

# Gender, Possession and Spirit Mediumship in African Total Theatre and Performance: The National Troupe of Nigeria's *Iba* as Paradigm

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## Abstract

Most African indigenous performances such as dance, music, masquerading, drama among others are characterised with possession and spirit mediumship. These attributes give the performances peculiar uniqueness. *Iba*, a National Troupe of Nigeria performance is used in this study to explore the intersection of gender, possession and spirit mediumship in African performances. The performance is wrapped in a complex web of possession, invocation, spirit mediumship and healing. Through a critical analysis of this theatrical performance, the study seeks to examine how gender challenges and shapes the experiences of spirit mediumship and possession in African performance. Furthermore, the study will also investigate how these performances mirror and/or challenges power dynamics, aesthetics and societal customs and traditions. This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach involving performance studies, anthropology and gender studies to explicate and reveal the complex manner through which gender influences spirit mediumship, possession and healing in *Iba* performance. Findings reveal that in the performance, the male gender exhibited dominance and power play through their performances. On the other hand, the female gender used the performance to challenge patriarchy, negotiate power and assert their agency. The study concludes that *Iba* performance is the window through which understanding of the intersection of gender, performance and African culture and spirituality is embodied.

**Keywords:** *Iba*, African Performance, African Theatre, Gender, Possession, Spirit Mediumship.

## INTRODUCTION

The connection between gender, possession and spirit mediumship in African total theatre performance remain an intriguing area of research and academic scholarship, revealing the dynamic issues in gender construction in African total performance experience and how they are negotiated using stagecraft. African performance has experienced diverse performance genres and are characterised with African indigenous nuances, lived experiences and gender performativity, revealing and showcasing the uniqueness of African identities through dance, music, dramatization, puppetry and storytelling among others. This performative nuances are the strength of African performance and that which marks the continent out from the rest. African performance is encompassing and holistic. It is often regarded as total performance because it is the conglomeration of various African performative genres. Wagner, in 1827, championed what today is regarded as total theatre/performance as he was the person who set the tune of the concept. His proposition on the unity of music and drama in his idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* remains a new approach to drama and performance. While the concept looked new, Brandt (1998) explains that Wagner sought to create a new drama necessarily different in kind from that of antiquity but to serve much the same high communal ambitions; this he locates in dance, music and poetry in the ancient Greek

performances as the three were also combined. Wagner's interest and attention were on the total integration of the performative genres as he believed that it would enhance communal togetherness and the intelligibility of both performers and the audience if integrated. Pronko (1927-2019) further developed the concept of Total theatre in 1967.

While accepting Wagner's position on integrating the performance components, they added that when the performance occurs after the integration, the audience is treated to a robust and 'eye-catching' performance encounter. Apart from taking the audience through this feast of theatrical exposition, their sensibilities are awakened. This pushes them to naturally get involved, consciously or unconsciously, fuelling the pulse of physical, spiritual and emotional engagement. Influenced by the Asian theatre and performance traditions with particular reference to the Japanese Kabuki, Uwat in Emasealu (2010: 70) declares that Pronko's thesis in total theatre approach will engender "participative" and "stylised performance". Wagner and Pronko's thesis on total theatre/performance is a testament to the nature and style of indigenous performance practices, as exemplified in the study of *Iba* performances.

Hardly any indigenous performance stands on its own without depending on the other performance acts. Total theatre/performance involves merging all the various components of performance to form an artistic whole. Prior (2001: 7), in her contribution on what total theatre is, enumerated many meanings, and one of such is that total theatre is a collaboration between the performance space and everything that happens within it, including sound, movement and visual imagery. While some of these performances are remain gender sensitive, some are not. This is because, there are performances that are specifically meant for the men and there are others for women. There are also some where the duo can freely participate without hindrance. In Africa, generally and among the Igbo of Nigeria, whenever dance performances occur, movements are not the only significant thing that speaks to the senses of the performers and audience but other activities that happen within and around the performance arena. This will include the indigenous ritual, religion, festival, music; songs, instrumentations and other accompanying sounds, movements, dramatisation, mime, costume and make-up among others (Ossai-Uloku and Anyanwu 2024, Eunice Uwadimma-Idemudia. 2012, Okodo I. 2012, Zenenga 2015). Total theatre seeks to integrate theatre, music, dance, and other creative artistic modes into its practices in African performance techniques. Suffice to state that embracing the whole creative process and applying the same in performance brings about a unique identity of the cultural ethos of the people concerned.

