

The Theatrics of Religious Gymnastic in White Garment Church; Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero's* Performance as Directed by Ade Adeseke in Focus

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Abstract:

*Religion in Africa functions not only as a system of spiritual beliefs but also as a cultural performance deeply embedded in social practices. In many African Indigenous churches, particularly the white garment churches—religious expression frequently transcends conventional worship through stylised bodily movements, choreographed dances, and the incorporation of secular songs. While these practices are captivating and energising, they often lack explicit spiritual significance and instead serve to entertain, unify congregants, and cultivate a shared religious identity. This study critically examines Ade Adeseke's stage direction of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* as a lens through which to explore the performative dynamics of religious expression within these church contexts. By employing performance theory as its analytical framework, the study interrogates the intersection of theatricality and spirituality, revealing how certain churches employ spectacle and performative strategies not solely for worship but as mechanisms of attraction, inclusion, and socio-cultural resonance. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, with data gathered through content analysis of both the dramatic text and relevant performance recordings. Findings suggest that Adeseke's rendition of Soyinka's satire offers a compelling critique of how performance can be manipulated to simulate divine presence, blur the lines between the sacred and the secular, and reinforce systems of power and deception within religious spaces. Ultimately, the study concludes that such performative elements, while engaging, often compromise the authenticity of spiritual experience, thereby transforming worship into theatrical display.*

Keywords:

Religious gymnastic, theatricality, performance theory, african indigenous religion, white garment churches

I. Introduction

Religion, as both a belief system and cultural phenomenon, profoundly shapes the lives, customs, and values of its adherents. For many, especially within the African context, religious practices extend beyond spiritual devotion and enter the realm of performative expression. This synthesis of worship and entertainment, particularly visible in some African indigenous churches, is here termed "religious gymnastics." Within white garment churches, these practices often encompass dances, stylised bodily movements, and secular songs which, while captivating, lack direct spiritual relevance. Instead, they serve primarily to energise worshippers, create a memorable atmosphere, and solidify communal identity.

Describing this phenomenon, Adedotun Ogunde (45) posits that "religion in its ritualistic form has evolved to incorporate symbols of entertainment that strengthen collective

identity". Such performative elements offer parallels to theatre, suggesting an overlap between religious devotion and entertainment. This aspect is captured vividly in Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero*, a satirical play that critiques superficial religiosity through its protagonist, Brother Jero, whose charismatic yet manipulative persona reflects performative tactics found in certain religious spaces. As Soyinka articulates in his critique of superficial worship, "Religion has increasingly borrowed from drama, employing spectacle to invoke awe in the congregants" (Soyinka 67). When Ade Adeseke directed *The Trials of Brother Jero* at Ekiti State University's Arts Theatre and Main Auditorium, his staging of Brother Jero as a figure engaging in exaggerated movements, rhythmic chants, and secular dances mirrored "religious gymnastics" that critics often associate with white garment worship.

This phenomenon of religious gymnastics functions not merely as ritualistic exercise but also as a means of generating excitement among worshippers. Drawing on the Nigerian cultural context, "rituals and dances found in religious circles are as much about affirming communal spirit as they are about worship" (Ekanola 92). Adeseke's direction incorporated such performative elements, bridging cultural beliefs and theatrical artistry. Ekanola further emphasises that "the dramatic quality of worship rituals, particularly among white garment churches, fosters a unique form of cultural expression, blurring the line between sacred and secular" (93). This blend of sacred and theatrical aspects underscores the importance of performative elements as central to the communal experience, albeit often without direct doctrinal significance.

The theatricality of such religious expressions aligns with Soyinka's critique, with Ade Adeseke's rendition of *The Trials of Brother Jero* providing a reflection on modern-day religious practices thereby resonating with the main function of literature as a mirror where "the society looks and observes itself, appraise itself, appraises itself and reinforces accepted values as well as condemning the unacceptable ones" (Apalowo and Macaulay 2). This article thus aims to explore "theatrics" within white garment churches and how it serves to engage worshippers, often through elements that, while captivating, are not inherently spiritual. As Nigerian performance scholar Bamidele Afolabi remarks, "The enactment of religious rites, when viewed through a cultural lens, unveils how communities reify collective identity through theatrical means" (78). Additionally, Afolabi points out that "the movements, songs, and rituals adopted in such churches echo cultural rhythms that have existed for centuries within African traditions" (79).

