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Performance as Spiritual Conjuring: Exploring Influences of Alárinjó Theatrical Art in the Works of Taiwo Ajai-Lycett

Taiwo, Ajai-Lycett

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Abstract

Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, Nigerian-British actress of stage and screen, stands as a compelling contemporary figure whose work bears the imprints of this indigenous theatrical heritage. Her praxis is shaped by the “disguise” and culture-custodian legacies of the Aláàrinjò theatre, blended with the Western performance styles of Konstantin Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg, Bertolt Brecht, and Sanford Meisner. Through her, we can conceptualise Aláàrinjò as a living system of performance, thereby expanding the discourse of performance theory as well as the pedagogical landscape of performance from an African indigenous knowledge location – one that has remained comparatively underexplored until now. With this objective, this paper explores how Ajai-Lycett channels aspects of this receding theatre tradition into her contemporary screen and stage work. It examines key Aláàrinjò concepts - such as “invisibility”, “disguise”, and “spirituality” - alongside exemplars of her performances from 1973 to the present. In doing so, it spotlights three cultural subtexts of the Aláàrinjò form that are typically lost to the casual observer. These include: (1) the transcendental mindset required by the actor to simultaneously inhabit the dual roles of entertainer and cultural curator (Kalilu 1991); (2) the spiritual significance in costume selection (Aremu 1983); and (3) the cultural dimensions embedded in blocking and dance expressions of human experiences such as birth, death, loss, and marriage. In this way, the paper contributes to extended critical conversations on Nigerian screen performance and nuances key dynamics of gendered presences in Nigerian television systems since the 1970s.

Keywords: Nollywood thespians, Aláàrinjò (Yoruba) theatrical principles, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, stage to screen, decentering performance

Introduction

The insights offered in this paper are drawn from longitudinal conversations with Taiwo Ajai-Lycett. This began with in-depth interviews conducted **by Samantha Iwowo** (between 2014 and 2022) and extended through additional engagements and insights thereafter with **Oluyinka Esan** and **Victor Okhai**. The conversations unfolded over varying durations in various contexts: in person, during car rides over shared meals, at other times, through calls, voice notes, texts, and video interviews. The fluidity of setting, medium, and timing reflects the evolution and varied culturally situated ways in which knowledge is transmitted, remembered, and recorded.

This approach reflects the intergenerational exchanges common in Nigerian societies, where culture, values, and wisdom are passed down through respectful conversations. Such interactions carry admonitions, moral guidance, and models of good conduct, often delivered through story, humour, or reflective correction (Akinyemi 2003; Saka et al 2024). They also unfold unconscious bonding rooted in shared heritage, as well as the tacit responsibilities of cultural transmission (Asamoah-Poku 2024; Banjo 2024). And this collaborative engagement with the legendary Ajai-Lycett honours and participates in these traditions. By foregrounding her reflections, the paper consciously bridges scholarly inquiry with oral testimony, allowing lived experience to shape and animate critical interpretation. In other words, this forms an Indigenous-Knowledge methodological choice. We use direct quotes and conversational turns of phrase purposefully, capturing the oral texture and emotional resonance of the dialogues that ground this research. Therefore, the writing correspondingly adopts a hybrid

register, one that maintains critical rigour while embracing the informal power of spoken memory and cultural recall. This approach enables a nuanced theorisation of non-Western performance forms, specifically as they surface in contemporary, Western-oriented spaces. The paper also offers a model of culturally grounded archiving, where oral narratives captured through video and conversation are translated into text, preserving both content and context, whilst honouring the intergenerational processes by which culture is transmitted and embodied.

Taiwo Ajai-Lycett's distinguished career began in 1966 at the Royal Court Theatre, UK. She featured in William Gaskill's interpretation of *The Lion and the Jewel*. From there, she has gone on to become an accomplished stage and screen actress, though she had not consciously sought this path and lacked formal acting training. How could she then embody the character role to the satisfaction of a lofty director like Gaskill? To Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, this was a no-brainer. "Aláàrinjò theatre, of course! It flows in the blood of any Yoruba child raised in Yorubaland up until the late 1970s". she quipped. "I had no intention of being an actor, or whatever. Do you know I'm an accidental actor? Did you know that?" It has been previously revealed in an interview that Taiwo Ajai-Lycett is an accidental actor. What is news is her personal Aláàrinjò heritage - a legacy derived from her grandfather. In this paper, she prides this open for the first time, allowing us to theorise the assimilation of this non-Western paradigm in spaces girded by Western conventions. From Taiwo, we draw lessons on how it can be done.

Aláàrinjò: History and Trajectory

The Aláàrinjò theatre is the earliest known theatrical expression of the Yoruba people, who are predominantly domiciled in Western Nigeria, though they spread across West Africa and beyond. Pinpointing the exact origin of Aláàrinjò as an established theatre form is challenging. This may be partly due to incomplete historical records and losses of artefactual documentation through disruptive tendencies of the British colonial establishment and their forceful annexation of Yoruba land into colonial Nigeria. Adedeji (1969) traces its probable roots back to early Yoruba history. He notes that the art was first practised by the aboriginal Yorubas – descendants of Òbà. Aláàrinjò is linked to their earliest cultures of ancestor-worship and warfare stratagem termed *egúngún*, meaning a masked figure. (Adedeji 1969, p98).