In his discourse on dance, Adeoti (2014: 10) reflects on the dependence of the performative genres on each other, which he calls the "artistic trinity" comprising dance, music and song. Though he left out drama, mime, costume and make-up, his opinion points to the fact that movement, often classified as dance, cannot stand alone without other artistic elements in a given performance. The core issue here is that when a performance is contextualised within the ambit of Indigenous performance, all the above mentioned become signifying factors that also help in identifying the dance: its type, style, philosophy, psychology, ownership, etc. Adeoti (2014: 10) further stressed that music, song, and dance have remained an enduring phenomenon. Using Femi Osofisan's play – *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Context*, he drives home his discourse on the early beginning of the "artistic trinity". Though he calls it an allegorical play, Dance, Music and Song are children of Madam Felicity. The play, according to Adeoti, recounts the gift bestowed to each of the children of Madam Felicity, especially in the area of different skills. Each could not exist without the other and depended heavily on one another for existence. Hence, this mutual coexistence fetched them and their mother – Madam

Felicity - a great fortune (11) until a seed of discord was sown. Each started to demand better pay and recognition, resulting in separation and individual pursuit. They went their different ways afterwards. According to him, Osofisan captures this allegorical play when he writes that:

Soon enough, the sisters  
Broke up, and the loom went dead:  
The market *also* learnt to forget  
Their once-abundant stall (Adeoti, 11).

Continuing, Osofisan, in the play as recorded in Adeoti, stated the aftermath of the separation as thus:

Oh, what they threw away!  
Ach, by herself, could no longer find  
That old euphonious harmony  
Which makes their work distinct (12)

The unity among the sisters in the story strongly captures the expectation of an indigenous performance. This absence will breed a 'staccato' performance devoid of harmony. This was and still is the fate of Indigenous performance (dance) in Africa, generally and among the Igbo nation. Even when it is obvious that Adeoti avoided some key and pertinent aspects of Indigenous performance, such as costume, drama, make-up, gesture, and other paraphernalia that identify and locate the dance and/or performance, his point of view is clear on the subject matter regarding the relationship that exists between the artistic trinity in an Indigenous performance. It is possible to decipher in the narrative the reason for the neglect/avoidance in the text and his (Adeoti's) longing to connect and/or drive home his thoughts from this study's point of view. In the words of Asagba: (2014)

These unique features have remained constant over the ages, and they present dance in Africa as a mix-grill of music, song, dance and drama, which are better appreciated in performance. Nigeria or African dance cannot and will never be appreciated as an isolated artistic phenomenon in any social or religious context. Any attempt to isolate African dance as an independent discipline, different from other performative arts, is to miss its aesthetic, emotive and spiritual values.

There has been an associative and integrative nature and form (Asagba, 25) in the dances of Africa, which has remained its source of strength and aesthetic value. This has been grossly overlooked due to modernisation. Hence, African dances have continued to be defined and evaluated through an Eurocentric lens. One thing that has made the dances of Africa unique is the 'amalgamation' of the various artistic genres in a performance: dance, drama, music (songs, drumming, clapping, etc.), costume, make-up, paraphernalia, gestures, mention a few are usually in place to make a perfect whole. Asagba above understands the power of togetherness in achieving a meaningful performance in an indigenous setting. African performance generally and dance in particular is undeniably considered a tradition for every society to maintain in both its aesthetic and functional characteristics (Emoruwa, 2014). Adeoti *et al.* have, in their respective writings here, jettisoned other elements of Indigenous performance, such as costume, gestures, make-up that add up to the mix in an Indigenous performance.

