

Bàrìgà Boys' Urban Experience: Making Manifest (Im)mobility Through "Mobile" Performances

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Abstract: Crown Troupe of Africa is a theatre troupe based in sub-Saharan Africa's largest metropolis, Lagos. People call them "Bàrìgà boys" because the leader Segun Adefila and many other young troupe members grew up in an urban slum named Bàrìgà. My aim in this essay is to demonstrate the relationship between Bàrìgà boys' complex urban experience and their artistic creativity, through examining the contested nature of mobility embodied in both the content and the production process of their theatrical practice.

Mobility, a concept related to the spatial movement of people, ideas and things, is often considered a prominent feature of urban geography and a basic principle of modernity in the western world. However, in productions by Crown Troupe of Africa, there is a fundamental questioning and resistance of conventional ideas about the increasing fluidity in the city. Their dramatic productions such as *Eko Dialogue* ("Lagos dialogue"), *Ọmọ Dumping* ("Garbage boys"), and *Mi Ò Ní Choice* ("I have no choice"), highlight the uneven mobility in Lagos caused by class differentiation, high-level corruption, and unreasonable urban planning. At the same time, rather than limiting their performances to theatre halls, the troupe has a flexible way of production through close engagement with different outdoor spaces, such as the streets, parks and squares. The essay argues that the "mobile" theatrical practice is Bàrìgà boys' "tactic" to cope with various disadvantageous circumstances. It is their informal and inventive intervention in the urban public space.

Introduction:

In the last two decades, literary and cultural studies have been increasingly concerned with the ways in which space and place inform aesthetics, identities, and politics. Recent academic interest in mobility studies, referred to as the "mobility turn" and the "new mobilities paradigm" (Cresswell 2006; Hannam et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006), reminds us that not only where we live, but also how we move, influences our subjectivities, narratives, and ideologies. In this essay I examine the geographic theme of mobility in theatrical works by a Lagos-based theatre group – Crown Troupe of Africa.

"It all started on June 1st, 1996, with a couple of friends singing and dancing together." That is how Segun Adefila started Crown Troupe of Africa (hereinafter referred to as CTA). CTA is a group of young and energetic street artists based in sub-Saharan Africa's largest metropolis, Lagos. In an award-winning documentary made by Femi Odugbemi (2009), Segun Adefila is named "Bàrìgà boy." Known for its extreme poverty and vulnerable infrastructure, Bàrìgà is one of the largest slums in Lagos. This place without reliable access to clean drinking water, electricity, waste disposal, or even roads, is where Segun

Adefila and most of the actors grew up, where the motivation of the artists and the inspiration for their works come from. In dramatic works such as *Eko Dialogue*¹ (“Lagos dialogue”, 2009), *Ọmọ Dumping* (“garbage boys”, 2008), and *Mi Ò Ní Choice* (“I have no choice”, 2008), the Bàrígà boys critically discuss how the urbanization process has shaped their everyday life practice in the megacity, for instance, the ways in which they live, travel, communicate and cooperate in contemporary urban Africa. My aim in this essay is to demonstrate the relationship between Bàrígà boys’ complex urban experiences and their artistic creativity, through examining the contested nature of mobility embodied in their works.

Mobility is a concept related to the spatial movement of people, ideas and things. According to Canzler et al., it is “a basic principle of modernity” (2008, 3). Some of the foundational narratives of modernity have been constructed around the fact of moving, or in the words of Cresswell (2010), “mobility as liberty, mobility as progress.” With regard to the contemporary city, where new modes of movement and restlessness are widespread, technology plays an important role in the increasingly mobile world. It helps residents organize their travel and movement, provides greater flexibility in production and distribution, and aids in managing multiple networks and exchanges among citizens. Cresswell argues that mobility is not only everywhere in the modern world, but also more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before: “It plays a central role in discussions of the body and society. It courses through contemporary theorizations of the city. Culture, we are told, no longer sits in places, but is hybrid, dynamic – more about routes than roots. The social is no longer seen as bound by ‘societies,’ but as caught up in a complex array of twenty-first century mobilities” (2006, 1-2). In the meantime, what is worth noticing is that mobilities cannot be described without attention to the necessary spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings that configure and enable mobilities. Mobilities and immobilities, occur dialectically. According to Hannam et al. (2006):

there is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility, yet there is a growing capacity for more flexible and dynamic scalar shifting, polymorphism of spatial forms and overlapping regulatory regimes. We can refer to these as affording different degrees of “motility” with mobility now being a crucial dimension of unequal power relations.

