Rituals and theatre in Sudan: from cultural heritage into syncretic theatre forms [introduction]

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Published in:
Rituals and ceremonies in Sudan: from cultural heritage to theatre

Citation for published version (APA):

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“Many of us think of rituals and ceremonies as highly codified performative forms that have been handed down through successive generations in an unbroken line. But age alone is not enough, for ritualistic formulae are not simply a legacy from the past, they still inform our discourses on theatrical performance today. Rites, ceremonies, and oral traditions are crucial in any enumeration of what counts as theatre. It also goes without saying that the field of Theatre Studies is rapidly being re-shaped by the concept of ‘performance’, abetted by cultural analysis, interculturality, interdisciplinarity and the development of Performance Studies. In this context rituals and ceremonies are, as religious and social performances, closely connected with artistic practices or even considered as such. Their aesthetic qualities are one way of setting them apart from everyday life; they may involve poetic language, stylized gestures and other artistic elements. Taking place in front of an audience that shares a cultural and spiritual repertory of knowledge, such performances tend to bridge the gap between the observer and the observed, creating a ‘habitus’ that encompasses performers and audiences within the same space.”¹

It is exactly for these reasons that ancient rites and ceremonies are studied as part of the specific cultural heritage, and considered as formative for both a national identity and a further development of a national theatre. And although Sudan is committed to pluriformity of cultures and peoples there is a strong expectation that the ancient but still existing ritualism and dance-ceremonies will form the base for an autonomous, non-Western theatre that will enrich the international theatre-scene.

Umbrella

It is clear that the term ‘performance’ in Performance Studies has a broader meaning than it has in Theatre Studies, where we used to talk about the performance of a drama, a text. In the second edition (2006) of his book Performance Studies, Richard Schechner describes carefully the different perspectives and nuances of the term. Performances within the frame of

RITUAL AND THEATRE IN SUDAN
FROM CULTURAL HERITAGE INTO SYNCRETIC THEATRE FORMS

Mieke KOLK
Performance Studies are actions studied in four ways: 1. as behavior, what people do in their activity of doing it; 2. as artistic practices; 3. as participating in anthropological phenomena; and 4. as social practices. Performance ranges from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainment, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music) and everyday life performances, to social roles, the media and internet.

Performance Studies synthesizes approaches of its object from a wide variety of disciplines including among others the performing arts, social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, semiotics, media studies and cultural studies. A performance studies scholar examines texts, architecture, visual arts or any other item and artifact of art or culture, not in themselves, but as ‘players’ in ongoing relationships, as action, interaction and relation, not in but between…

In this sense ritual and theatre are to be described in a continuum of performances of art, rituals, and ordinary life that are ‘restored behaviors’; they are ‘twice-behaved behaviors’, (28) performed actions for which people train and rehearse. Separating art and ritual, then, seems difficult. Deciding what is art varies historically and culturally. The difference is based on the function, the event and the expected behavior of players and spectators.

– Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals help people deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies and desires that trouble the norms of daily life. Play/theatre gives people a chance to temporarily experience the taboo, the risky: you may never be Oedipus but you can ‘perform’ him in play. Both ritual and play lead people into a ‘second reality’ separate from ordinary life.

– Although both ritual and play show comparable functions, one is inclined to see play/role-playing as an essential part of theatre: today we consider the enactment, the playing of drama or another form of scenario, as a theatrical performance. But what we call theatre, people in other times did not. It is still an open question whether the ancient Greeks considered their ‘theatre’ not more as mere ritual that took place during the religious festivals. Only later drama and theatre were codified (Aristotle) in their aesthetic dimensions while ritual elements receded. And only in the 15th century did the rebirth of Western theatre take place. (39)
Drama and/as Theatre

Theatre as a form of art was well accepted in (Western) Europe when 19th century colonialism imported the notion of ‘theatre as enacted drama’ into their colonies. The English invaders even introduced the slippage between the terms drama and theatre, that is a text and the performance of that text. Drama became the term for everything theatrical, one studied the art of making theatre at a Drama-school. This drama, in its generally accepted Western mode as realistic text-based actor’s theatre, set the norm for all non-Western theatre.