Suffice it to state that costumes and make-up exist in traditional ... performances (Traore, 1972: 19).

These performative component are not just mere artistic undertakings, they are embedded with societal spirituality; religion and belief systems. Although they can be performed independent of the other components, they are however, better experienced holistically. African Spirituality is significantly a practice and a belief system. It embodies the interconnectedness of the two worlds trapped in the in-between (Threshold). Possession and spirit mediumship are two holistic and dynamic concepts that are prevalent in indigenous African Performances. When this happens, the performers transit from their original self to another character. This characters are assumed through the aid of possession, costume and make-up among others. These performances are passed down from generation to generation through oral narratives (folktales), rituals, songs, festivals among others. Its efficacy hinges on the acceptance and believability of the historical culture and religious practices. During these performances, humans are transformed and become agents and/or vessels through which cosmic spaces are revealed. Despite the avalanche of scholarship and literature on African total theatre and performance, none of this scholars have looked at gender, possession and spirit mediumship in total African performance of *Iba* of the National Troupe of Nigeria. This study therefore looks at the intersection of gender, possession and spirit mediumship in African total performance through *Iba* of the National Troupe of Nigeria and with the objective to examine how gender challenges and shapes the experiences of spirit mediumship and possession in African performance using the National of Nigeria's *Iba* as a case study and to investigate how this performance, mirrors and/or challenges power dynamics, aesthetics and societal customs and traditions.

## METHODOLOGY

As a multidisciplinary research approach involving performance studies, anthropology and gender studies, this study adopts the qualitative and autoenographic methods in examining the intersection of gender, possession and spirit mediumship in the National Troupe of Nigeria's *Iba* performance. While the qualitative method makes use of interviews from the performers of the National Troupe's *Iba*, the autoethnographic method reflects a firsthand report of the researcher's involvement in the performance

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Social Role Theory of Gender

Social roles are said to be common behaviours inherent in different genders. Gender roles, therefore, refer to those socially and culturally constructed behaviours expected of either of the genders (male or female). Usually, these roles are universal; in some, they are not. While men are seen as people with strength and vigour, women look feeble. With this ideology in mind, the men are expected to undertake more strenuous jobs and duties within and outside the family while the women take care of home-making and nurturing. These cultural and societal expectations and/or obligations of men and women are called stereotypes.

In the 1980s, Eagly developed the social role theory of gender to address gender development and stereotypes. This theory is of the view that sex differentiation, especially in the division of labour and the expectation of society based on stereotypes, generates gender roles. When cultures support gender stereotypes and form rigid expectations based on those

stereotypes, behaviour is strongly influenced by gender roles. According to Koenig and Eagly (2014: 371), Social role theory postulates that social perceivers' beliefs about social groups in their society derive from their experiences with group members in their typical social roles - that is, in roles in which these group members are overrepresented relative to their numbers in the general population. Social role theory addresses gender stereotypes in our societies and institutions in general. Championed by Eagly in 1987, social role theory examines gender roles through biological, psychological, social and cultural constructs. Sociocultural theory, also called a social structural theory or social role theory, was proposed by Eagly and Wood 1999 as recorded in Petersen and Hyde (2014). The hallmark of social role theory is that "a society's division of labour by gender drives all other gender differences in behaviour" (Petersen and Hyde, 2014). Accordingly, gender role beliefs are viewed from the perspective of sex differentiations and similarities. These beliefs and perceptions, therefore, represent the social roles of the men and women in the society. Writing on social role theory, Eagly and Wood (2011) assert that; "Gender role beliefs arise because people observe female and male behaviour and infer that the sexes possess corresponding dispositions. Thus, men and women are thought to have attributes that equip them for sex-typical roles. These attributes are evident in consensually shared beliefs or gender stereotypes".