On one hand, there are interdependent “immobile” systems and platforms (for instance, airports, roads, stations) that enable fluidities (Urry 2003). On the other hand, new technologies and platforms that enhance the mobility of some people also heighten the immobility of others; therefore differential mobility empowerments reflect, and even reinforce, structures and hierarchies of power and position.

¹ This play is adapted from Joy Isi Bewaji’s novel of the same name.

Urban mobility has been figured, by geographers, as important everyday life practice that produces meaning and culture, an essential aspect of modern society. However, like the title of Cresswell's book – *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* – implies, most of these interpretations are based on examples from developed countries. As Cresswell (2006, 15) says in the introduction of this book, "mobility seems self-evidently central to Western modernity." The author also points out elsewhere that, mobility is "clearly seen as a central theme in mainstream North American culture," and it "fits into the central pioneer image of mobile Americans" (Cresswell 1992). In this essay, I will use cases from an African metropolis to examine the contested nature of mobilities in the non-western world. Specifically I approach theatre practice not only as an aesthetic form that critically reflects the politics of mobility, but as an institution which itself is part of the urban mobility practice, a way of bodily engagement with the city through a combination of physical movement and dramatic communication.

The African city is a space of intensified movement, of movement in a very broad sense that encompasses migration, displacement, and social mobility. At the same time, this accumulated mobility coexists with the increasing material unavailability of specific urban territories. According to Anna Tibaijuka (2008), Africa is currently experiencing the world's fastest rate of urbanization. As people flock to cities, the slums of Africa's cities overflow; 200 million Africans live in slums, making up 70 percent of urban inhabitants. The essay explores how CTA performers use this dimension of (im)mobility in both the content and the production process of their theatrical works in order to express resistance to some political, economical and cultural norms in various urban practices that are conceived as "modern." Through theatrical performances, the performers ask questions of mobility and immobility related with the power geometries of their daily life: How to move and how to settle? Who is able to move and who is immobile? What is the reason behind the increasing (im)mobility? Furthermore, rather than limiting their performances to theatre halls, the group has a flexible way of production through close engagement with different outdoor spaces (streets, parks or squares). This essay argues that the "mobile" mode of performance is Bàrìgà boys' "tactic" (Michel de Certeau) to cope with various disadvantageous circumstances. It is their informal and inventive intervention in the urban public space.

Eko Dialogue ("Lagos Dialogue"): Everyday Movement

Adapted from their own experiences as urban dwellers, many CTA productions could be read as a "collage" of Lagos life bites. One of the most evocative plays by CTA - *Eko Dialogue* - shows the familiar

scenarios of living in a busy city like Lagos, and how ordinary residents struggle to keep up with day-to-day challenges.

With an explosive population of over 20 million people, Lagos has been battling with the problem of finding a suitable means of conveying this vast population of residents from one place to another. The most common way of commuting is what local people call “Danfo” (or “Molue”): the overcrowded yellow mini-bus (See figure 1). In several productions, the actors recreate an image of sitting in a “danfo” and retell the consequence of the “crazy” driving style of Lagos drivers, which has become one of the major reasons for Lagos’ notorious traffic chaos and frequent road accidents.²



Figure 1: “Danfo” in Lagos, photo by Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP/Getty Images

At the beginning of *Eko Dialogue* (Figure 2), the actors represent a scene of a morning ride in Lagos: they use a “4-4-4” pattern to imitate the bumping status of passengers stuck in the “danfo” being pushed and squeezed constantly. One passenger, dressed in suit and tie and heading for a business meeting, is demanding his change and the conductor does not have it, then both men get angry and the

² The famous Nigerian musician Fela Kuti once satirized the Lagos authorities for the lack of a proper transport management in his song “Shuffering and Shmiling”: “Every day my people dey inside bus / Forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing / Them go pack themselves in like sardine... Suffering and smiling...” In a report on Lagos transport, a Lagosian once said that “the average danfo driver either has psychological imbalance or he is possessed by some spirit of self destruction. They drive like they get a medal every time they bash or scratch their vehicles, and they have no problems scratching yours” (Adeseri 2012).

situation turns violent, leaving the passenger exasperated. In this production the automobile becomes a site of heightened representation of daily commuting experience rather than an instrument enhancing the circulation of residents through urban spaces. The audience laughed when they saw the decently dressed passenger cursing furiously. This is the moment when the audience identifies with a moving and oppressed body and forms a consensus on the urgent nature of the “danfo” problem in Lagos.