In the earliest times, Yoruba warriors and *ancestral* worshippers in the *Egúngún cult* would each wear *egúngún* regalia, often dressing up to represent a deceased relative to honour them during the worship. Warriors do so to invoke fear in their enemies on the battlefield (Adedeji 1969, p12). The tradition of *egúngún* performers portraying ancestral spirits is long and commonplace, as *egúngún* appeared at festivals, funerals and milestone events. [The Hollywood film, *King Woman* (2022), references the *egúngún* warfare style of the Yorubas].

This culture had another function; it was primarily religious. For devotees, the outings are opportunities for serious encounters. Ifa is the earliest religion of the Yorubas practised till date. During Ifá divination the Ifá priest communes with the gods using religious poetry, in a style similar to the *egúngún*'s. The priests commune with Ifá in poetry. Instructions and revelations are also communicated to the worshippers in parable-laden poetry (Adedeji 1969, p13). But *Egúngún* was also positioned as a form of entertainment even in those early days. They were masked actors with spiritual and religious functions. Besides being conduits to the

ancestors and the gods, they offered moral guidance and social commentary to crowds using the tripoidal essences. The “*masked costumes, metaphysics, and poetic oratory* formed the tripod upon which performance was supplied” [sic] Alálàrinjò theatre which Ajai-Lycett speaks about evolved from this.

Despite being persistently reduced to the barbaric in Orientalist discourses like those of Hinderer (1872), Dennet (1910), Talbot (1926), (*cited in Adedeji 1969, p12*) the Alálàrinjò theatre, remains a tapestry of artistic sophistication as Ajai-Lycett (born in 1942) discovered. She maintains that her core perspectives in acting were influenced by the artistic discipline of Alárinjó. This is reflected in her performance on screen and stage. That is ample justification for us to unpick the nature of this theatre as would be done in this section. Intermittently, the discussion would lapse into crucial anecdotes from the Alárinjó system supplied by Ajai-Lycett herself.

The word "Alárinjó" itself means "wandering entertainers" in the Yoruba language (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). Working in groups that were akin to the British travelling theatres, these entertainers would set up temporary stages and delight crowds with their lively acts. The Alárinjó would also touch on current events and social matters in their humorous skits. Characteristically, they travelled round villages, bringing entertainment through their vibrant dancing, acrobatics, music, comedy routines, and storytelling (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). Despite its links to primordial *Egúngún* practices and the paucity of formal documented records, Oloruntoba-Oju conjectures that Alárinjó theatre likely evolved between the 18th and 19th centuries – before the colonising influence of Britain in West Africa. (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). Alárinjó offered a way for groups of travelling performers, often unemployed young men, to earn a living during economically uncertain times. They moved from place to place to entertain crowds with their talents (Omofolabo 2022). Indeed, it has been argued that these groups constitute the first true professional secular performers (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). But Omofolabo (2022) disagrees with this account, asserting that concrete documentation of Alárinjó only emerges in the early 20th-century historical record.

What is less contentious is that by the early 1900s, as colonial Nigeria was formally incorporated, it had evolved into a highly sophisticated and competitive theatre form. The Alárinjó introduced specialised music and intricate choreography (Sowande 2023). They were still sometimes referred to as *Egúngún* (or masquerade) theatre due to its roots. Performers tended to wear colourful masks and costumes. The costumes and masks became more adventurous, representing current realities and socio-cultural imaginaries. One such iconic character was the strong mother figure protecting her children featured in the Gelede mask (Omofolabo 2022). These masks allowed performers to take on different identities and personalities, convey religious prophecies, satirise socially unacceptable behaviours. Even erring authority figures were not spared. So, the masks served as curators of Yoruba culture. Through entertainment, they would educate people about society, talk about prevailing economic struggles and encourage people to remain hopeful, to press for a better world (Omofolabo, 2022). As Qadeer (2018) summarises, this ability to connect contemporary concerns with lived experiences reaffirms Alárinjó's cultural relevance.

Ajai-Lycett's grandfather, Popoola Ajai, was a griot, a derivative of the Alárinjó. From that vantage position, she observed that at their core, the actors are “evangelists”. “They curated

the values of Yoruba cosmology far and wide with conviction, albeit laced in exciting, suspenseful drama". She explains this observation further:

"When the Alálàrinjò actors would perform, they provoked actions laden with a spirit other than theirs, convincing us to believe what was unravelling before our eyes and convincing us to believe it was as easy as we believed our breathing. They made us laugh, cry, left us stone-faced. They brought us to our feet in rushes of applause and sent us out their presence weak-kneed".

