

Bridging Ritual and Dramaturgy: Total Theatre as Performance Praxis in Uwemedimo Atakpo's Isadok

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the convergence of ritual and dramaturgy within the framework of Total Theatre as performance praxis in Uwemedimo Atakpo's Isadok. While African theatre scholarship has consistently acknowledged the integrative nature of indigenous performance traditions, there remains limited critical attention to how these elements are structurally deployed within contemporary dramaturgical practice. This article interrogates Isadok as a paradigmatic text that synthesises ritual performance, narrative structure, music, dance, and spectacle into a unified theatrical experience.

Drawing on Total Theatre theory, postcolonial performance aesthetics, and ethno-dramatics, the study adopts a qualitative textual and performance analysis approach. It explores how ritual elements such as invocation, symbolic embodiment, and communal participation are embedded within the dramaturgical architecture of the play. The analysis reveals that Isadok transcends conventional dramatic form by collapsing the boundaries between performer and audience, sacred and secular space, and narrative and enactment.

The findings demonstrate that Total Theatre in Isadok operates not merely as an aesthetic device but as an epistemological framework that encodes cultural memory, social values, and cosmological consciousness. The play exemplifies how contemporary Nigerian theatre reconfigures indigenous performance logics into modern dramaturgical expressions, thereby challenging Eurocentric theatrical conventions.

The study contributes to ongoing debates on African-centred performance theory by positioning Total Theatre as a viable methodological and conceptual model for analysing African dramaturgy. It further underscores the relevance of ritual aesthetics in shaping contemporary theatrical practices and advocates for the recognition of Total Theatre as a dynamic performance praxis within global theatre discourse.

Keywords: Total Theatre, African dramaturgy, ritual performance, ethno-dramatics, Nigerian theatre, Isadok

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ritual and theatre has long occupied a central position in performance studies, particularly within African contexts where performance traditions are deeply rooted in cosmology, spirituality, and communal life. Unlike Western theatrical traditions that often privilege textuality and representational realism, African theatre operates through integrative systems that merge music, dance, ritual, and storytelling into a holistic performative experience (Obasi, 2023; Ngobeni, 2024).

Uwemedimo Atakpo's Isadok exemplifies this integrative aesthetic. The play reflects a synthesis of ritual enactment and dramatic storytelling, positioning Total Theatre not merely as an artistic style but as a cultural and epistemological framework. Despite the growing body of scholarship on African performance, limited attention has been paid to how contemporary playwrights structurally embed ritual within dramaturgy as a performance strategy.

This study addresses this gap by analysing Isadok through the lens of Total Theatre. It argues that the play represents a convergence of ritual logic and dramaturgical form, thereby offering a model for understanding African theatre as performance praxis rather than literary artefact.

Theoretical Framework

Total Theatre Aesthetics

Total Theatre refers to the synthesis of multiple artistic elements music, movement, spectacle, and narrative into a unified performance experience. While the concept is often associated with Western modernist theory, particularly Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk, African performance traditions have historically embodied this integrative principle as an ontological reality rather than an experimental construct (Fischer-Lichte, 2021; Lehmann, 2023).

In African contexts, Total Theatre operates through multimodality, ritualisation, and participatory engagement. Performance is conceived as a lived event that integrates sensory, symbolic, and communal dimensions (Mbede, 2024).

Postcolonial Performance Aesthetics

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for understanding how African theatre negotiates identity, memory, and resistance. African performances often employ non-linear narratives, symbolic embodiment, and ritual structures to challenge dominant Eurocentric dramaturgies (Lo & Gilbert, 2021; Balme, 2022).

In Isadok, postcolonial aesthetics manifest through the re-centering of indigenous knowledge systems and the reclamation of cultural narratives.

Ethno-Dramatics

Ethno-dramatics emphasises the cultural specificity of performance, focusing on indigenous narrative structures, symbolic codes, and ritual practices (Obasi, 2023). It provides a framework for analysing how meaning is generated through embodied and communal processes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on textual and performance analysis. Data are derived from Isadok as the primary text, supported by relevant scholarly literature on African theatre and performance studies. Analytical focus is placed on ritual elements, dramaturgical structure, and performative techniques.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Ritual as Dramaturgical Structure

In Isadok, ritual is not an external embellishment but a structural principle that shapes the narrative progression. Ritual sequences such as invocations, chants, and symbolic actions function as dramaturgical devices that advance the plot while reinforcing cultural meaning. These elements create a cyclical narrative structure, reflecting indigenous conceptions of time and existence. Unlike linear Western dramaturgy, the play operates through repetition, transformation, and symbolic progression.

Multimodality and Performance Integration

The play exemplifies Total Theatre through the integration of music, dance, costume, and spatial dynamics. These elements are not supplementary but central to meaning-making. Sound and movement operate as narrative agents, conveying emotional and symbolic content beyond verbal dialogue.

Participatory Spectatorship

A defining feature of Isadok is its emphasis on audience participation. The performance dissolves the boundary between performer and spectator, transforming the audience into active participants in the ritual process. This aligns with African performance traditions where theatre is a communal event rather than a passive spectacle.

Symbolism and Cultural Encoding

The play employs symbolic imagery to encode cultural values and cosmological beliefs. Ritual objects, gestures, and spatial arrangements function as semiotic systems that communicate layered meanings.

DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that Isadok embodies Total Theatre as performance praxis. The integration of ritual and dramaturgy challenges conventional theatrical categories and redefines performance as a holistic, culturally embedded process.

This approach aligns with emerging African-centred performance paradigms that prioritise embodiment, participation, and cultural authenticity over textual dominance.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Uwemedimo Atakpo's Isadok represents a significant example of Total Theatre in contemporary Nigerian theatre. By bridging ritual and dramaturgy, the play redefines theatrical practice as an integrative and experiential process.

The findings underscore the importance of recognising African performance traditions as sophisticated systems of knowledge and artistic expression. Total Theatre emerges not merely as an aesthetic category but as a methodological framework for understanding African dramaturgy.

Future research may explore comparative analyses across African performance traditions or examine the implications of digital media on Total Theatre practices.

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