The analysis here is neither a critique nor a dismissal of these practices but an academic examination of their cultural and performative aspects. Indeed, as cultural historian Femi Onabajo (101) asserts, that "the inclusion of secular elements in worship services reflects an adaptive cultural syncretism that has deep roots in African religious expression". Such practices in white garment churches often add vibrancy, drawing congregants together and creating a memorable experience, even if they diverge from the core tenets of Christian spirituality. The convergence of religious rites and theatrical techniques thus invites a rethinking of religious space as one where cultural expressions and religious sentiments can coexist, shaping the identity of African Christianity today.

Through *The Trials of Brother Jero* and Adeseke's direction, this study illustrates how theatricality functions within religious worship, particularly within white garment churches, as a means of community engagement and entertainment. As Nigerian cultural theorist Bayo Aluko (109) articulates, that "the performative dimension of worship is central to African Christianity, creating a shared space where entertainment and devotion intersect". This

phenomenon, as represented in both Soyinka's work and Adeseke's directorial interpretation, offers a critical reflection on how spectacle in worship settings affects authenticity and the spiritual experience of worshippers.

II. Review of Literature

Religion in African societies is an intricate blend of spirituality and cultural performance, where worship extends beyond doctrinal practices to include performative aspects rooted in tradition and communal life. Scholars have long noted the fluid boundary between religion and culture in African worship, which frequently incorporates local customs, dance, and music. "Religion in Africa is not merely an individual's relationship with the divine; it is a community activity shaped by social and cultural values" (Adewale 56). This understanding underpins the phenomenon of "religious gymnastics" in some white garment churches, where practices such as energetic dances, theatrical movements, and secular songs, while often lacking direct spiritual relevance, serve to engage and unify congregants.

The term "religious gymnastics" refers to performative worship elements that, though not essential to doctrine, enhance the worship experience through entertainment. As cultural theorist Yinka Ogunleye (88) explains, "These practices reinforce group cohesion and energise worshippers, blending ritual with performance in ways that appeal to both spiritual and cultural sensibilities". Ogunleye's work reveals how these activities transcend conventional worship, enabling a communal experience that resonates with African traditions. They reflect, in Ogunleye's terms, "a syncretism that balances faith with the dynamics of cultural expression" (88).

Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* offers a critical lens through which to view these performative elements. The play is a satire on religious manipulation, where Brother Jero utilises spectacle and charisma to captivate his followers, comments on the use of theatrics in religious spaces. Adewale Folarin (105) observes that "Soyinka's satire critiques a type of religiosity that values spectacle over genuine devotion, mirroring some contemporary worship practices". Soyinka's portrayal of Brother Jero underscores how some religious leaders use entertainment to maintain control, suggesting that spectacle in worship can distract from the core spiritual message.

Ade Adeseke's staging of *The Trials of Brother Jero* at Ekiti State University expanded on Soyinka's themes by emphasising Brother Jero's physicality and the theatrical elements of his character. Adeseke's direction brought out the play's commentary on religious spectacle by highlighting the choreography and energy of the protagonist's movements, symbolising the performative rituals seen in many African churches thereby illustrating the blurred line between religious and theatrical spaces, showing that worship can become performative while still fostering community bonds.

Beyond Soyinka's satire, the role of performance in worship is a longstanding feature of African Christianity, as indicated by Ifeoma Onwuegbuna (121). She argues, that "African worship services, especially those within indigenous churches, reflect an experiential form of Christianity that incorporates dance and music to create a holistic spiritual encounter". This perspective resonates with the notion of "religious gymnastics," wherein performative elements provide congregants with a tangible, sensory experience of spirituality.

The impact of these practices on worship authenticity has sparked considerable debate among Nigerian scholars. Religious historian Olu Olatunji contends that “the emphasis on performance within certain churches is often misinterpreted as lacking spirituality; however, it represents an adaptation that blends Christian tenets with African cultural values” (135). Olatunji’s insights suggest that these practices, while culturally driven, serve as vehicles for expressing faith in a way that is accessible to worshippers and resonates with their lived experience.

Moreover, Nigerian anthropologist Bolaji Adepoyu emphasises the role of these performative practices in reinforcing identity. “In African communities, where religious and cultural identities are intertwined, the spectacle of worship rituals in white garment churches serves to affirm group solidarity and provide a sense of belonging” (98). His research highlights how practices termed “religious gymnastics” serve a social function, anchoring worshippers in a shared cultural heritage.