Figure 2: Stage photo of *Eko Dialogue*, the early morning “danfo” ride, photo by Taiwo Olusola Johnson

Instead of putting mobility at the center of their understanding of urban life, Lagos commuters represented in this play fill up the stage with arguments, stasis, and immobility. Early American sociologist Nels Anderson once wrote: “The city is more mobile, mobility being a characteristic of its life just as stability is characteristic of rural life” (1998, 260). However, in most theatrical productions by CTA, there is not an emphasis on movement and speed, as is commonplace in modern planning visions concerned with improving the efficiency of transit, rather, there is a fundamental questioning of conventional ideas about increasing movement and flexibility. In the following examples, we will see that CTA productions are often bundled with an ambivalent understanding of mobility and modernity.

Omo Dumping (“Garbage Boys”): The Mobile Subjects

With the explosion of a youthful demographic confronted with the absence of decent work, African cities have shaped the lives of the young generation tremendously. According to Sommers (2010), “Young

Africans emptying villages and funneling into cities have never paid much attention to the contention that African cities are built on an economic house of cards.” Kaplan (1996) describes the large numbers of out of school unemployed male youth as “...loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite.” Since it is difficult to find a stable job, large numbers of young people have to throw themselves into the informal sector, which represents more than 70% of economic activity in most sub-Saharan African countries (International Labour Office 2009). For instance, recycling and reusing trash has become an ordinary practice in urban Africa. In cities like Lagos, Kinshasa, and Nairobi, people at the end of the social scale have no choice but to rely on recycling used substances from the trash (Figure 3). The CTA production *Ọmọ Dumping* (“garbage boys”) explores the life story of teenagers living on a dumping site in Bàrìgà, Lagos. In it, three brothers move to the mega-city with the dream of a modernized world, but finally they become “ọmọ dumping” just like many other young people who could not find jobs in the city. When receiving a call from their mum who still lives in the rural area, the three brothers make up a story of a “treasure hunt” in the city, instead of telling the truth that they have been wandering in piles of rubbish all day long.



Figure 3: A young man picks up trash for recycling at the Olusosun dump, Lagos. Photo by Akintunde Akinleye

An alternative sense of the city was thus constructed by the “ọmọ dumping” based on their own understanding of the urban space (Figure 4). Built on the ideals of modern science and progress, the urban space is supposed to be healthy, clean and in order. However, in this play a big package of rubbish

is dragged onto stage and scattered on the cloth covering the whole stage, turning the city into a place that is chaotic, insanitary, and precarious. Three brothers make jokes about the objects (for instance, a cigarette case, alcohol bottles, a banana in a rubber condom, and so on) they found in the trash, and laugh at the aspects of city life from which they are excluded. Perhaps it should not simply be understood as an act of resistance to the urban spatial hegemony; rather, it is a process of asserting their own place-based urban subjectivity. Adefila’s identity with the title “Bàrígà boy” is an example. In the documentary film of the same name, Adefila introduces the audience to CTA’s previous rehearsal place – a deserted backyard in Bàrígà. He points to the bridge right outside the backyard, and from the camera we see people and traffic moving from one side of the city to the other:

It is about waking up everyday and seeing poverty around. As an artist, you found yourself here. My environment is very, very poor, but I’ve never in my life felt poor at all... This is the humble background we have. Ten years ago, when we were looking for a space to rehearse; we had no space; this is where we came to. From here you can feel Lagos around us, especially the ghetto of Lagos. We came here; we would dance from morning until night. This is also why I speak the language of the street... (*Bàrígà Boy*, 12’20 -18’50)

The movement of people, objects and ideas in the dynamic web of the city, the beat and rhythm of Bàrígà slum, inspires Adefila’s artistic creation.