This evangelistic curating of Yoruba cultural norms implied that the Alálàrinjò troupe essentialised a level of discipline which expected their actors to die to self upon assuming a role and embodying the spirit of the message. The invisibility of the person who adorned the *Egúngún* mask and costume was a marker of this evangelical duty as Ajai-Lycett further stated:

In this moment, no one is asking how tall, short, pretty the person behind the mask is. Clad in the regalia, no one knows who is inside there. It is a secret because the end goal is not for self-glorification but for the iteration of values for the community . . . the actor is trained to deny self and focus on the 'spirit' of the *Egúngún*, which is passed on intergenerationally. (sic)

This *spirit* is used to prompt the audience to the values and the interconnectedness of their shared heritage. Although this spirit requires the actor's expressions of majestic dancing, oratory, and rhythm, the Alálàrinjò performer is trained to understand that the moment is not about them. It is about the character and message that they embody, in that moment. It was understood that their common responsibility was to stimulate creativity and imagination. They were also to stir curiosity, empathy, fear, awareness of shame, knowledge of right and wrong, social order, aspirations, and achievement. Performance was to iterate and reinforce social civility and stability. Through these iterations, the social structure is reinforced – people are encouraged to know their places in society, to recognise their roles, responsibilities, and the indispensable place of communalism to the existence of a healthy society. This worldview regards the actor's *self* as a conduit via which enduring values are conveyed, Acting was essentially viewed as a spiritual exercise, so careers were not primarily driven by profit (and such capitalist motivations). Although both are not mutually exclusive, it can be argued that acting, by the traditions of the Alálàrinjò, was a religion. Its actors are evangelists committed to the stability and sustenance of the collective.

Alálàrinjò: Evolution in the 20th Century

Alálàrinjò theatre has evolved over the years (possibly becoming more secular, less yoked to the *Egúngún* cult), but it remains a cornerstone of Yoruba cultural heritage. As Alálàrinjò-style troupes proliferated, some began to secure wealthy patrons. These enabled them to incorporate more elaborate theatrical components. In an increasingly competitive climate, several troupes started to integrate sensational acrobatics and sexually suggestive dances to titillate audiences and they continued to attract sponsors. The plays retained their relevance because of their contemporary commentary on pressing issues like colonial tax policies and experiences affecting West African soldiers during World War II (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013).

Complex reactions confronted Aláàrinjò in the face of the colonial knowledge systems that accompanied the full establishment of Nigeria by the British colonial government.

Some performances elicited outright disapproval to what was deemed their anticolonial stance and subversive themes (Qadeer 2018). Some others adapted to shifting contemporary realities under colonial rule. According to Udengwu (2018, p18), with the inundating “foreign human and material presence” in colonial Nigeria, the colonised people learnt to adapt speedily to the far-reaching consequences of colonial realities. According to Udengwu (p18) the fear of losing indigenous cultural identity provoked the incorporation of the popular Yoruba Travelling Theatre in the 1940s, which had been inspired by the Aláàrinjò theatre.

Amongst these colonial disruptions was Christianity and some of its appurtenances of worship. Some Aláàrinjò troupes learnt to appropriate these into their practice by adopting musical instruments, and other elements of worship. According to Yusuf (2012), this demonstrates Aláàrinjò’s capacity to absorb external creative elements, while retaining its intrinsic Yoruba cultural identity. That said, the authenticity of traditional theatres became vulnerable. In discussing the devaluation of indigenous cultural systems in colonial Nigeria, Olayiwola (2011, p184) suggests that traditional theatres were not shielded from colonial mentality.

During the colonial era Christian propaganda helped to entrench the influence of the colonialists in the name of civilization. Olayiwola argues that this Western civilisation was to the detriment of indigenous cultural development (p184). By 1960 at Nigeria’s independence, Aláàrinjò performance style had become hybrid blending with British cultures and language. In response, the Yoruba dramatist – Duro Ladipo, spearheaded an aesthetic revolution by returning Aláàrinjò to more foundational Yoruba artistic elements (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2013). He replaced creolised language with indigenous speech patterns and leveraged traditional music, costumes, and folk tales. Ladipo’s approach reflected Yoruba roots better and laid the creative foundations of the modern conventions still seen in contemporary Aláàrinjò forms. Aláàrinjò thus experienced renewed popularity as a powerful emblem of cultural heritage and resistance. Yet, renowned artists like Hubert Ogunde, Moses Olaiya, Duro Ladipo, (along with Kola Ogunmola and Oyin Adejobi). Adebayo Faleti was a renowned writer and broadcaster from that era. These artistes achieved national and global fame. There is a view that this may be due at least in part, to their showcase of Aláàrinjò’s flair for fusing tradition and innovation to entice crowds (Euba 2015).

However, since the peak of its popularity in the 1960s, there is consensus among some academics that Aláàrinjò in its purest form has experienced a major decline, especially among cosmopolitan crowds who had imbibed Westernised definitions of modernisation. The emergence of alternative forms of entertainment (with the rise of mass media) further aided its transformation. For some, the lack of patronage especially from government, contributed to the observed decline of this indigenous form. All these made room for changing cultural tastes, particularly among Nigerian youth (Ebewo 2023; Omofolabo 2022). Indeed, the altered emphasis in public administration had undermined funding of traditional structures – palace courts which were the official patrons of the art. That said, it can still be argued that the authentic indigenous practice is maintained in traditional contexts. The form remains functional and is still being employed to convey relevant messages.