When roles are shared, there is bound to be a division of labour. The biological endowment and the socio-cultural attributes of the sexes give each their right of place. Ridgeway (2001) agrees with the researcher when reiterating Eagly's social role theory idea. He writes that Eagly's (1987) social role theory argues that widely shared gender stereotypes develop from the gender division of labour that characterises a society. Here, the biological attributes of the male gender (man) and the female (woman) are, first and foremost, the distinguishing factor and a reference point for the division of labour. While the male folk undertake more tasking responsibilities, especially those that require strength, the female folk do otherwise. According to Eagly and Wood (1999), to equip men and women for their usual family and employment roles, societies undertake extensive socialisation to promote personality traits and skills that facilitate role performance.

Eagly classifies gender roles into two, viz, the communal and the agentic. The first (communal) relates to the women (female), and agentic is attributed to the men (male). While communal deals with women's nurturing, caring, and emotional nature, agentic exhibits men's assertiveness, domineering, and independence. Biologically, the women have a gestation period, and when they give birth, they stay at home to breastfeed and nurture their newborn. While at home, they take care of the home by performing responsibilities such as homemaking - washing, cooking, and cleaning, among others. This invariably makes it difficult for them to pursue careers like their male counterparts. Hence, women perform the role of subordinates in families and society. On the other hand, men are more prominent and/or more significant in size, giving them an edge in the area of strength. They provide and protect their families and, by extension, their societies. This role places the male folks above their counterparts. Biological differences between males and females are essential because they are magnified by culture (Petersen and Hyde, 2014). These stereotypes shape gender behaviours and roles. Magaji and Jegede (2019) assert that these roles and stereotypes are imbibed in such a way that one of the sexes becomes dominant and the other, submissive. Stereotypes are culturally structured and constructed ideologies that define the mode of operation and pattern of living in societies. It is pertinent to state. Therefore, that culture is central in gender discourse and more often than not, it is used to legalise and rationalise the way men and women are positioned (Magaji and Jegede, 2019).

## Theory of Liminality

Liminality is a concept that was first coined by the anthropologist, Arnold Vann Gennep (1961) (1909) and refers to the transitional phase where individuals or groups are suspended between two worlds. The word ‘liminality’ or ‘liminal’ is derived from the Latin *limen* meaning ‘threshold’. Liminal space is the ‘in-between’ location of cultural action (Turner, Victor. n.d, Arup Ratan Chakraborty 145). Liminality talks about threshold and boundaries in activities such as ritual practices and performance. This can happen through the following;

- 1) Physical – Use of curtains, flats and apron.
- 2) Temporal – Use of costumes, lighting etc
- 3) Psychological – Mindset, characterization.

Victor Turner in his ritual theory and liminal categories, identified four stages of liminality. These are;

- 1) Separation
- 2) Liminal stage (threshold)
- 3) Reintegration
- 4) Communitas

All these are inherent in cultural performance experiences. In African performance when actors attain the liminal stage, they develop characteristics, shielding their own identities while embracing a new one. In his work on ritual process (1969) which was expanded to form his ritual theatre, Victor Turner’s concept of liminality relates to the state of the in-between. According to him, during ritual process, the individual(s) are separated and/or suspended from social status thereby allowing them to transform and take action(s) with their new roles. Liminality now rests alongside a family of interrelated concepts—performativity, creativity .... (2) Cultural performance’ is broadly conceived, capable of variously serving as social glue or crowbar (Stephenson, 2020). This is evident in most indigenous performances that capture the nuances of the people’s lived experiences. For instance, the wearing of masks and costumes allows the performers to temporarily step out of their personal identities and become or take another role either as ancestors or deities. During initiations, the performer is removed or detached from the society and enters into a sacred space of learning transformation and at this point they experience liminal presence. This represents the liminal space where a performer neither fully human or fully spirit carries message from the spirit world to the physical. Stenner () writes that “Liminality theory encourages us to attend to the importance of these ‘worlds within worlds’, and indeed to recognise that human beings are what Proust (2000) calls ‘amphibious creatures’ who are plunged simultaneously into both sides of the distinction. This he maintains is called “Liminal experience”. These were experienced in different scenes in *Iba* performance of the National Troupe of Nigeria.

