

THE DANCE OF FREEDOM: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF DANCE IN *THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI*

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Abstract:

This study is an analysis of 'The Trial of Dedan Kimathi', a play co-authored by Ngugi wa 'thiongo and Micere Mugo. The analysis focuses on the use of theatrical devices, especially dance and gesture as message media in the play. The theme of the play is the resilience of the human spirit in the face of oppression and injustice. As a fictional dramatization of the struggle of Kenyans under colonial rule, it carries a prophetic and triumphant message, especially in view of the recent admission by the British government of culpability in the horrific torture and murder of indigenous Kenyans during the insurgency of the fifties, known as the Mau-Mau. Existing analyses of the play have examined the use of language and thematic directions, but none of these documents the semiotic use of dance and speech as parallel message media. The research employs internet, library and archival search as well as the main text as sources of data. Viewed from the technical angle, the work validates the universality of the use of dance as the bedrock of African drama.

Introduction

For this work, the two critical comments on the back cover of the 1988 edition of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* provide a point of departure in the analysis of the text. Both are revealing because they simultaneously define the theme of the play as well as the technical structure or literary allegiance of the dramatic form. The first commentary reads thus:

Never before has the story of the Kenyan freedom struggle been told with such force and conviction.
Target Nairobi

The other:

The opening night of *The Trial* could well be described as a gala occasion with the house packed full and a degree of audience participation and appreciation which one seldom sees in Nairobi, culminating in the audience joining in the final triumphant dance down the central aisle and spilling out into the street.
The Sunday Nation

While the first commentary immediately tags the play with a historical theme, the second indicates the dance motif as a major dramatic form. Both observations therefore, unite the thematic and technical direction of the play. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is Ngugi and Mugo's joint dramatic representation of the *Mau-Mau*, the popular term of reference for the Kenyan struggle for independence under imperialist domination. The inspiring factor for the play is well outlined in the introduction to the text.

Briefly, before the publication of *The Trial* (as the play shall henceforth be referred to) other existing accounts of the Kenyan freedom struggle were those rendered from the colonial point of view. These

include Ruark's *Uhuru* and Henderson's *The Hunt of Dedan Kimathi* among others. However, *The Trial* is the first account of the events of that crisis from the indigenous Kenyan point of view. It is therefore, significant, not only because this is a pioneer account from native Kenyans, but also because unlike the earlier accounts, it deviates from the former colonial tradition of character presentation which portrayed the Africans in negative stereotypical roles. As the authors indicate in the introduction, their aim in writing the play is to enlighten all working peoples, universally located, of the evils of imperialist and capitalist oppression, with particular focus on the working people of Kenya. By resurrecting and celebrating the heroes of the freedom struggle in this dramatic work, the playwrights emblemize the Mau-Mau crisis as the spirit of resistance to all forms of social and political oppression, in this case, imperialist domination. The protagonists are therefore, the heroes of the Mau-Mau led by the most celebrated of them all; the 'living Marshal', Dedan Kimathi. The antagonists are the administrators who represent British imperialist rule and the white, privileged, settler community in Kenya.

As a technical device, dance kinesics is employed to enhance the semantic content of the play at differing levels. There are three distinct areas within which the function of kinesics may be realized. These are the **indexical**, the **symbolic** and the **metaphoric** levels. The first and most prominently featured of these levels is the **indexical** one. At the level of the index, dance movements serve or communicate at their most basic level, using the system of ostention. Keir Elam(1980) describes ostention as a system whereby "in order to refer to, indicate or define a given object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question"(pg 67). This represents one of the most simplistic forms of signification in drama because the question of analogy does not arise, neither is the imagination called into play. Hence, by presenting to the audience the subject matter of the play through deliberate, gestural mimed movement, designed to convey meaning, the message is easily understood by the audience. Through dance dynamics that appeal to the emotion, the information relay process cuts right across audience boundaries and variety, so that even the most academically untutored of the audience can grasp the theme of the play. A glance at the dances reveals this indexical use of dance at more complex and higher levels. These are the roles of dance as **index of setting**, of **character stereotypes** and of **militancy**. We shall first examine the role of dance kinesics as an historical index:

Dance as Index of Historical Setting

We examine the first dance movement within the plot. The mimed dance here depicts in phases, the process of acquisition and sale of slaves. This immediately places the action within the era of the slave trade. However, the signification process does not emphasize so much the historical facts as it does the physical and psychological effects of the trade on the victims. The slave characters, heavily burdened, are shown rowing a boat across a river and miming gestures which communicate their agony and despair to the audience-spectator. In this scene, the theme of the play is effectively relayed in condensed dance dynamics. Thus, dance kinesics is employed as a basic structural device and other codes, such as the verbal, mime and costume, find more effective expression through the dance.