Figure 4: CTA actors sitting in a deserted “danfo”. Rehearsal photo of *Ọmọ Dumping*, dump site in Bàrígà, Lagos

The subjects of mobility, the urban drifters, have been repeatedly represented on Nigerian theatre stage. Besides “*ọmọ dumping*”, the other figures include: “area boys”³ (*The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*, Wole Soyinka), “armed robbers” (*Once Upon Four Robbers*, Femi Osofisan), and “vagabond minstrels” (*Èṣù and Vagabond Minstrels*, Femi Osofisan). On stage, it seems that the sense of anxiety about mobility in modernity is far more extensive than the sense of freedom and liberty. The drifters and their unstable living status, is in some way related to the lack of fixity of marginalized groups in urban Africa. In Soyinka’s work *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope*, he depicts Lagos “area boys” as apart from the other criminals that are satirized or demonized. The leader of “area boys” – Sanda, is presented as a figure of counter-culture, a better version of “free enterprise.” As Sanda explains to his old flame, Miseyi, he had dropped out of university one year short of graduation, because nowadays in Lagos “hundreds of PhDs are roaming the streets, jobless” (Soyinka 1995, 48), while as a security officer and the head of “area boys,” he earns many times the salary of a college graduate. This uncompromising attitude of “*ọmọ dumping*” and “area boys” suggests an exuberant resistance to the socio-economic marginalization of urban youth. At the same time, by drawing attention to the neglected sites of the city, these drifting bodies, especially the “nobodies” on the city street, become an ironic response to Africa’s urban revolution and the so-called “rise of Nigeria” as Africa’s largest economy.

“Mi Ò Ní Choice”: Mobile Production and Performance

Mi Ò Ní Choice [“I have no choice”] is a dramatic musical performed by Segun Adefila and the CTA in 2008. Featuring the catchy and powerful lyrics starting with “Mi ò ní choice, Mi ò fẹ́ rob, Ebí dẹ pa mí, Kí lẹ́ fẹ́ kí n ẹ?” [“I have no choice, I don’t want to rob, yet I am starving, what is it you want me to do?”], the performance creatively mixes English rap with Yorùbá traditional expression, and attempts to awaken public consciousness in the audience about the underlying causes of increasingly rampant armed robbery. The performance subverts the common images of the terrifying and brutal “armed robbers,” and urges the audience to reflect on the fundamental reasons behind this – the uneven mobility in Nigeria caused by class differentiation, high-level corruption, and unreasonable urban

³ Area boys (also known as Agberos) are loosely organized gangs of street children and teenagers, composed mostly of males, who roam the streets of Lagos. They extort money from passers-by, sell illegal drugs, act as informal security guards, and perform other petty crimes in return for compensation.

planning. The statement “I have no choice” implies that “mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (Sheller & Urry 2006).

In order to work under the influence of stark social inequality and limited resources, CTA has its own ways of “making-do.” Unlike most established theatre groups in Europe or the US, contemporary Nigerian theatre groups like CTA, do not have their own theatre houses. Each time they perform, they have to hire a venue, for instance, the city hall, a music center, or a church. The rent is comparatively high for the group, especially considering the background of most troupe members. For instance, Terra Kulture is one of the regular venues for theatre productions on Victoria Island, Lagos; to rent the hall (which seats 300 people) for five hours, one has to pay 150, 000 Nigerian naira (about 370 British Pounds). Moreover, in Nigeria, contemporary theatre and performance still has the stigma of an elitist art form from which the majority of urban dwellers are excluded. In order to form a conversation with a wider audience, CTA often moves their performances to open areas and charges little to no fees for entrance. The picture below (Figure 5) is of a newspaper report about a street performance by CTA. Two hours before the show, the actors were locked out of their performance venue - the Glover Memorial Hall, because they were not able to pay for the rent. Then they decided to move the show to the street in front of the memorial hall, and created an improvisation on the show, which was simply a thriller.



Figure 5: Newspaper report of CTA street performance, “Òrìṣà walks a deserted street of Lagos”

For Adefila and the other group members, moving the performance to the street is a way of reclaiming their “right to the city”⁴ (Henri Lefebvre). “The show must go on,” the performers told themselves after they were locked out of the memorial hall. They made the audience sit right in front of the hall, changed the Customs Street into a stage, using the Nikon Building at the back as the backdrop, and used the car park as the dressing room. For years, the troupe has been surviving without any government support; unable to afford the rent, they create performances which can be easily moved to various places – streets, parks and public squares.

In most CTA plays, the actors do not have a mature dramatic text, but rather a theme or a skeleton of the story. The whole production is usually generated through a few rehearsals and improvisations. Driven by a spirit of investigation into urgent social issues, the performers often travel to controversial neighborhoods and then take photos, carry out interviews, and complete rehearsals in these places. Afterwards, they combine these elements into a multimedia production on stage. In May and June 2011, the whole cast travelled to Aiyédùn street (a coastal area in Lagos facing the problem of flooding) and completed a project named “Aiyédùn” (Figures 6 and 7). This project is based on interviews with inhabitants whose lives were tremendously influenced by the flood. The performance starts with video records of interviews they collected during the research, so audiences from the street and other coastal areas could immediately recognize their own stories from the stage performance. According to Adefila, most audience members stayed after the show to discuss what they felt during the performance, the cause and effect of the problems they are facing, and possible solutions they could afford.