## National Troupe of Nigeria: An Overview

The National Troupe of Nigeria is a government agency/parastatal and currently under the Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture and Creative Economy. It is housed at the National Theatre annex at Iganmu, Lagos State. Pioneered by Chief Hubert Ogunde in 1989 to represent Nigeria’s cultural and artistic image within and the global space. The troupe was officially taken over by the Federal Government of Nigeria and formally established in 1991 by Decree

No 47, the same Decree that formally established the National Theatre. This was year the troupe relocated to Lagos from Osasa in Ogun State, Nigeria following the death of Chief Ogunde. The National Troupe of Nigeria has remained a window to Nigeria's cultural economy especially in the area of performing arts: dance, drama and music. Their major objective is to sustain and Preserve and propagate Nigeria's Intangible cultural heritage through the trilogy of the performative genres - Dance, Music and Drama. Over the years, the National Troupe of Nigeria has continued to discharge these duties while representing the country globally.

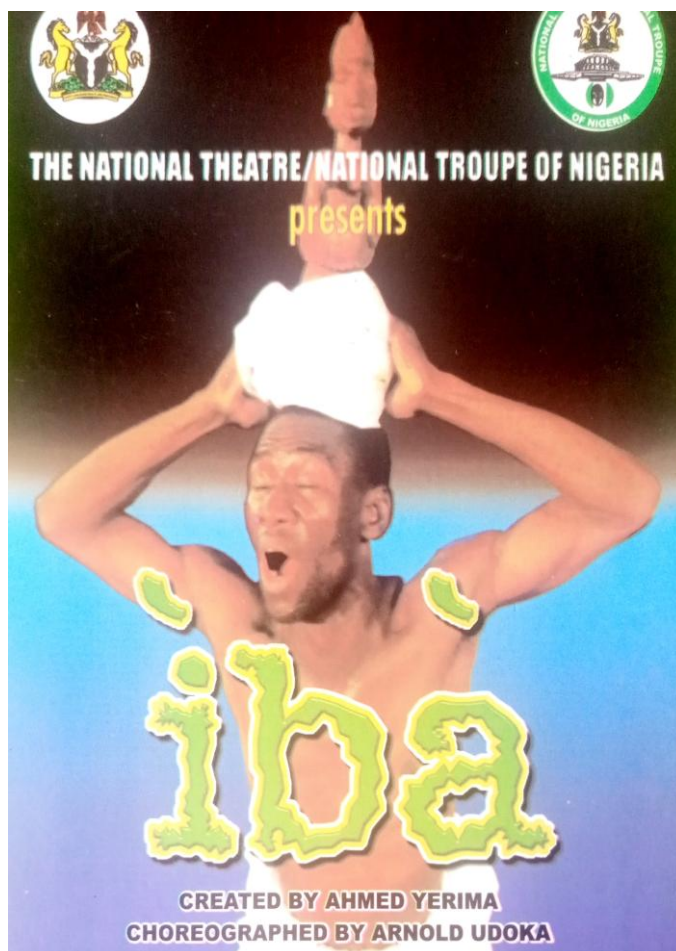


### ***IBA* (Homage): THE PERFORMANCE**

*Iba* is an indigenous Nigerian performance that incorporates the total theatre experience. The performance was created by Prof Ahmed Yerima (Artistic Director and CEO) in collaboration with Dr Arnold Udoka (Director of Dance) for the National Troupe of Nigeria's performance tour of United States of America in 2007 and has remained a masterpiece; touring different countries and state of Nigeria since its creation.