Aláàrinjò practitioners have been involved in contemporary social change campaigns. Topical concerns such as HIV/AIDS, women's rights, and political corruption have been adapted, making Aláàrinjò relevant to societal issues (Ebewo 2023). Yet Femi Omofolabo (2022) argues that these innovations largely fail financially. He argues that without immense systemic renewal efforts and promotion, Aláàrinjò remains endangered, prone to vanishing, but Ajai-Lycett is more hopeful that the form will endure. She recognises Aláàrinjò as an adaptable African folk art form. In the next section, she highlights characteristics that make this possible and demonstrates how she has channelled several of its stylistic features to her work on stage and screen. This account is a significant shift in the documentation of Aláàrinjò. It documents the modifications applied to its techniques, which make what was originally intended for open-air or at best stage performance into a suitable screen style of performance. Ajai-Lycett thus helps to capture the age-long otherwise overlooked practices of the Alarinjo. This will be her first time formally documenting her legacy and that of her forebears, for posterity.

Aláàrinjò has several enduring elements that are culturally relevant. Prominent amongst this is its unique storytelling aesthetics, with recurrent and non-linear plots where the past, present (show) and future are interlaced. This reflects the Yoruba understanding of time as a continuum (Euba 1990). Add to this the techniques of delivery, particularly those which form the repertoire of Ajai-Lycett's screen performance. These techniques – interactivity with the audience (Oloruntoba-Oju 2013, p398) and musical tapestry (Oju 2013; Aguoru 2012; Roy-Omoni 2020) will be the focus of this paper.

Ajai-Lycett's Adaptation of Aláàrinjò Interactive Technique for Screen Performance:

The evangelistic mission to address socially unacceptable behaviours and highlight paths to progress makes the audience central to the Aláàrinjò. Performers actively engage the audience to ensure that issues raised in the stories resonate. The success of this mission depends on the performers' interpretation of the stories, with their thoughtfully structured narratives and carefully chosen themes.

Long before the contemporary appreciation of interactivity now evident in the behaviours seen in social media platforms, Aláàrinjò relied on interactivity with audiences. Performers engaged the audience directly through a vibrant call-and-response technique. This encourages rhythmic responses from the audience, who occasionally participate in acted scenes (Fiebach 1996). Such shared experiences tend to heighten emotional resonance and impact. The practice highlights the interdependency of the artist and the audience in the development of artistic meanings. This can be termed as Aláàrinjò's Interactive Technique.

For Ajai-Lycett, when using this technique, the Fourth Wall (the invisible wall between actors and audience) is completely non-existent. The audience is encouraged to disregard invisible boundaries, suspend disbelief, and immerse themselves in the experience, making it more relevant. This is well exemplified in the rendition of the play, *Hear Word* (2014), in Mushin, a market in Lagos, Nigeria. Here she features as "Iya", the straight-talking feminist, whose performance is directed to the crowd, as is the other actresses in the play. This elicits responses from the large audience that is around and above them - some perched on a pedestrian bridge for vantage views. The point here is that the performers are able to achieve this audience engagement through their adoption of the Aláàrinjò Interactivity technique. This

requires the actor to actively listen, observe and respond to both their co-characters and their audience. This processing will be discussed further shortly, but first, a look at the site of audience engagement – the location.

In the May 2014 performance of *Hear Word*, with its attention to the socio-cultural issues affecting women, the market serves as the mise-en-scene for the play. Ironically, the rotting infrastructure seen in the location of the open-air performance is also evidence of government neglect. Thus, the location doubles as a place of (trauma) bonding between actor(s) and the audience. Here, the actress (despite her comparative socio-economic privilege), the market traders, and the audience were all first-hand witnesses to the government's neglect of their common patrimony. The location constitutes an interactive psychological space, as evidenced on the day when the play was staged in Mushin market. Experience of the poor infrastructure on that day (Wednesday, May 14th 2014) is compounded by the downpour and the waterlogged route to the market. Thus, the location is both the issue (subject of the story) and evidence of its believability.



Pic. 1. Taiwo Ajai-Lycett with other thespians performing *Hear Word* in the market

Taiwo Ajai-Lycett notes that such strategic selection of location by performers employing the Alárinjọ Interactive technique in contemporary times is a challenge. In the case of *Hear Word*, despite her recognisable face (and those of her co-performers) she is not hidden behind a mask. She relies on her audience's reactions to maintain the spatial distance in the performance where she plays the character of Iya, the feminist. A steady bonding between her and the audience emerges from their attentiveness, responses, and exclamations, which she likewise was quick to respond to. Before long, the internationally acclaimed actress, Taiwo Ajai-Lycett, has become one with them, *one of them – a fellow market woman*.