The effect of this terminology seems devastating. In a recent article in TDR, John Bell² signals the absence in most of the Western and Eastern theatre publications of already long existing theatrical practices in Arabic and Islamic cultures in the Middle East, such as Al-hakawati (solo-storytelling), khayal al zhil (Shadow theatre), various pictural performance techniques (tamathil in Egypt, sanduq al-aja ib in Arabia, pada-zan in Iran) and numerous versions of puppet theatre (Aragoz in Egypt, Abderrazak, a marionette theatre in Tunesia). Bell puts the blame of that absence on the influence of books like Jacob Landau’s 1958 Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema, where drama and theatre were considered historically as ‘wholly foreign and implanted’ and traces his influence till 2003, in the introduction of Short Arabic Plays by Salam Khadra Jayyusi. The same slippage between drama and theatre leads her to a denial of a strong and rich tradition of Arabic (written) drama since the end of the 19th century while centering on: Arabic drama (that is theatre) “little attempted and remaining in darkness (…) and only developing as a major genre in the latter 20th century.”³

Studies on Arabic Theatre mostly focus on Egypt where European theatre was literally imported by Napoleon when the French armies entered the country at the end of the 18th century. When the English marched into Sudan, some hundred years later, the Egyptian army came with them, again, as colonizers. But the Egyptians were also instrumental in bringing the new form of western theatre to the Sudanese community. In the long article of Khalid Mubarak about theatre in Sudan, we find a description of developments of ‘modern drama’ after 1880 through School Theatre and the birth of a tradition of playwriting in the late 1930s. Four strong and gifted writers took up the challenge that the political, colonial, situation posed on them, criticized it, and started to use in their work Sudanese literary forms and popular wisdom. After Independence in 1956, the search for new forms began by returning to the rich historical past and cultural heritage, both in content and form. Old rituals like the Zar-ceremonies and a traditional Shaiqiyyah wedding ceremony were put on stage. The National
Folklore Troupe, founded in 1968, presented performances of traditional dances from all over Sudan. The search for cultural identity started at the roots.

**Rites and Ceremonies**

One of the main advantages of the paradigmatic change of theatre to performance is the new continuum that is shaped between ritual and theatre. Rituals, ancient texts and images can all be read as performances when we concentrate on their performative dimension, that is: to do, to make happen… Performative means working like a performance, striving to an effect between the ‘doer’ and the public. Like its sister-term performativity it deals with constructions of social reality that point to the repetition in behaviour.

Divided from the theatre by the aesthetic/ not real/ dimension of the last, the struggle for origins between the two seems uncertain. Fact is that at any given point in time, in every part of the world and in every culture, people are making dances, music and theatre. The search for origins is a typical feature of Western scholars at the end of the 19th century.4

In his study on the Sudanese Rituals through the Ages, Shams El Din Younis deals with the Coronation Rites in the Central Nile Valley Civilization, the Kingdom of Nabata/Meroe (300 BC-1500 AC) that are read as performances, ‘in a theatrical way’. Texts and images of these Coronation rituals, center on the ‘birth’, the crowning of the new King and the ‘death’, funeral rites, which are read in their narrative, ‘dramatic’ dimensions as ancient stories. His material for the King’s two Journeys comes from archaeological findings that in a process of retrieving, reconstituting and re-contextualization produce in the end a couple of scenarios for three different Kings from the Sudanese past. Comparing these developments with the ‘origins’ of Greek theatre, the rites of Dionysus, El Din Younis concludes that where the Greek rituals developed into theatre, the Meroetic rituals stayed as social practices in present-day coronation-rituals.