*Iba* performance opens with a narrator who introduces the performance, highlighting the symbolic meanings of the intricate performative nuances prevalent in some Nigerian indigenous performances. The first performance scene is the emergence of Sango; the Yoruba god of thunder. This manifested in the performance of Sango bata with the character displaying all the nuances of Sango worship with his wives pleading for his calmness in Apepe dance performance. Then comes in the worship of the Yoruba Orisha's led by a priestess with her accolades (a young man and about six maidens). Dressed in white, they dance in with songs and movements typical of the Yoruba Orisa worshipers. The young man carrying the effigy of Yemoja {Yoruba water goddess). He prances and dances with movements that suggest possession. The priestess starts with homage and worship of the orishas in their own oriki (special chant). Eulogising their presence, qualities and nuances. Towards the end of the scene, the acolytes fall into a possession state as their movement suggest. Maintaining the rhythm, the hop, bend, twist their bodies while leaving the stage. As they leave, a very big and tall drum (Sator) seating at the back stage centre and covered with cloth is revealed and moved to the centre stage by the lead drummer who displays mastery of praise, evoking and paying obeisance to the god of wood that made the drum come alive. This ushers in the Sator dancers who performs with acrobatic displays circling the Sator drum with curved sticks. Their departure from the stage, ushers in drum ensemble. Here the drummers bring in on stage different drums and percussive instruments that showcases unity in rhythm and movement as an Ekombi dancer emerged with grace and poise; dancing around the drums in her beautiful Ekombi costume and paraphernalia. The emergence of the masquerades gave the performance another spike as Ekpe, Okanga, Layewu, Gelede, Adamma take their turns to celebrate the

ancestral spirits and as connection between the two worlds – the living and the dead. The exit of the masquerades ushered in the Odudu performance. This dance is gender specific as only women occupied the dance space while the men remain on the side to play instruments. This is followed by egwu odum dance performance which celebrates valour. After Egwu odunce, Bori, a healing dance performance follows and the performance is climaxed by the appearance of the Igbabonilimi which spines and gyrates to call the performance to halt.



A pictorial image of first *Iba* Performance Brochure

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

*Iba* is a story that tells the world about Nigeria's deep-rooted cultural respect for traditional institutions; respect for hierarchy; and respect for constituted authority. *Iba* bring to the front burner, Nigeria's unit in diversity as various components of the dance are drawn from a few of the diverse ethnic groups that make up the sovereignty (curled from *Iba* performance brochure, 2007). The performance is hinged on homage and worship as essential bonds between the living, dead (ancestors). and the unborn. *Iba* is an action parked performance with multiple themes such as gender, possession, myths, liminality and African spirituality. Through the medium of dance, music, chant and masquerading among others, the people celebrate worship as a medium of African spiritual philosophy. Udoka is in agreement with the researcher when he avers thus; "As we transit to the other level, we have to call on the powers that be to accept what we have to offer to them," (Arnold Udoka, October 25, 2015). This statement is very symbolic as it reflects the true nature of African spirituality and belief system.

*Iba* as a performance is thematically structured to capture discussion on gender, possession and spirit mediumship in African total theatre and/or performance. The National Troupe of Nigeria's indulgence in this sort of performance is laudable because the performance explicates the intersection of gender, possession and spirit mediumship. These themes are insuperable in understanding African performance nuances.

### **Gender Role and performance Dynamics in *Iba***

*Iba* is a groundbreaking theatrical performance conveyed through the medium of dance, music and drama and embodies history, ritual, philosophy and artistic expression of Nigerian cultural milieu. One major important and intriguing value of *Iba* performance is its quest to explore gender roles as they traverse with the spectacles of possession and spirit mediumship specifically. In Nigeria, there are two major recognised gender types; male and female. *Iba*, though drawn from the Yoruba sociocultural milieu maintained the universal balance of shared roles between the male and female especially in partitioning influences. In *Iba*, gender is fluid and performative. Cross-gender roles were evident in some of the masquerade performances such as Adamma and Gelede masquerades. In appearance, Gelede and Adamma exhibit female characteristics both in looks, costume and mannerisms. This aspect of the performances buttresses Butler's gender performativity. In her theory of gender performativity which was well articulated in her works; *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler postulates that gender is not inborn or a biological reality but something that is acted and repetitively and hence, creates the illusion of believability and stable identity. In conceptualising *Iba*, Yerima (2005), writes that *Iba* is a vital prerequisite in African performance, it ensures that the "owners of the world": this group includes both male ancestors and the powerful matriarchal collective known as *Awon Iya Mi* (Our Mothers) are appeased, especially when they appear through the spirit medium (masquerade).