The scholarly literature surrounding “religious gymnastics” and performative worship highlights the nuanced role of theatrics within African religious contexts. Nigerian scholars contend that while these elements may not have intrinsic spiritual value, they are essential in fostering community, expressing cultural identity, and making religion accessible to the wider population. The literature establishes that the incorporation of cultural elements into worship enriches the spiritual experience, reflecting a distinctly African approach to Christian worship. This phenomenon, represented through Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* and Adesoke’s direction, invites a reflection on the socio-cultural dynamics of faith within African societies.

Theoretical Framework

Performance Theory, pioneered by Richard Schechner in the 1970s, offers a compelling analytical lens through which religious practices, particularly those involving spectacle and embodiment can be examined as performative acts. This theory proposes that all human actions may be perceived as performances, particularly when they are stylised, repeated, and shared within a communal setting. Applying Performance Theory to the phenomenon of “religious gymnastics” in white garment churches enables scholars to uncover how these ritualistic movements though lacking overt doctrinal value—serve vital functions in reinforcing group identity, engaging congregants, and symbolising spiritual experiences.

Richard Schechner articulates that “performance must be viewed not as a separate genre of art but as a broad spectrum of human actions” (28). This assertion establishes a critical foundation for evaluating how liturgical dance, drumming, and stylised gestures in white garment churches can be understood as “restored behaviours”—that is, rehearsed and repeated actions, laden with cultural and symbolic meaning. These practices, though spiritual in intent, borrow heavily from theatrical forms and public spectacle.

African performance theorists have also provided perspectives aligned with this theory stating that “ritualistic forms in African churches often transcend their spiritual origins, functioning as sites of cultural drama” (Jeyifo 72). This reinforces the notion that worship in these spaces is as much a performance of faith as it is an expression of cultural theatre. The emphasis on bodily expression such as dancing, clapping and gesturing exemplifies Schechner’s point that “performance is the twice-behaved behaviour, behaviour restored and replayed” (50).

Victor Turner, another influential voice in the study of ritual performance, posits that “rituals are transformative dramas that shift participants from one state to another” (41). In this context, religious gymnastics in white garment churches function as liminal acts—spaces in which individuals symbolically move from the profane to the sacred, even if the movements themselves are not directly doctrinal. Turner’s theory aligns with the dramatization of *The Trials of Brother Jero*, where the protagonist utilises rhythm and gesture to simulate spirituality while performing for the audience’s approval. Kofi Agawu comments that “African performance is rooted in an integration of movement, sound, and text, often dissolving the boundaries between religious worship and communal festivity” (105). This fusion of sensory elements aligns closely with what is observed in both church rituals and Adeseke’s theatrical adaptation, where dramatic movement and rhythm are used to simulate charismatic preaching styles.

Kwasi Wiredu provides a philosophical context to such cultural expressions, asserting that “African religious practice is never detached from the community; the performance of faith is also the performance of belonging” (98). This underscores how the performative aspects of white garment services—such as synchronized dancing or collective chanting—serve to strengthen social cohesion, much like theatre. Adelugba reflects on Nigerian theatre’s religious roots, stating: “Many modern Nigerian theatrical expressions are deeply indebted to the performative traditions of indigenous worship” (89). Adeseke’s directorial decisions in *The Trials of Brother Jero* capitalise on this dynamic, using religious spectacle to satirise manipulative clergy while engaging audiences with recognisable cultural motifs.

In analysing these intersections, Catherine Bell’s theory of ritual performance is also instrumental. She notes, “Ritualisation involves the strategic use of the body to communicate, assert, or legitimate authority” (138). The bodily gestures and theatricality of Brother Jero, both in the text and in Adeseke’s interpretation, reflect this notion of embodied rhetoric; using performance to command and manipulate religious authority. From a gendered lens, Judith Butler’s theory of performativity offers a parallel. She asserts, “Performative acts are not expressions of a pre-existing identity but rather constitutive of identity itself” (25). In this vein, the white garment worshipper’s identity as a believer is not merely internal but enacted through movement, voice, and ritual—a continuous performance of faith.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye In her work on African spirituality maintains that “ritual and song in African churches are not merely liturgical add-ons but essential carriers of theological meaning” (112). This affirms the idea that the expressive elements found in white garment churches are not merely decorative but integral to the worship experience, even if they sometimes echo secular performance traditions. Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, addressing the convergence of art and communal life, writes: “In African traditions, performance is not isolated in theatres but is part of everyday life—weddings, funerals, and spiritual practices are all performed events” (55). This observation solidifies the notion that theatricality in religious services is not an anomaly but an extension of African performative heritage.