His pioneering approach, he received a master grade in Archaeology in 1999, was stimulated and protected by Intisar ElZein, a driven archaeologist herself who developed new ties with other disciplines, making archaeology into a mixture of arts, anthropology and sciences like physics, chemistry, ancient medicine, geography and by now also an object of performance studies. She supervised both this study and that of Nuha Abd el-Hafiz who combined her archaeological findings with practical research. She participated in a ceremonial
hunting-party in the White Nile region, together with the Sheik of a religious Sufi sect and found out that objects and gestures had not changed. In this way she could explain a couple of questions about the ancient material.

A comparable interdisciplinary approach is found in the study of the Zar both in its universal and regional dimensions. Origins of the ‘Zar as a theatrical Healing Cult in Transition’ are to be found in Africa, the Middle East and especially in Sudan. As a healing cult it is a universal phenomenon and much is already written about it as Khalid El-Mubarak’s article shows. He concentrates on its Northern Sudanese form and describes the ceremony in all its theatrical aspects. Central in the ceremony is the impersonation-strategy of the possessing spirit by the patient that shows strong performative features. A woman may play a man, be dressed like an ‘Englishman’, may smoke a pipe and drink whiskey under the protection of the Sheika. Engaged in a taboo-breaking exercise its social function offers clearly a form of “religion of the oppressed”, a sort of safety-valve in its discharge of repressed emotions and wishes.

Recent changes in the Sudanese version of the Zar mark the beginning of its shifting ground from ritual to theatrical performance that is put on stage. Frowned upon by Islamic and Christian authorities who condemn the practice as demagoguery, it is prohibited in Egypt that took over the Zar only at the end of the 19th century. But it still thrives, explains Egyptian scholar Eman Karmouty, striving to reconnect the Zar with Pharaonic times. In her lively and evocative description of the ceremony she reaches a cathartic end both for the patient and the public: “Along with the music, chants, commotion, wild dance, incantations and final trance, the spattering of blood of the killed animal at the finale of the al-Zar ritual produces the desired cure and release from the djinn or demon”.

Describing the Waza rituals along the Blue Nile Imthital El Tayib Abdel Rahman deals with the crucial question of what the Barta tribe thinks that will happen to them when they no longer will be practicing the rituals. She mentions that the power of the ritual is still that strong that people believe when they do not perform, their society would collapse, that they will face draught so that there will be no harvest at all and that they will lose their heritage and social structures and value-systems. Wasa rituals, she states, are considered a form of friendship, an expression of relationships and intimacy between members of a social group. That is what really is expressed in their dancing, their music and singing. And, ending with a practical note: it also keeps them fit, building their bodies up to carry the burden of work in agriculture.
From rituality to theatricality

“The study of Sudanese rituals and ceremonies is the first step towards a theory and a practice that is derived from Sudanese heritage and that can enrich both national and international theatre. Some of these elements have already been introduced in Sudanese theatre-performances but nobody encouraged the artists to carry on the experiment. From this place I want to call for establishing a studio to work in an experimental way with these ritualisms, in order to coin a new theatre”. This is the last paragraph of the paper of Saad Yousef Obeid. His reason to take dramatic and theatrical elements from the ritual heritage is twofold: to develop these elements into a theatrical form, and in selecting these shared elements for theatre, to bring together the different parts of Sudanese culture. Foreign influences will not help to develop a real Sudanese theatre, and besides that, also international theatre will not profit from the Sudanese research. For the time being Saad Obeid describes as specific elements in Sudanese theatre: the setting, a theatre in the round; multi mediality, acting, singing, dancing, audience-participation and a position for the director as master of the show. It is difficult to find all these factors in one production, he says, but there are examples in a performance of *Apadmak*, played in front of the presidential palace in the sixties and street theaters in the seventies of the last century, and some recent experiences. In the meantime, he is waiting for a process of transformation of the rituals from an everyday practice into art, that is, to put them on a stage.