The National Troupe of Nigeria's *Iba*, embodies the performance of both genders and each performed the role assigned to him/her. Most of the roles are culture specific. While the male performers took the more difficult and/or "hard" roles such as masquerading, the women concentrated on dances/movement and chant aspects of the performance. Here therefore, there is division of labour (Petersen and Hyde, 2014) where each performs specific role accepted by the society. Before the masquerades emerge on stage for the *Iba* performance, the men perform the ritual of 'permission' from the ancestors. The movements of the men are often characterized by high intensity displays of movement and gestures of strength and vigor. These were experienced in the masquerade performances, Sango bata, Sato and Egwu odum. On the other hand, the female performers performed with grace and elegance. Their movements suggest subtleness and "calmness". In Yoruba ritual studies as exemplified in *Iba* performance, the female gender is associated with the ability to play a soothing role when malevolent spirits (Drewal 1992) possesses a character. In *Iba* performance, the chants and fluid movements by the women create the "spiritual atmosphere" necessary for the gods to descend. This was evident in the possession scenes during the performance.

### **The Context of Possession in *Iba* Performance**

*Iba* as a performance explored the intersection of possession, ritual and African performances. Emerging trends in modern African performance means that indigenous performative nuances are brought to the conventional stage giving the audience the opportunity to experience the cultural aesthetic dynamics of the people. *Iba* as stage by the National Troupe of Nigeria reflects the theatrical landscape of contemporary Nigeria. The

performance reveals the intricate Yoruba possession into the metaphysical forces. *Iba* as performed reflects the authentic sacred and spiritual Yoruba essence. Though staged, possession in *Iba* showcases the Yoruba authentic spirituality, ritual and above all, possession. These nuances assert the Yoruba cultural identity in a globalised milieu.

One major thing to take away from *Iba* is the transition of the real time possession associated with sacredness to possession on stage. This suggests imitation and a practice that showcases African communal spirituality. In *Iba* performance, the art of possession was aesthetised and made very authentic. Stage possession is reconstruction of reality (Yerima, 2005). When performers engage in this act, they make a temporary transition engaging the two worlds. Staying in this threshold or liminal point does not take long because it is a role play which involves professionalism and discipline. For instance, the performer already knows what is expected of him/her and pretends not to control him or herself and at the same time sustaining the required directorial and/or choreographic precision technical accuracy. Ampraro (2010) calls this "the performer's paradox". Three scenes were significant in possession in *Iba* performance. The first is the *sango* scene. The performer that played the character of *sango* could be seen in that temporary threshold as he was possessed by a malevolent spirit; hostile, brutal and fury. His sway stamping of the feet as the wives plead for his calmness. The second was the *yemoja* scene where the priestess and the acolytes swayed, hoped, staggered but still maintained coordination and precision according to the choreographer's intent. The last point of recognisable possession was in Bori scene. The protagonist of the scene was possessed by a malevolent spirit after the spell was cast into him by his colleagues during farming. He equally maintained the aggression until he was healed.

It should be noted that possession does not just happen. It requires a trigger to accentuate its occurrence. While writing on African ritual performance, Drewal (1992) posits that African ritual performance uses "sonic signatures" Here therefore, music and chants (instrumentation and songs) are some of the vehicles that facilitate its effective take-off: possession. Apart from music, often times, before the performer gets to that point of threshold or the in-between space, he could have got to the point of physical exhaustion where his body gives in to the divine and hence 'possession'.

Possession is not gender based. It could happen to either of the genders; male or female. It could happen simultaneous to them during performance as evidenced the *yemoja* scene of *Iba*. Possession often involves a symbolic "feminization" of the medium, as they must be "receptive" and "submissive" to the deity Matory (1994). A female spirit can possess a man during performance and vice versa. When a female spirit possesses a male, his mannerisms become feminized. The same applies to a female getting possessed by male spirit, she also exhibits the character of a male.

