

Spiritual Aesthetics and Audience Reception in Contemporary Nigerian Christian Drama Using Festus Dairo's Production of Mike Bamiloye's *The Return of the Bridegroom*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62154/qjrts.2025.04.01011>

Abstract

When theatre becomes a vessel for spiritual encounter, it transcends entertainment and enters the realm of sacred experience. This study explores the reception of *The Return of the Bridegroom*, a stage play written by Mike Bamiloye and directed by Festus Dairo under Zion Royal Theatre, as performed at Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU). Anchored in Reception Theory and the Theology of Aesthetics, the research investigates how a faith-based university audience interprets and internalizes the play's theological messages, symbolic imagery, and emotive performances. Reception Theory—particularly the contributions of Hans Robert Jauss and Stuart Hall—frames the audience as active interpreters, while Spiritual Aesthetics positions the dramatic experience as a site of divine mediation and theological reflection. Using focus group discussions, audience surveys, and thematic analysis, the study reveals that the play elicited profound emotional engagement, spiritual introspection, and moral conviction. Cultural familiarity with Christian doctrine within the Nigerian context further intensified the reception of the play's eschatological and ethical themes. By centering audience voices, this study contributes to scholarly conversations on African Christian dramaturgy, religious performance, and the affective power of faith-based theatre. It affirms that Christian drama, when rooted in spiritual aesthetics and performed within a receptive community, becomes a participatory space for theological reflection and communal transformation.

Keywords: Christian Drama, Audience Reception, Spiritual Aesthetics, Mike Bamiloye, Festus Dairo, Reception Theory.

Introduction

In the African context, theatre has historically functioned as a potent socio-cultural instrument—an expressive medium through which communities negotiate identity, morality, memory, and spirituality. Within this tradition, performance has never been solely an aesthetic venture but one deeply embedded in communal experience and metaphysical reality. Among the Yoruba, for instance, performance intersects with ritual and religion, often dramatizing the dynamic interplay between the physical and spiritual realms (Fosudo & Babatope, 2017; Balogun, 2013). This enduring relationship between art and belief has

continued to evolve, finding new forms in contemporary religious theatre, particularly within Christian traditions across Nigeria.

The emergence and flourishing of Nigerian Christian drama in the late 20th and early 21st centuries reflect a conscious re-appropriation of performative art for evangelical and doctrinal purposes. Christian drama, particularly as developed by faith-based groups such as the Mount Zion Faith Ministries, has carved a niche in Nigeria's cultural and spiritual landscape (Oki & Olatunji, 2024). Through the fusion of biblical allegory, moral instruction, and artistic creativity, Christian drama has become an effective medium for communicating faith-based values in ways that are accessible, emotionally resonant, and socially relevant. Beyond the conventional church pulpit, the stage has become a contemporary altar—a site of persuasion, conviction, and spiritual awakening (Oki & Adetoro, 2024).

Despite the growing popularity of Christian theatrical performances, academic attention has not adequately kept pace with this vibrant artistic and religious phenomenon. While theological critiques and media studies have engaged the content of faith-based narratives, less scholarly focus has been placed on the *experiential* dimension of Christian drama—how audiences engage with, interpret, and are potentially transformed by these performances (Wells, 2018). In an age of increasing mediatization of religion, understanding the reception of religious theatre, especially within academic and youth-centered environments, becomes particularly important. The audience is not a passive recipient of religious messages but an active interpreter, shaped by individual belief systems, cultural memory, and socio-religious context (Toelle & Sloboda, 2019; Marsh, 2009).

This gap in scholarship is even more pronounced when considering stage drama, which, unlike digital or cinematic productions, creates a shared and immediate space for live spiritual engagement. The communal dynamics of theatrical performance—its spatial intimacy, real-time emotional energy, and collective participation—provide fertile ground for investigating the intersection of aesthetics, faith, and audience experience (Okwulogu 2024; Ojo & Olatunji, 2023). Within the Christian theatre tradition, such experiences are often intended to do more than inform or entertain; they aim to provoke introspection, repentance, and renewed devotion. However, these intentions can only be fully understood through the voices of the audience—those who witness, interpret, and respond.

The problem this study addresses is the lack of scholarly engagement with how audiences in faith-based academic environments interpret and are impacted by the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of live Christian theatre performances in Nigeria.

In light of this, the study seeks to explore the spiritual aesthetics of *The Return of the Bridegroom* from the perspective of the audience, analyzing how its themes, symbols, and performative elements are received and interpreted within a faith-based university environment. The objectives are threefold: (1) to identify the spiritual and artistic elements that characterize the play; (2) to assess how students at JABU engage with and respond to these elements during and after the performance; and (3) to understand the potential influence of such engagement on their spiritual consciousness and religious commitment.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What spiritual aesthetic elements are evident in *The Return of the Bridegroom*?
- ii. How do students at JABU interpret and internalize the messages and forms presented in the play?
- iii. In what ways does the performance influence their spiritual reflection or religious conviction?