A comparison of the dance scenes reveal the advantages which dance kinesics possess over other theatrical codes in this play. An analysis of the two other dances which portray the historical setting is pertinent here. For instance, in the dance of the tribes located in the second movement of the play (pg. 22), the major historical pointer here is the costume code. However, it proves to be highly limited in a signifying message context. Beyond the mere ostentation of the historical background, little information is available in costume codes to relate the importance of this dance or its contribution to the thematic direction of the play. It then becomes necessary to furnish the audience with additional information on the theme through the verbal code. Hence, Kimathi says:

They used to dance these before the white
colonialists came. In the arena... at initiation...
during funerals... during marriage...

Immediately following this dance is that which depicts the colonial era. As in the tribal dances, the signifying code, at least of historical background, is the costume. Here, the information on the importance of this dance sequence is conveyed through the mime. As in the dance depicting the slave era, the movement here depicts the colonial era and is characterized by gestures of fear of the oppressors and humiliation under persecution by the colonial governor. Again, as in the first dance sequence of the play

(pg. 4), the gestural movements predominate by lending meaning to the static information about historical setting.

Dance as Index of Character Stereotypes

Another important function of dance dynamics in *The Trial* is in the area of enhancing character depiction. In this direction, dance kinesics provides information about dramatic stereotypes, and these are in turn represented in the two projected spheres of action in the play. In the first dance sequence (pgs. 6-9), four stereotypical role characters are presented. These will be tagged in order of appearance, characters **a**, **b**, **c**, and **d** in the following analysis. The first '**character a**' is a rich-looking African chief who is shown as he exchanges his subjects for a 'long piece of posh cloth and a heap of trinkets' (pg. 5). The next phase depicts **character b**, an exhausted chain of black slaves who 'drag themselves across the stage' (pg. 5) and later rows a boat across a river under heavy whipping. The third phase shows the slaves on the plantation toiling under the supervision of a cruel black overseer who is **character c1**. Later, 'a white master comes around and inspects the work' and this will be tagged **character 'c2'**.

The final phase projects a procession of defiant blacks, chanting thunderous anti-imperialist slogans in songs. These will be tagged **character d1**. An analysis of these character types will reveal their roles in the dramatic action.

Character a, is a stereotype of the traitor and betrayer of black African peoples. Through the action of selling his subjects in exchange for material gains, he typifies the category of disruptive elements in the struggle for freedom from imperialist oppression. He is therefore, a prototype of his character types in the dramatic action. The imperialist period equivalent of this character is the black mercenary soldier who fights on the enemy side against his people in exchange for "one hundred shillings" and "*posho*". He stands for the unpatriotic and treacherous members of the struggle. He represents the first in the long chain of oppressive forces in black African society and his moral prototype is the Judas figure.

Character **a2**, the hungry-looking European slave trader, is a stereotype of the parasitic element which threatened the life of the black Kenyans by preying on the 'body and blood of the people', a symbolic reference to the sweat and labour of the peasants. While in the slave era, he buys the people with 'a long piece of posh cloth and heap of trinkets', he is depicted in the colonial era as the aggressive settler who buys the peasants along with their land in exchange for a school and a dispensary. Like his stereotype, he also arrives in Kenya a 'poor soldier'. He represents the additional indignity of servitude, not just in a foreign land but in the victim's own homeland. As the aggressive settler indicates:

I had a perfect relationship
with my boys
They were happy on my farm
I gave them posho, built
them a school, a dispensary
...gave them everything
they needed
they loved me
Yes, at Olkalau they talked of
my farm with awe: loyal, meek
submissive

The settler's statements reveal his attitude to and his relationship with the black peoples, which depict an inherent assumption of superiority by his reference to the indigenous blacks, whether young or old as 'boys'. He sees them as simple-minded bodies useful only as beasts of burden, hence his description of his servants as 'meek', 'loyal' and 'submissive'. It is this state of mind that Kimathi vows to free his people from. As a stereotype of the parasitic element, **character 'a2'** is identified by his exploitation and subjugation of the indigenous people, his control of their mind and body as his prey, and his conviction that his victims are sub-human.

Next in line is character **b¹**. This stereotype is characterized by the weak and submissive element in the struggle. Like the slaves, the meek and submissive characters in the colonial era display a willingness to be ruled and controlled both in body and mind and to live in eternal servitude to the parasitic stereotype. He represents the passive element in the society who does not display a willingness to be free of oppressive forces.

The next in the line of stereotypes is **character 'c'**. This character type is identifiable through his masochistic or self-negating behavior. In the 'black overseer', the unnatural enthusiasm to break the spirit and body of his own kind is a manifestation of the self-negating syndrome. The colonial example of this stereotype is the hooded *Gatotia* or *Gakunia*. The 'second soldier' is similarly molded along this stereotypical role. His provocative cruelty to Dedan Kimathi in the cell is typical of this self-negating element. Thus, this stereotype is identified by his willingness to collaborate with the enemy in the oppression of his kin and the unnatural enthusiasm applied to the task of oppressing his people. The first soldier's words sums up the self-negating traits of the **character c1** stereotype, 'how *Mzungu* makes us thirst to kill each other!' Within the same phase we have **character c2**. He is labeled as the culprit who is indirectly responsible for the actions of **character 'cl'**. His depiction suggests the complicity of both whites and blacks as partners in the oppression of the black peoples. This character type is represented by Shaw Henderson who symbolizes colonial domination in Kenya. His stereotypical cast is made absolute when he directs *Gakunia* to punish *Dedan Kimathi* during the final confrontation in *Kimathi's* prison cell.