### **African Spirituality and Mediumship in *Iba* performance**

As a total African theatrical performance, *Iba* of the National Troupe of Nigeria functions as a histrionic manifestation of African culture and spirituality. Although set in a Yoruba cosmology which thrives in core indigenous African spirituality through the reverence and obeisance of the *orishas*, the performance transforms the stage into a threshold where the two worlds (physical and spiritual) intentionally coexisted but in supremacy of the order (spiritual). The first idea in reflecting to this assertion is that the human body (physical) which is seen as the medium through which the spiritual realm is connected, cannot not have anything with the metaphysical unless s/he enters the threshold or liminal state. Here, therefore, it is possible to

state that the stage becomes the new place where modern indigenous divinity happens and hence a 'shrine'. This is observed in the performance as it engages various methods of spirit mediumship such as ritual, homage and invocation to authenticate the presence of African belief system.

African indigenous performance is holistic because the different components that make up the performance become interrelated and interdependent. The 'marriage' of these interrelated and interdependent variables (component) such as dance, music, dramatisation, costume, make-up and paraphernalia among others is what is seen today as 'Total theatre'. Most indigenous performances of the African people are products of everyday life experiences. Even religion is laced into the fabric of daily experience (Mbiti, 1990). Generally speaking, *Iba* performance served as conciliation (Yerima (2005)) which guarantees that both the actors, audience and the society at large endure to continually stay in harmony with spiritual forces.

The performer does not only act or dance in portraying his/her character. They become that spiritual force through their manifestations. They transit and separate from the existing physical body into the threshold or liminal space. In *Iba*, the bodies where the vessels through which the performers interact and mediate with the spiritual forces, hence, he is medium. This mediumship according to Drewal (1992) is called the "ritualisation of the body". These were evident in most of the scenes such as bori, orisha worship and masquerade scenes. These spirit mediumships manifested through some specific rhythms, evocations that culminated into spirit possessions and subsequent ritualised movements and communications.

## CONCLUSION

*Iba* performance is structured into six major different segments: The narrator, worship/homage, drum ensemble, visit of the ancestors (Masquerade), healing and celebration. *Iba* performance basically showcases a dynamic indigenous African performance, theatrically staged on the conventional stages in Nigeria and some part of the world. It is designed to capture most African performance nuances such as ritual, dance, chant, masquerading, songs, acting, costume, make-up and paraphernalia among others. *Iba* performance exemplifies African traditional religious practices, spirituality and belief system.

The intersection of gender, possession and spirit mediumship in *Iba* performance of the National Troupe of Nigeria surpasses mere entertainment but exposes the cultured design of the amalgamation of the various components of indigenous African performance which here is referred as "total theatre". Although the performance followed strict theatrical organisation, its integration of the African performative elements and indigenous belief system especially spirituality and mediumship makes the performance an indigenous knowledge repository. *Iba* employed three major elements, these include; gender, possession and spirit mediumship.

First, *Iba* elaborately x-rayed the context of gender as it shows that it is not just binary but flexible and/or fluid. The performance reveal role swap through transvestism which was experienced in some of the female masquerade performances. Here, the performers overcome their biological limitations of stereotypes to take up roles of the other gender signifying gender fluidity and/or flexibility. Again, through spirit mediumship, women were able to negotiate their place in the historical scheme of authority in the society; a feat that changes the narrative of women being relegated to that of occupying central position of authority.

On possession, *Iba* takes the indigenous African ritual practices to real time experience on stage. The utilisation of total theatre made the performance engaging as it brings the

audience closer to the physical reality of the metaphysical. Here, the performers transform into ancestral spirits and deities and become bridges that connect the living, the dead and unborn. Here, the present, past and the future. *Iba* becomes a repository for indigenous knowledge and cultural memories by employing the art of spirit mediumship and possession to legitimate and validate the artistic practices. Generally speaking, *Iba* demonstrates that African Theatre is not just an ordinary aesthetic endeavour but a socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political obligation. *Iba* performance became a space where gender role is explored. It was a place of interface with tradition which helps to create an all-inclusive experience of identity, real time experience and ritual authenticity.

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