His colleague Adil Harbi supports him in this line of thinking in ‘Sudanese Folk Rituals: a Key to solving the Cultural Dilemma of Sudanese Theatre’. Folk rituals, he writes, are a social phenomenon, growing and renewing themselves in response to changes in social conditions. Rituals are the instruments that enable people to achieve a kind of equilibrium between self and society. But, and there he takes the next step, there is a wide gap between rituals and art in their relative ability to bring solutions to problems in the Sudanese society. Rituals cannot address tribal conflicts and they cannot create a kind of unity within the different groups and are unable to achieve development and social progress.

The function of theatre relies on the process of overlapping social and artistic fields. Theatre makers and scholars are aware of the revolutionary trends that happen in the theatre worldwide. What the author then proposes, is a combination of European methodological developments in the area of rituals and theatre with the Sudanese diversity of rituals. Examples of these usable Western methods are those developed by Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Artaud, Brook and Grotowski, in short, the European theatrical Avant-garde of the 20th century that worked and is still working in cultural cross-overs.
Ritual and Theatre in its social function

‘The function of theatre as a humanitarian and educational instrument is there to express problems and put solutions in a positive, exciting and beautiful way’, writes Adil Harbi. But to make a strong theatre in Sudan that can deal with both ethnical and cultural diversity and the life in the big cities, we need to update the theatre and develop theatre experts who are aware of its social role and duties. Again. Pleading for a strong combination between imported theatrical techniques in a combination with Sudanese popular acting and developments of well know ritualism into theatre, he describes not only a strong new art/Theatre but also forms of social, ‘applied’ theatre that function in different contexts in different areas.

In both domains cultural heritage is a key-concept.

In a country like Sudan where war waged for decades between North and South and still wages between different rebel groups and the government, it seems for many people hard to think about theatre as entertainment or even as a serious power in creating some form of unity. Nevertheless, it is there: both the desire to make theatre (a National Theatre) a place for cultural and political negotiations and, in reality, an already existing broad scale in forms of community theatre.

Theatre for Development seems the only sensible way to address refugees, migrant social groups, orphans, teenagers in Darfur and other desperate people trying to survive as victims of war. In the middle of many smaller initiatives to work on communal building by way of making music, dancing and acting, I met two bigger projects that were supported by professionals, and staff and students of the College of Music and Drama in Khartoum: the Peace Culture Project, until last year under the direction of AbuelGassim Gor, and the Centre for Theatre in Conflict Zones, organized by Ali Mahdi Nouri and his Al-Bugaa Theatre-group.

The Theatre in Conflict-zones is a three year project based in post-war Sudan. It grew from a series of workshops organized by the German Center of the International Theatre Institute in Berlin. It already had organized workshops specialized in dealing with cultural conflicts in Egypt and Bangladesh before arriving in Sudan. The methods used in those workshop were a fusion of the ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ of Augusto Boal, and ‘Image Theatre’ and a series of improvisation techniques developed by Alexander Stillmark, director and former actor of the Berliner Ensemble. These methods appeared compatable with the
work in Sudan of the Bugaa theatre of Ali Mahdi that had presented similar experiences in the field of post-war Sudan, while using devices from popular culture and improvisation techniques. In 2004 a joint project was decided upon.

Both the Boal method and the Image Theatre technique are suitable for non-performers from all age groups and cultural and social backgrounds. Special attention was given to the cultural heritage of the groups it worked with by using traditional forms of theatre, dance, songs and story-telling. Workshops are directed to train groups of people to promote a dialogue between them. The method was enriched by the ‘Composition theatre’, a style of theatre developed by Ali Mahdi during his theatrical career, which consists of creating a visual image of an idea, transposing thinking and words into visual language: “Any idea from which no image results, cannot be dependable” the director says. His ‘compositions’ are rooted in the Sudanese tradition of festivities, celebrations as is represented in rituals since ancient Sudanese time.

Less internationally directed but also institutional well embedded, is the Peace Culture Project run by the Center of Theatre Research of the University of Sudan. The project aims at using theatre as a way to communicate unity in difference and peaceful negotiations in rural communities. It directs its activities in the first place to schoolchildren. The project uses elements of folklore, songs, music, dance from the local communities it works with. Making the participants more aware of their roots could lead to a change in ideas and behaviour. Fundamental for the project is its strategy to connect with the people. They have discovered that a project should be built up in the following stages:

a. A short play to attract the attention  
b. A longer play on the subject to be discussed  
c. This longer play should develop into a larger event involving a larger part of the community.