⁴ According to Lefebvre, “the right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life...Which presumes an integrated theory of the city and urban society, using the resources of science and art” (1996, 158).



Figure 6: Segun Adefila lying on a bed inside a flooded house on Aiyédùn Street. Rehearsal photo of *Aiyédùn*, Lagos



Figure 7: Actors standing inside a flooded house on Aiyédùn Street. Rehearsal photo of *Aiyédùn*, Lagos

Referring it to a modern version of Yorùbá traveling theatre,⁵ Nigerian scholars and audiences have noticed the “flexibility” of the troupe and the power of theatrical practices in unconventional

⁵ For detailed studies about Yorùbá travelling theatre, see Karin Barber 2000, and Biodun Jeyifo 1984.

venues. In an interview, Nigerian playwright Ahmed Yerima once commented that, “he [Adefila] practices his guerrilla theatre without even knowing it” (*Bàrìgà Boy*). Moreover, in my interview with him in August 2013, Adefila also mentioned that the troupe is influenced by the works of Hubert Ogunde, “father of Yorùbá travelling theatre.” By performing outside theatres, it is possible to disrupt the naturalized meanings and behaviors of public space and ordinary social life. For the audience, the interaction is more direct and immediate because on the street they are less restricted by “correct” theatrical behavior. Unable to pay the rent of performance venues, the troupe simply moves the performance to the street. With little support from the local government, they borrow free rehearsal venues – for instance, a deserted backyard – from friends or other people they know. This art of making-do is similar to what Michel de Certeau calls “tactics” in his foundational study *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In the chapter “Walking in the City,” de Certeau asserts that “the city” is generated by the strategies of governments, corporations, and other institutional bodies who produce things like maps that describe the city as a unified whole. The city planning commission may determine the street map, but the local passengers and cabbies will figure out the shortcuts, and how best to navigate the lived reality of those streets. He understands these “tactics” of the non-powerful as an adaptation to the environment, which has been created by the strategies of the powerful. The theatre troupes like CTA also have their own way of “poaching” in various places of the city: they operate beyond buildings, migrate fluidly into the informal settlements and urban edges, which are often excluded from mainstream political discourse, and they attempt to influence urban life from a micro level.

Conclusion

“The everyday human labor mobilized in building specific city forms is not only material. It is also artistic and aesthetic” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008, 8-9). Unlike much of the recent work on the “new mobilities paradigm” situated most directly within the social sciences, this essay provides an example to trace the potential productivity of artistic works in understanding mobility. Mobility, in keeping with influential ideologies of modernity, is connected with liberty, opportunity, and choice. However, the aspect of urban mobility associated with modernity and progress is frequently questioned in theatrical productions by the Crown Troupe of Africa: grappling with emerging urban conditions and possibilities, Bàrìgà boys’ Lagos experience enables a conceptualization of urban mobility that remains contradictory and provisional. Under the explosive trend of Africa’s urban revolution, the majority of the urban residents, including the Bàrìgà boys, face the experience of immobility rather than increasingly

“progressive” fluidity and mobility. In these theatrical practices, the politics of urban space and social relation is not always progressive or emancipative, but the embodied paradox of urbanism casts important light on contested conceptions of mobility, which are too often taken for granted or reduced to technical matters. Moreover, it is not difficult to notice that the alternative urban mobility represented by CTA has much to do with a sense of upheaval, uprooting and dislocation. Mobility, especially the “mobile” production style, is often used as a rebellion against authorities and mainstream urban culture. On CTA’s official website, it says that “the troupe believes in the viability of the art as a tool for social re-structuring;” through exploring the role of power and its relationship with uneven mobilities, they aim at a potential transformation of fundamental social and spatial relationships, including those that constitute the basis of urban society and its power relations. Bàrigà boys’ mobile practices provide an example of contemporary forms of civic resistance in Africa. The paradoxes and contradictions they reveal are fundamental to understanding the overwhelming influence of the volatile urban geography on its residents, their experiences, and their imaginations.

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Note: All the rehearsal photos are owned by the Crown Troupe of Africa and the use of these photos has been agreed.