The audience dynamics differ when the Alárinjọ train docks at high-end theatres, as was the case when it played to more upmarket audience groups in the MUSON Centre. However, with the breadth of issues covered in the story, the technique still works when the performer forges a connection with *fellow women, albeit women of privilege*. Thus, Alárinjọ speaks to the high and the low. For this, it relies on other features of the Alárinjọ Interactive technique. To Alárinjọ, the audience is essential for its epistemic acting.



Pic 2. Taiwo with Ireti Doyle in the foreground in the market performance of *Hear Word*

According to Oloruntoba-Oju, the desired interaction in Alárinjọ theatre relies heavily on the use of language. (2013, p398). Taiwo Ajai-Lycett affirms this.

Language holds [much] significance, so [an Alárinjọ performer] employs robustly expressive elements of [the Yoruba language] . . . idioms, proverbs, incantations, music, and poetry. These are often directed at the audience with the consciousness that they can relate.

[Through this, the audience is] expect[ed] to connect personally with the unravelling performance. With language the performer can also anticipate and manage the responses from their audiences. However, eliciting this interactivity requires sustained and purposeful focus. For example, [the actors need to] meticulously [capture] subtle details of reactions from people all around, especially at key moments in the narrative. Slightest gestures, including fluttering eyelids, or raised eyebrows of co-characters as well as those of audience members, are of great significance. These can only be noted with active attention; they must be responded to promptly. “Where this is done, each ensuing line of dialogue or song I produce depends entirely on how the responses of my co-characters and/or my audience would be”, Ajai-Lycett says.

For this reason, when on stage, she engages a fixation with the audience as she would with a co-conversant in an informal, heartfelt discussion. “An enthralled audience attends to every move of the performer, and it is the responsibility of the actor to interact with that attention”. This way, the actor as *conduit*, as messenger, as *evangelist*, emerges unforced, because they have offered self in entirety to the interactive moment.



Pic. 3. Joke Silva with the enthralled audience in *Hear Word* at Mushin market.

Beyond making her mark as a thespian, Ajai-Lycett is widely acknowledged for her performances both on the small and the silver screen. The actress was asked to reflect on how she adapted the lessons from Aláàrinjò theatre, such as the interactive technique, where the performer works with the audience. This is one of its core essences – the audience is part of the play’s world. To translate this directly to the screen would constitute a breaking of the Fourth Wall because Aláàrinjò performance depends on the audience as a co-creator. Therefore, the transition to a medium where the audience is absent poses a fundamental structural challenge. Ajai-Lycett responds:

What I therefore must do is deploy that interactive technique with modulation... Actually, even if you took [as examples] the Stanislavski System or Lee Strasberg's Method . . . which are some of the Western acting styles I am also trained in, they are primarily for stage but then screen actors use them by moderating their tones and sizes ... Alárinjọ is equally so adaptable for screen performance. What I do with it in this case is translate its verbosity to subtlety by recognising the proximities of the camera, of the sound, of my co-character or characters.

Spatial awareness in this case also means physicality of the actors, relationships between co-characters, physical distances between them. Such spatial awareness makes for visual poetry if an actor can draw on all of them [and] makes moderating Alárinjọ practical. As I said, these can only be achieved by active listening and observation, primary tools of the Alárinjọ theatre.

This ability to modulate her technique sets her (and other elite artistes) apart, especially in the early days of television in Nigeria, as performers transitioned from stage to screen. Wooden performance and verbosity had characterised many Nigerian productions involving the travelling theatres, when there was much ad-libbing, poorly designed sets and limited choreography in talent blocking. These traits, which persisted even in early Nollywood productions, were among the factors that accounted for the reservations of elite audiences. However, Ajai-Lycett demonstrates that Alárinjọ's interactive technique can enhance screen performance, and one of the instances she employs this is in the screen performance with Michael Crawford in the BBC drama, *Some Mothers Do Have Em* (1973), [Se2/Ep5], where she played "Sally". This required a consistent consciousness of the spatiality of the set and scene, especially of Crawford's character, "Frank". Such consistency was necessary to respond rhythmically to each move he made, and to elicit some of his own reactions accurately. Unlike the Alárinjọ theatrical performance, this production did not have an audience to interact with. To her, Crawford and other actors on set became (simultaneously) *the audience and co-characters*. Breaking the Fourth Wall in this instance meant for her, looking not to the camera to engage the audience conspiratorially, but to engage an attitude of believing people are watching her, even if they were unseen. So, as she engages her co-actors, she maintains this belief. Let us take the scene of this episode where Frank meets a pregnant Sally at an antenatal class and seems to wrongly believe she wants to pass him off as her husband. Ajai-Lycett's actions as Sally stem from keen observation and prompt responses to Frank's crucial moves, as though intentional to give 'onlookers' (the audience) no room to believe Frank. It is like the call-and-response between a stage actor and a live audience. When Frank avoids Sally's gaze, she invades his space; he snarls, she grins back. He briefly storms off, and she shakes her head in mock disapproval. This interactivity is also visible in Sally's reactions to Frank disrupting the session, ultimately leading to their heated argument. This style results in rhythmic blocking which consists of a range of gestures - huge and small, sparks of humour, tensions, suspense, and, likely, fascination whenever both actors walk, sit, or talk.