Students and their teachers traveled to West Kordofan and visited the tribes of the Myssria and the Dinka. In difficult conditions they did their work in a well organised manner. It is a hopeful initiative that is to be continued.
Seasons of Migration
East/West differences as a ritual War between the Sexes

The post/colonial diaspora has forced a further exploration of Sudanese identity, in the process of confrontation with the Western countries.

Where cultural heritage and tradition as living practice still functions as unifying frame within social groupings, political and economic migrants have been confronted with the difficult task to find a new living far from home, to adapt to a non-Islamic and non-Sudanese social surrounding where nothing what is said and done can be taken for granted. This being cut off, ‘half of their emotional life is missing’, is reflected in art and literature in the traumatized experiences of the artists, that return in the art-form. In Sudanese literature the best-selling novel of Tayeb Salih Season of Migration to the North published in the late 1960ties, functions not only as topic for international studies and conferences but also as pilot for theatre-adaptations in Sudan and new novels about recent migrations. Sha’za Mustafa counted four new books on the experiences of the lonely male hero far from home. They are apparently part of the tradition of immigrant fiction often moving within the archaic model of the biblical ‘Lost Son’.

And, for the first time, a Western theatre company has started to produce the novel for the stage; the National Theatre in London gave its first performance last year.

Where the ‘Empire wrote back’ in the terms of Salman Rushdie, now the Motherland was reacting. Starting with a workshop about the novel in Khartoum, Mieke Kolk got into contact with director William Galinsky and his artistic problems, which she tried to explain later in an article.

Cruelties of Migration, dealing with recent stories of the Sudanese migrants, serves as a short introduction to this article about the famous novel that is migrating to the Theatre of the North.

‘I pray in Arabic and dance in Africa’, explained the new director of the National Theatre in Khartoum, Fatlallah Ahmed Abdallah. Mediated through language, Arabic culture is a long and deeprooted factor in Sudan, long before the country became Islamic in the 15th Century. Arabic culture is not the same as Islamic culture in Sudan and that makes a problem. From a cultural description
Arabic has turned into a mark of ethnicity, and ethnicity as culture is a dangerous combination. “I looked in my studies for an open combination of religion and Sudanese identity and focused on the Sufi movements. The Sufi has its roots in pre-Islam, it respects the celebration of holy places and burial spaces and its ceremonies. From Sufi and from the more ancient history of Sudan we will take our cultural heritage and bring it into the theatre. This is part of our cultural identity, even in the experience of our Islamic culture now”.

Thanks

I am grateful to all the authors and other participants who were crucial for both the Conference in Khartoum last year and the content of this publication.

    I thank again the Haella foundation in The Hague and Mrs Marianne van der Steen for their financial support.

    The publication has greatly profited from the assistance in Khartoum of Mrs Sha’za Mustafa, Dr Shams El Din Younis and Prof Khalid Mustafa Mubarak, and the creative power of designer Kees de Graaff from Holland. But the book would not be here, now, without the continuing energy and dedication of Martin Adrichem, who wanted in this way to return the hospitality that the Khartoum Conference showed him last year.

December, 2006

NOTES

1 I am slightly paraphrasing the Call for papers by Khalid Amine for the Conference on Rituals, Ceremonies and/as Theatrical Performance, that took place in December 2005 in Khartoum, Sudan.

2 John Bell ‘Islamic Performance and the Problem of Drama’ in The Drama Review 49.4 (T188), Winter 2005, p.5-20

3 Salam Khadra Jayyusi Short Arabic Plays, an Anthology, New York, Interlink Books 2003, 8. See for this discussion also Mieke Kolk (ed.) The Performance of the Comic in Arabic Theatre, Gent, 2005