When viewed through this robust framework, Ade Adeseke’s direction of *The Trials of Brother Jero* emerges as both a mirror and critique of religious spectacle. His exaggerated staging of Brother Jero’s bodily antics, chants, and simulated trances parallels white garment church practices, inviting audiences to reflect on the line between authentic spirituality and orchestrated performance. Performance Theory—especially as expanded by global and African scholars—provides a multi-dimensional lens for evaluating religious gymnastics in white garment churches. These actions, though theatrical and sometimes devoid of direct

doctrinal relevance, perform vital roles in community identity, spiritual affect, and cultural continuity. As this analysis demonstrates, the performative rituals on both the altar and the stage are never merely acts of entertainment—they are powerful symbols in the continuous negotiation of faith, identity, and culture.

III. Results and Discussion

Evaluating the act of Religious Gymnastic in *The Trial of Brother Jero*

Ade Adeseke's stage direction of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* vividly encapsulates the idea of religious gymnastics; a term used here to describe the highly choreographed, entertaining yet spiritually ambiguous actions frequently observed in some white garment churches. From the onset, the performance immerses the audience in a religious spectacle that, while initially appearing spiritual, swiftly reveals layers of showmanship, deceit, and performative piety that expose the protagonist's hypocrisy. The production opens with Brother Jeroboam leading the orchestra in a gleeful rendition of a gospel-like song while simultaneously lighting candles and making flamboyant dance steps, some of which derive from secular traditions.

This fusion of sacred and secular is key to understanding the director's critique of religious practice in some white garment Christian denominations. The opening glee culminates in a song led by Brother Jeroboam:

E ba mi dupe lowo Jerimoyamah, to seleri to si mu majemu se. Aye yo tan, Jesu ni yo ku, Eba mi yo, mo yin Baba logo.

Meaning: *People, help me appreciate God who made promises and fulfilled all his covenant. Even if the earth and heaven vanishes, Jesus will remain forever. Help me rejoice. I praise God. (03:29–04:17)*

Interestingly, this song is rich in biblical language ironically ending with the character (Brother Jeroboam) performing *shakushaku*, a secular dance popularised by Nigerian hip-hop artists like Zlatan and Naira Marley, whose musical style is often considered vulgar and antithetical to religious decorum. The choice of *shakushaku*, along with breakdancing, in this opening sequence indicates how some religious leaders, in a bid to remain socially relevant or appealing, incorporate contemporary pop culture into religious practices. This blending of the sacred and the profane serves not as a tool for spiritual edification but rather as a means of attracting followers through sensationalism and entertainment.

As literature mirrors society, Soyinka's play, especially as interpreted by Adeseke is a piercing reflection of contemporary Nigerian religiosity, where white garment churches often introduce worldly trends into the church under the guise of evangelism. Adeseke's direction makes clear that these performative acts are not necessarily inspired by divine direction but are frequently employed as strategies to expand church membership or to project spiritual authority. The phenomenon of self-appointed prophets, who often run their ministries as business enterprises, is at the heart of the play's thematic critique.

This is demonstrated early in the performance by Brother Jeroboam's self-introduction:

I am a Prophet. A Prophet by birth and by inclination. You have probably seen many of us; many on the street, many with their own churches, many in land, many on the coast, many leading possession, and many looking for possession to lead. Many curing the deaf and many rising the dead... I think my friends found

out that I was born with rather thick and long hair. To them, that was a certain sign that I was born a natural prophet and I grew to love the trade... this beach has become fashionable and the struggle for land has turned it to a thing of ridicule. (04:36-05:44)

The use of the term “*trade*” in reference to prophecy and ministry is especially telling. Prophet Jeroboam acknowledges the commodification of religion, portraying himself not as a spiritual leader but as a businessman who has chosen prophecy as a means of livelihood. His nostalgia for a time when prophecy was “respectable” and “dignified” further exposes his real concern—not about spirituality but about prestige and authority within a competitive religious economy.