By foregrounding the audience's interpretive role, this study contributes to an expanding field of inquiry at the intersection of religious studies, performance scholarship, and African cultural expression. It seeks to offer critical insight into how Christian stage drama functions not only as a tool of moral instruction but also as a participatory medium of spiritual formation in contemporary Nigerian society.

Literature Review

The development of Nigerian theatre has been deeply rooted in oral performance traditions, where ritual, storytelling, music, and dance coalesce into a dynamic mode of cultural expression. Precolonial African performance was largely communal, spiritual, and functional—often integrated into religious ceremonies, initiation rites, and festivals (Barber, 2000; Finnegan, 2012; Ossai, 2024). Scholars such as Alifa (2023) and Wumkes (2023) have emphasized the embeddedness of African performance in societal values and spiritual cosmologies, making it a powerful vehicle for moral and metaphysical engagement. This foundational understanding of African theatre as spiritually infused sets the stage for examining its contemporary Christian adaptations.

Fueled by Pentecostal and evangelical movements in the 1980s and 1990s, Christian drama transitioned from informal church-based performances to organized stage and screen productions (Oki & Olatunji, 2024). This development was marked by the establishment of drama ministries such as Mount Zion Faith Ministries, whose founder, Mike Bamiloye, pioneered what has come to be known as "christian drama"—a genre blending didactic Christian themes with narrative and performative intensity. Scholars have examined this genre as a form of "theatre of conviction," aimed at evangelism, repentance, and spiritual transformation (Olayiwola, 2019; Olatunji, 2024). Christian drama in Nigeria transcends mere evangelism, engaging audiences in introspection about societal issues. Oki and Adetoro (2024) analyze Mount Zion Film Productions' movies, *Last Man Standing* and *Legion*, highlighting how these films address themes like faith, redemption, and ethical dilemmas, thereby reflecting contemporary moral and spiritual challenges.

Within this genre, however, the role of aesthetics—especially *spiritual aesthetics*—has not been adequately theorized in existing literature. While some studies have acknowledged the emotive and symbolic power of Christian drama (Oki, Oki & Olukoju, 2025), few have addressed the way spiritual themes are *embodied* through dramatic structure, visual symbolism, and performative techniques. Balthasar's (1982) theology of aesthetics, though rarely applied directly to African performance, posits that the perception of divine truth can occur through beauty, form, and symbolic resonance (Fatehi Peykani & Meftah, 2025). This

aligns with Yoruba performance traditions, where the aesthetics of ritual drama often function as a medium of spiritual encounter (Bakare, 2020; Fosudo & Babatope, 2017). Understanding spiritual aesthetics, therefore, requires an analysis of how form and content interact to evoke transcendence and moral introspection.

The idea that theatre can be a site of spiritual experience is further supported by performance theorists who regard the stage as a liminal space—a threshold between ordinary and sacred time (Susnow, 2022). Christian drama in Nigeria capitalizes on this liminality, creating immersive experiences that elicit spiritual reflection and behavioral change. Yet, while many of these performances aim for transformation, scholarly attention has largely focused on authorial intent or theological messaging, rather than the *audience's interpretive agency*. This gap calls for a shift in focus from performance content to performance reception.

Audience reception, particularly in religious theatre, remains an underdeveloped area in African performance scholarship. Reception theory, especially as articulated by Jauss (1982) and later cultural theorists like Hall (1980), emphasizes the plurality of meaning-making in any performance encounter. Audiences do not consume drama passively; rather, they interpret, negotiate, and even resist its messages depending on their social, cultural, and religious contexts. This approach is particularly relevant in Christian drama, where viewers bring deeply held beliefs to their interpretive acts. Asiedu (2008) observes that in African theatre, meaning often emerges not from the text alone but from the dynamic interaction between performance and audience.

Research on religious media in Nigeria has begun to explore how faith-based content is received, especially among youth populations. Omenugha and Duru (2019) found that new media platforms enable young Nigerians to interact across religious divides, fostering exposure to diverse ideological worldviews and promoting tolerance. Similarly, Ononogbu and Chiroma (2018) highlight the significant role of social media in youth ministry, noting that a substantial portion of Nigerian youths' spiritual development occurs online. Additionally, Afolabi and Oderinde (2024) discuss how Pentecostal churches in Nigeria leverage online media to engage youth, utilizing strategies like e-evangelism to attract digitally active young audiences. However, these studies tend to focus on televangelism, gospel music, and film, with little attention paid to live stage performances. Given the resurgence of stage drama in academic institutions and faith-based communities, there is a pressing need to explore how contemporary Nigerian audiences—particularly students—engage with religious theatre. Such exploration can illuminate how drama not only communicates doctrine but also facilitates spiritual consciousness and moral self-examination.