(iii) Dance as index of Militancy

The third area in which dance kinesics highlights dramatic meaning in *The Trial* is as an index of militant action. In the same way that dance interprets the mood of a given situation or character, it can also be manipulated to evoke or inspire desired emotions in a subject. In *The Trial*, particularly within the protagonist camp, dance kinesics acts as a gestural stimulant as it positively lifts the spirit of the agitators by boosting their morale. It is logical to assume that if dance can function in the capacity of a morale booster in a common interest group, this effect must be attributable to certain intrinsic qualities of the mode. There are several ways in which dance kinesics work to further the spirit of common identity in a given group, but the most effective of these, (at least within the present context of analysis) is as a stimulant of the gestural codes of dance kinesics. It is in this capacity as a stimulant for courage and decisive actions that dance is most effective. In such situations, dance instills through unified gestural movements, an involving effect whereby individual dance is expanded to group expression. The combined dance generates an electrifying excitement as the group performance eclipses the individual show. The group is thus perceived as a single, live, swarming entity. As in traditional forms, the dance here functions as a stimulant, instilling courageous excitement into the participants and boosting their morale for militant action. In addition, the factor of anonymity, guaranteed by the united body of the group, is also responsible to a certain extent for the effect of dance kinesics as a symbol of militancy.

As a solution to the issues thus dramatized, an ideal situation is symbolised in the tribal dances which represent the traditional way of life before the intrusion of foreign forces. As *Kimathi* highlights:

They used to dance these dances
Before the white colonialists came
In the arena... at initiation.... during funerals
during marriage...
Then the colonialists came
And the people danced a different dance

The word dance functions here as a symbol of life and continuity. A substitution of the word 'dance', with life will immediately demystify the speech and reduce the syntactic symbolism to the literal level. In the following lines the imagistic use of the word 'dance' is further strengthened. *Kimathi* continues:

Oh, my people!
How can we sing and dance like this
In a strange land?
How can we sing and dance like this
When water everywhere is bitter
How can we dance the dance of
humiliation and fear
These were... no, are the questions
To wrestle with them
I became an organizer of youth
We collected from the seven ridges
Around *Karunaini Gichamu*,
We called ourselves

And we devised new dances
Talking of the struggle before us
Readying ourselves for war

In this impassioned speech, *Kimathi* pleads with his people to rise from the entranced life of humiliation and fear. In the first six lines of the speech, *Kimathi* seems to have been addressing his questions to an audience of the past, but in the seventh line, he changes the context to the present through a rearrangement of the syntax. From 'were' here, he relocates the audience by switching to 'are'. This tense rearrangement strengthens the image of a continuum, another context through which dance expresses meanings in the play.

(iv) DANCE AS SYMBOL OF CONTINUUM

A third area in which dance is employed to convey meaning is as a symbol of existential continuum. At this level, dance suggests a continuous thread of connection which bridges the various phases of history. In order to project the idea of continuity, the necessity arises for a means of bridging the mental gap between the historical phases. Dance kinesics is here transformed into a vehicle which emphasizes the stream of consciousness, thereby bestowing a higher density of meaning on the semantic content of the gestural action.

As a symbol of continuum, dance kinesics conveys this philosophy of history as a rotational process or cycle revolving through phases **a**, **b**, and **c**. In the final analysis, a resolution is achieved due to the militant revolution and this is indicated in point 'c'¹ which represents social equilibrium.

Conclusion

The Trial is a tightly fused symbolic play in which dance serves as a medium of accessibility to densely fused symbolic message contexts. The most common area of this usage within the play is as an index of resistance and militant action. In this analysis, the importance of war songs and dances as integral parts of traditional African political institutions are celebrated. In *The Trial*, the playwrights employ the dance medium with brilliant result and where the verbal is restricted by language barriers, the kinetic is unfettered as it 'speaks' in consonance with the universal human chord of catharsis. As Magel (2014) says, the boy and girl in the first movement realise that

Under close scrutiny, the boy and girl discover that their attitudes and
behaviour has fallen short of the mark set for them by this great standard
bearer, Kimathi wa Wachiuri

Today in the age of Globalization, it becomes questionable whether the principle of freedom which inspired the revolution of the Mau-mau has been realised or whether Africa is still reeling under the weight of neocolonial oppression. Ngugi (2004) drives this issue when he says globalisation:

has been a feature of capital since its genesis in the 16th century as a challenge and later a replacement to feudalism as the dominant and determining force in social production. Explorations and colonial ventures are concomitant with its genesis. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels predict the worldwide character of its development when they talk of the bourgeoisie, through its exploitation of the world market, giving a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. They talk of old established national industries being dislodged by industries utilizing raw materials drawn from the remotest zones—

industries whose products are consumed not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe.¹ Africa has always been an integral part of the key moments in the evolution of the globalizing tendency of capital, though disadvantageously so.

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