A similar pattern of modulated interactivity is apparent in the drama series, *King of Boys: The Return of the King* (2021) [Se1, Ep4], featuring Ajai-Lycett as the uppity "Chief Randle". A snooty, formidable politician, her posture and blocking consistently oppose those of her co-

characters and their blockings as though to convey her social status to the unseen onlookers. The scene with her daughter-in-law, “Jumoke Randle” (Nse Ikpe-Etim) comes to mind here. Especially for its initial part, the hostility seems to be conveyed in a call-and-response style. The power-tussle between both women is seen in the ramrod straightness of their backs, glares, and occasional head movements. Whenever Jumoke inclines her head to a side, Chief Randle slightly inclines hers in the opposite direction. She defiantly blinks in response to Jumoke’s cold stare. These matching oppositional energies draw the viewer in to wonder about who would submit first.

Alárinjọ as System of Performance: Ajai-Lycett’s Conceptualisation

So far, this paper has contextualised Alárinjọ as a system of performance which fosters effective communication. It has also now established the dependence of the system on the skillfulness of its performers, exemplified by Ajai-Lycett. The facts commend the Alárinjọ system and its performers for critical scholarly attention. It justifies why Ajai-Lycett is showcased here. For both aesthetics and professional considerations, we now consider lessons that Alárinjọ can bequeath to performance spaces, even those beyond Yorubaland from which the art evolved. Going by Ajai-Lycett, this success begins with an awareness of cultural practice and professional discipline. In her view, acting requires complete immersion into imaginary characters, authentic emotions, and sincere connection with viewers. Skills that an actor has imbibed help to bring their characters to life and to deliver fascinating performances. There must, for instance, be clarity of communication. Ajai-Lycett offers: “...if people are confused about what one is saying, what one is doing, then one has not effectively conveyed the message or delivered on the objectives.” This challenge was evident in early attempts to transfer the craft from street theatre to stage, to screen. Much was tolerated under the slapstick comedy style elements, such as seen in *Alawada*, a 1970s Nigerian television series, for instance. Less excusable are typical fight scenes in less established troupes (involving co-wives, husband and wife, market women). These challenges have also been identified in Nigerian television, and Nollywood. These and even social media content creators will benefit from this lesson. Ajai-Lycett notes that the mission to communicate across cultures will likely be frustrated without modulation. Worse still is the miscommunication that occurs:

You cannot get people to hear our philosophies and our way of life and our perspective on what's going into the world when we're screaming and shouting at one another, and they don't hear. They don't understand our accent, anyway. And then we're just . . . [we just leave them thinking], “Oh. Look at how animated they are. They're so lovely people”. That to me is disrespectful. It is patronising . . . I want to push ideas to them [Western counterparts], and I want to tell how [to] get those ideas [from the show] . . . I don't want them telling me how animated my race is.

With these, Ajai-Lycett shows that there are interrelated technical and ethical principles that hold up practice. She discusses five, each one informed by her Alárinjọ performance lineage. The first and central to her approach is an ethic of conscious embodiment in which the actor strives to submit to the character, ultimately as a higher presence. This technique stems from the Alárinjọ use of performance as sacred labour to the divine. Thus, they are to offer

undivided service, humility, and ethical reflexivity. This ethic is complemented by a second principle, which is Ajai-Lycett's expansive sense of presence when shaping her solo performances. For this, she draws on the Aláàrinjò convention in which performers engage presences that are not materially visible yet are treated as dramaturgically real. She therefore approaches the character's goal, conflict, or interlocutor as a tangible force within the performance space, even in the absence of other actors. In *Oloibiri* (2015), for example, when her character, Ibiere, learns that her son (Gunpowder) has been killed, to portray grief, Ajai-Lycett imagines grief as an active, confronting presence positioned before her. The audience cannot see this imagined figure, but by conjuring and responding to it as though it were physically before her, she produces actions that render the moment believable. She describes this capacity as "words becoming flesh" - the actor imaginatively transforms words on the script or screenplay into an embodied reality.

One can say this principle follows the African philosophy that spirits exist in all mortal spaces. When this is channelled into a site of performance, especially lone-character situations where inner states of mind are to be expressed, actions (such as thinking, sleeping, grieving) are treated as physical entities. They are addressed with the same intentionality as an actor addresses visible co-actors. This produces a distinctive mode of embodiment in which the actor's imaginative labour summons and responds to inner situations with actions that possess heightened clarity, conviction, and affective force. This style introduces into contemporary actor training a dimension that is largely absent from established global pedagogies. In this way, Ajai-Lycett advances a pedagogical paradigm that expands performance theory beyond psychological or physical models of training associated with established systems such as Stanislavski, Strasberg, Meisner, Lecoq, and Grotowski, offering, an indigenous understanding that presence includes spiritual realms and is engineered for believable, grounded performance.