The character’s manipulation of a politician, described as a back-bencher aspiring for a ministerial position, further reveals his strategic use of false prophecy. His approach is methodical and deceitful:

...and he; (referring to the politician). He’s already a member of my flock. He does not know of it yet, but he’s already a follower. All I need to do is to call him and say to him my dear brother of the federal house, your place awaits you. You doubt me? Watch me work on him (now speaking to the audience)... My dear brother in Christ. God in his favour has landed upon you minister by the grace of God... and at the door leading into your office I read the word minister for War. (1:07:57-1:09:46)

What is remarkable here is Prophet Jeroboam’s calculated rhetoric. His language is deliberately grandiose and flattering, appealing to the politician’s ambition and ego. The politician, initially sceptical, is gradually seduced by the theatrics of prophecy and is seen kneeling for prayer. In a moment of high comic irony, Brother Chume, a victim of the Prophet’s manipulations, storms the stage in rage and attempts to attack the Prophet with a cutlass. Jeroboam flees the stage, leaving the politician who has his eyes shut in prayer believing that the Prophet has been miraculously “transported” by the Holy Spirit:

Aah! Prophet don’t leave me. Prophet. Wait o, Vanished, Transported, utterly transmuted. I knew it. I knew I stood in the presence of God. (1:13:28-1:13:54)

Here, Adeseke’s direction cleverly uses physical comedy and timing to satirise blind faith and the ease with which people ascribe divine agency to human trickery. The moment the Prophet returns, he breaks the fourth wall to boast:

You heard him with your own ears. By tomorrow, the whole town would have hear about the miraculous disappearance of brother Jero, the immaculate Jero, the articulate hero of Christ crusade. (1:14:00-1:14:18)

This moment reinforces the duplicity that undergirds the Prophet’s ministry, exposing the dissonance between performance and authenticity in religious worship. Jeroboam’s awareness of his manipulation, and his pride in its success, speaks volumes about the nature of performative religion—a religion that relies not on divine authority but on spectacle, hearsay, and manipulation of public perception.

In one of the most vivid instances of religious gymnastics in the performance, a prayer session escalates into a full-blown choreographic sequence. Around the 40th minute, Brother Chume leads the congregation to chant “three *gbosa*” for the Prophet. With each *gbosa*, Prophet Jeroboam performs exaggerated bodily movements, supposedly in spiritual ecstasy,

and is supported theatrically by Chume himself. The session soon morphs into an energetic revival dance, with the orchestra leading a song: “Maa ja o, ide maa ja lara mi o” meaning that “Let the shackles break, let every bondage in my body be broken. The revival dance reaches a peak when Prophet Jeroboam lays hands on a pregnant woman and simultaneously places his foot on her stomach in a supposedly symbolic gesture of deliverance. As he proceeds to lay hands on each congregant, they dramatically fall to the ground, jumping or convulsing—actions reminiscent more of dramatic performance than genuine spiritual encounter.

The spectacle crescendos when another song, “*Meta meta l’atewo iye, Atewo,*” is raised. At this point, the Prophet begins conducting the congregation like a musical ensemble, controlling their movements with his hands as they dance in a circular pattern. This sequence is emblematic of what has been termed “religious gymnastics”—bodily theatrics that imitate spiritual manifestations but lack theological grounding or ritual significance.

The brilliance of Adeseke’s direction lies in the way he transforms the text of Soyinka’s play into a rich tapestry of sound, movement, and symbolism. The choreography and musical elements serve not only to entertain but to highlight the performative, almost farcical nature of some contemporary religious practices. As Ogundiya and Apalowo rightly observe, “Dance can simply be performed for dance’s sake and it should be appreciated for its aesthetic value” (6). In this context, dance and music in *The Trials of Brother Jero* are not employed to invoke the divine but to dramatise and critique how religious leaders stage-manage worship to manipulate their congregants. These aesthetic choices serve to illuminate the performative tension between spiritual authenticity and theatrical spectacle in religious spaces.

IV. Conclusion

Adeseke’s direction of *The Trials of Brother Jero* successfully satirises the commodification of faith and the rise of performative spirituality within certain expressions of Christianity. The performance brilliantly illustrates how spectacle, deception, and theatrics are co-opted to simulate divine encounters, often to the detriment of sincere worship. Through choreography, music, and physical comedy, the production exposes the absurdity of religious gymnastics and encourages viewers to question the authenticity of religious experience in a world increasingly driven by appearances.

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