwright.

#### **4.0 – A Systemic Functional Theory's (SFT) Construction of the Language of Theatre of Oni's Stage-Lighting and Stage-Design**

As much as Oni's intellectual contributions to theatre and theatrical productions are remarkable, I assert in this chapter that a linguistic construction of his works, nay; stage-lighting and stage-design, is attainable. In other words, theatre is what it is because language forms the pivot upon which its intellectual and professional engagement revolves. Hence, my topic in the work: language as theatre and theatre as language.<sup>10</sup>

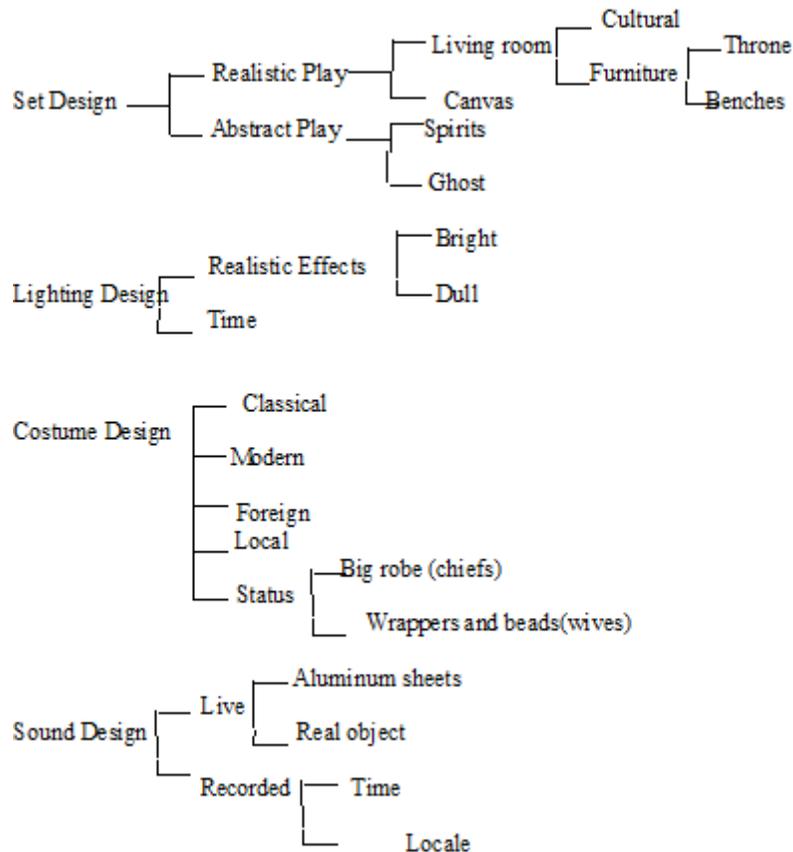
SFT is a theory of meaning as choice. That is, language users, albeit unconsciously, choose to say what they say out of several options available to them in the language they use as conditioned by relevant extralinguistic parameters. These linguistic choices can be interpreted as a system of meanings, and these meanings are realized in the wordings of the language. The idea of choice in language entails paradigmatic relations (the linguistic choice as one from a set of possibilities) and its realization – the syntagmatic (the linguistic chain or 'structure') relations. Structure, in SFT, is an output device, the device is used to express the choices already opted for in the language (see Halliday 1964, 1975; Daramola 2004, 2008; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

SFT as a theoretical model is predicated on a tripartite pivot of Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual Metafunctions (Halliday 2004; Hasan, 1985, 1987; Daramola 2010). The Ideational Metafunction deals with the construction of experience through language. Through it, a speaker expresses his experience of his own and the external worlds of consciousness. The Interpersonal Metafunction concerns the participants in discourse thereby presenting language as doing something by, and to the people. It deals with role relationships among the participants in a universe of discourse (Daramola, 2006). The Textual Metafunction complements both Ideational and Interpersonal Metafunctions by creating what is commonly referred to as relevance; relevance to the environment,

both situational and cultural. The grammatical systems of Transitivity, Mood and Modality and Theme correspond respectively to the three metafunctions. They serve as resources for the realizations of the theory of metafunctions in practical linguistic analysis.

The notion of system in SFT is incomplete without the notion of its formal construct – the System Network (SN). Being the formal representation of the linguistic theory, the construction of a SN shows a set of features of the language or concept from the paradigmatic options can be drawn. It is used, therefore, to model relationships between meanings in language. It is an illustration of possibilities of ordering what is and what is not in the language. It provides a concise account of the structural descriptions as a result of which it appears as a summary of what is being described.

As a kind of application to theatre, the Ideational Metafunction relates to theatrical linguistic expressions or meanings. The Interpersonal Metafunction relates to participants or actors on theatrical stage. This also extends to behind-the-scene activities of the stage and lighting designers. Textual Metafunction relates to the forms of language and extra-linguistic paraphernalia of theatre. Extralinguistically, every form of theatre is cultural. The SFT is a theoretical Model that takes into consideration the cultural aspect of any production. Most relevant to this work is the construction of some sets of possibilities in the following scheme a set of designs:



**Fig. 2- Oni’s Stage-Lighting and Stage-Design**

All of these discussions of Oni’s Model in theatrical construction in section 4.0. above may be explained further but briefly. The SN for Fig.2 above captures diagrammatically, set, lighting, costume and sound designs. From left to right, the SN describes the delicate divisions of each of the designs.

## 5.0- Conclusion

The chapter provides a very brief but succinct description of the development of theatre from Oni's perspective. Oni's success as a scholar of theatre in Nigeria cannot be described comprehensively without a recourse to the contributions of Adelugba. Hence, a part of the work takes a glance at Adelugba's very large contribution to the origin and the development of theatre in Nigeria. Even as he, that is Oni, asserts that Adelugba has a model comprising theory and practice (i.e. application) so a model of his (Oni) stage-design and lighting-design has been constructed using the Systemic Network of the Systemic Functional Theory. One is left in no doubt, in conclusion, of Oni's significant contributions to the development of theatrical practice in Nigeria.

## Footnotes

1. I could have used the word 'legendary, but I prefer the word 'significance' which to me is more intellectual in this instance.
2. Other than and beyond the dictionary meaning of academician as someone belonging to an academy, academician is used for accomplished professors and, academic for dons especially people with doctoral degrees.
3. To his chagrin then, many theatre practitioners did not realize the combinatory possibilities of all of the arts as mixed!
4. Chief Hubert Ogunde was and is regarded as the 'father' of the Nigerian Theatre.
5. 'Egun' of *Egun Alarinjo* might be spelt *Eegun* in the modern Yoruba Orthography. *Eegun*, which means 'masquerade' *alarinjo* a dancer that goes from place to place. The compound word means 'a travelling or roving masquerade dancer'. The mode of dancing is unique/generic.
6. This observation by Professor Egun Clark is very significant historically and professionally.
7. Similarly, as in 6 above, this observation by Professor Duro Oni is very significant in the history and practice of theatre in Nigeria.
8. The Systemic Functional Theory is a linguistic theory.
9. Professor Dapo Adelugba is still teaching at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
10. Both form the two sides of the concept of theatre instantially in this work.

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