A third principle that Ajai-Lycett offers is the transcendental state of mind required by the actor to be both the entertainer and cultural curator simultaneously (Kalilu 1991). For this to happen, Ajai-Lycett recommends that the actor develop the *ability to listen attentively*. This is exemplified in Ajai-Lycett's performance as Sally, noted above, where her listening and observing facilitated effective, authentic engagement with co-actors. The actor must have the ability to meditate and draw on the implicit messages from the character's words, actions, wants, obstacles, and constraints – the internal and external pressures confronting them. This step is crucial for actors to interpret their roles. This occurs both before and during the production. Ajai-Lycett identifies the two-step process that this entails, the two Rs – *Ruminating and Rehearsals*. She distinguishes these from other levels of preparation that they should accompany, such as active listening that facilitates recall. A good actor requires good memory and the capacity to dredge up the knowledge required in each situation. Ajai-Lycett explains this:

"You do not even walk around with [such knowledge], but when you come to that [point], you have to [summon the knowledge] ...That is why you have [to practice] keen observation and have attention to details. I mean. . . it is not for nothing they say the devil is in the details. It is. The devil is in the details. You have to be keen about everything. You do not take anything for granted because accuracy is of the essence. A sharp tool is the mind . . . a lot of it then becomes

subliminal. You file [it] away . . . when you get to the situation, it enables you to recall. And then, of course, that is why we have rehearsals. Do you know, they themselves [Alárinjò performers] have rehearsals? [with rehearsals] . . . you can be sure that. . . you have the roadmap to navigate with. So, you work, you work, you work.” (sic)

Indeed, for Alárinjò performers, rehearsals help actors ruminate. It puts them in touch with information that is locked up at the subliminal level. Through regular rehearsals, they become familiar with such details that facilitate the quick retrieval of required knowledge when need arises. From songs to dancing, ad-libbed dialogue, all must be mastered and perfectly choreographed. Veteran performers speak fondly of this, the passion and sacrifices they made knowing that there is no room for error in theatre, unlike recorded media – film / TV. With the intense, rigorous and regular rehearsals, the performer has a repertoire of performances that avails them of several opportunities to organically create several dimensions of their acts. In this way, the performer’s role is natural, because that is who they are. It is all premised on hard work. Ajai-Lycett appreciates this, citing Hubert Ogunde, the doyen of Alárinjò theatre as an example, noting his peculiar pragmatic problem-resolution approach:

“You go and see them, [Alárinjò performers] see how they work. . . We know they don't have . . . the funds that [European counterparts] have, but they produce magnificent work. Why? Because of this attention to detail...Now, anybody who knew how Ogunde worked will know how much work they do before they get on stage. He was so, so intense [even with the women, despite the cultural constraints against them as performers] ...The women, like other performers, have to study; if they were there under his roof, he was able to do a lot of work with them. That's why we're still talking about them today.” (sic)

Ruminating and rehearsals make performers well rounded. Ajai-Lycett cites examples of rehearsals by the cast of the *HearWord play* ^{[1][2]} which she was a member of, to show the traditional style of Alárinjò rehearsals. They are inherently collective. As evident in the clips, music, dance, ensemble interplay, and communal forms of rehearsal are the primary conditions through which Alárinjò performers obtain energy, coherence, and social meaning. This style of rehearsals also provides the rhythmic structures, collaborative textures, and communal meaning-making that enable the work to resonate as an expression of collective life. Rehearsals constitute a form of mutual help amongst performers who partner to create energy-filled moments; generate visually artistic experiences; embrace bodily expression; be conscious of spatial dynamics; and build relationships beyond individual performances. Ajai-Lycett maintains that with this preparation ethic, when Alárinjò performers are confronted with a challenge, they are enabled to bring their experience to bear; to say, "Well, this is the best way I'm gonna go". She recalls channelling this orientation when presented with a minor role in Conor Cruise O'Brien's, *Murderous Angels* (1971/1972)³, at the Dublin International Festival.

She was cast to play “Pauline Lumumba”, wife of the murdered Patrice Lumumba. According to the script, upon learning of Lumumba’s death, Pauline’s Belgian mistress would hold her shoulders and comfort her. However, Ajai-Lycett suggested to the director a better way to

honour the man. "... I must do a dirge for him". So, rather than be a non-speaking character, she successfully requested to perform a dirge, since this would be the expectation of her character in the African context. She channelled the Aláàrinjò style of performance, movement (talent blocking) and dance, particularly in its expressions associated with death and loss. Aláàrinjò theatre requires its performers to be conversant with human milestones such as birth, marriage, death, losses, and the culturally appropriate expressions in such situations.

She recalls drawing on this cultural repertoire; she sat and let the dirge come from her "belly". She imagined the wife not just weeping about her loss, but calling on neighbours – the audience, as well as fellow Africans all over the world – to see the extremity of the violence the West had dealt to her defenceless husband. She added a description of the reaction to her performance of this. "...Tom [her husband] was in the audience; he said that if a pin dropped in the hall, you could hear it". And although no one could understand a word she sang, the intensity of the performance was elevated. Ajai-Lycett also recalled that, "It went down like a thousand violins, eliciting a tribute and a huge bouquet of flowers from the author on closing night. . . he [the director O'Brien] thanked me for doing what the author did not do." (sic)

In one of the foregoing sections, we discussed the relational dynamic between the actor and audience in Alarinjo, and how this dismisses the rigid boundaries of the Fourth Wall. We have emphasised how, from the outset, this has been typical of Aláàrinjò's performance. We have also discussed how in this Indigenous form, the performance serves as a location for communal negotiation with the audience, not merely one for isolated display, and we have shown how Ajai-Lycett mobilises this onto screen. This mode of relational presence — already elaborated earlier — forms the fifth characteristic trait of her style. Let us now shift registers to consider costumes, which are crucial in every production.

Costumes are indicative of the place and time in which the story is set. Moreover, they convey information about characters – their journey and transformation in the course of the story. This principle is no different in the Aláàrinjò style evident in the use of costumes by the masquerades. Aremu (1983) speaks of spirituality in the choice of costume. It is said in Yoruba, "*Bi a ti rin, ni a nko ni*" meaning, one is encountered (judged) as one appears. Costumes are indicative of characters' state of mind, wellbeing, and social stature. Costumes are cultural indicators, and beyond their artistic value (including clothes, accessories, and make-up) is the symbolic meaning that they carry. Age is identified by style as is marital status, and beads attest to status. Devotees of different deities are known by their appearance. Often used to showcase social norms, they indicate values of good and evil. Costumes, thus, direct how audiences relate to characters. That said, costumes can be hegemonic; they can be deployed in disruptive moments. For example, a statement is made when a female actor dons a cap designed for men. Similarly, Ajai-Lycett's hairstyle – spiky threaded hair, though fashionable in Nigeria, but unusual for the British audience – stood out when she played *Sally* in the BBC drama *Some Mothers Do Have Em* (1973), Se2/Ep5]. It was an insistence on being accepted on one's terms. This can be likened to Nollywood's insistence on stories that uphold the African identity. As another Yoruba adage goes, *Iri ni si, ni iso ni lo jo* meaning *You will be treated as you present yourself*. The most paramount lesson here is this: Costumes direct the audience's gaze.



Pic. 4. Taiwo Ajai-Lycett (as Sally), with Michael Crawford (as Frank) in (Allen & Mills, 1973) *Father's Class*. *Some Mothers Do Have 'Em*. (Series 2, Episode 5). BBC.

To Conclude

When all is said and done, this paper elucidates the logic of the Yoruba thespian – the Aláàrinjò. It reveals attitudes from the Yoruba world view, along with skills and disciplines that sustained Aláàrinjò - the original Yoruba travelling theatre. In the last section, we presented five traits central to Taiwo Ajai-Lycett's framework for actor training and performance, whether in the community, on stage or screen. This performance vocabulary is structured by spiritual discipline, social intelligibility, and aesthetic presence. Taiwo Ajai-Lycett has demonstrated the transferability of this style, though not without due preparation and hard work. Call this framework her legacy to the industry. By outlining them here, we provide a foundational framework for understanding the Aláàrinjò-informed praxis of Ajai-Lycett. Each carries theoretical, pedagogical, and methodological implications which this present discussion has not accounted for. Future scholarship may therefore advance these traits. For example, there is room to further explore their conceptual strength within contemporary acting and performance studies, examining how they may apply across various stage and screen landscapes. There is also room for testing how they might reframe dominant approaches to embodiment, presence, and dramaturgy. Equally importantly, their grounding in Yoruba Indigenous epistemologies invites further engagement from the Decolonial Humanities. Characteristically, the decentring positions in this trouble the inherited hierarchies of knowledge, expand the vocabularies of performance aesthetics, and contribute to ongoing efforts to reimagine performance theory from non-Western intellectual locations.



Pic. 4. Ajai-Lycett, sporting a revolutionary Mohican haircut as Chief Mrs Randle in *King of Boys: Return of the King* (2021).

The last words, here, belong to Taiwo Ajai-Lycett. She situates practice into culture:

I just read and read [the script] until I find the heart of the character . . .

But you do find the character? You read and read because words are nothing, words are cheap. To find the meaning of each word. . . When writers string the words together it means something, and each word . . . I like to make each word mean something. I like to play on the subtext, play on the nuances in my dialogue.

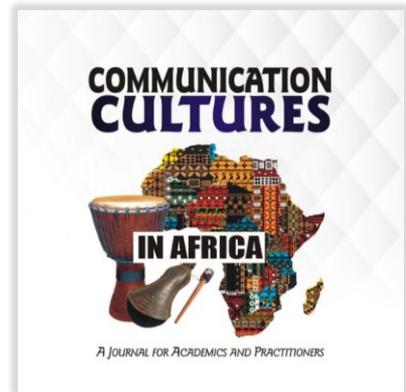
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“Good morning, good morning” does not kill the old lady.’ The charm and complexity of greeting in Kwahu, Ghana: Experiences of an anthropologist

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