Furthermore, the university setting presents a unique audience demographic. As a site of both intellectual formation and spiritual exploration, institutions like Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU) provide fertile ground for analyzing how young adults interpret religious performances. As Ojebode (2013) points out, the youth demographic in Nigeria is

increasingly involved in shaping religious discourse through participatory media, peer networks, and cultural production. Studying their engagement with Christian drama can thus yield valuable insights into the evolving relationship between faith, performance, and personal identity.

Existing literature has focused primarily on the theological content, evangelistic aims, and media adaptations of Christian drama, while under-theorizing its spiritual aesthetics and largely neglecting the audience's interpretive and experiential roles particularly in live stage settings and youth-centered academic contexts. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding audience reception and spiritual engagement within a university environment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Reception Theory and Spiritual Aesthetics. These frameworks provide the analytical lens through which the audience's interaction with *The Return of the Bridegroom* is examined, focusing on both interpretive agency and the sensory-spiritual elements of religious performance.

Reception Theory, as articulated by Hans Robert Jauss (1982), shifts critical focus from the author or text to the audience, emphasizing the role of the reader—or in this case, the viewer—as an active co-creator of meaning. In contrast to traditional hermeneutics, which centers authorial intention, reception theory posits that texts achieve significance only when interpreted within specific socio-historical contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant in the study of live Christian theatre, where audiences do not merely decode messages passively but bring with them a “horizon of expectations” shaped by personal belief systems, religious background, and cultural memory.

Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model further enriches this approach by recognizing that audiences can accept, negotiate, or oppose the intended messages of a performance. This dynamic interpretive process acknowledges the multiplicity of meaning-making among diverse spectators. In the context of this study, students at Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU) constitute an interpretive community whose reception of the play is mediated by their spiritual orientation, educational environment, and youth culture. Understanding their responses requires attention to the social and religious frameworks that inform their viewing experience.

Complementing Reception Theory is the framework of Spiritual Aesthetics, which interrogates how form, beauty, symbolism, and sensory expression serve as conduits for spiritual experience. Rooted in theological aesthetics as developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar (1982), spiritual aesthetics suggests that divine truths can be encountered not only propositionally but also through the beauty and emotional resonance of artistic forms. In theatre, this includes visual symbolism, music, costume, lighting, gesture, and dramatic structure. When carefully employed, these elements can create what Turner (1982) calls a “liminal space,” wherein spectators are momentarily suspended between the profane and the sacred, potentially leading to spiritual insight or transformation.

Within the African context, this concept finds resonance in indigenous performance traditions where drama is often imbued with metaphysical significance. Fosudo and Babatope (2017) affirms that among the Yoruba, aesthetic excellence is not separate from spiritual power; beauty and symbolic performance are seen as pathways to divine encounter. Christian drama in Nigeria, especially as practiced by ministries like Mount Zion, draws on this heritage, merging evangelical purpose with performative techniques that seek to touch the soul.

Thus, the theoretical integration of Reception Theory and Spiritual Aesthetics provides a holistic framework for this study. It allows for an analysis that accounts for both the internal logic of the performance—its aesthetic and symbolic strategies—and the external responses of the audience—how viewers interpret, internalize, and spiritually engage with the play. In applying this dual lens to *The Return of the Bridegroom*, the study seeks to understand not just what the play communicates, but how and why its message resonates with its audience.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative audience-centered research design to explore how viewers engaged with the spiritual aesthetics of *The Return of the Bridegroom*, a stage play written by Mike Bamiloye and directed by Festus Dairo under the Zion Royal Theatre, the theatrical arm of the Mount Zion Institute of Christian Drama. The audience-centered approach prioritizes the interpretive agency of the audience, allowing for a deeper understanding of how individuals internalize and respond to religious performances within specific cultural and institutional settings (Elinwa, 2020).

The fieldwork was conducted at Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU) in Osun State, Nigeria, immediately following the staging of the play on May 2, 2025. The university, a faith-based institution affiliated with the Christ Apostolic Church, provided a unique environment for studying youth engagement with Christian drama. The selection of this setting was intentional, as the spiritual orientation of the student population aligns with the thematic content of the play, creating a fertile ground for reflective and meaningful audience responses.

Participants in the study were drawn purposively from among students who attended the performance. A total of forty (40) participants were selected to provide a range of perspectives across gender, academic disciplines, and spiritual backgrounds. These participants were divided into four focus groups of ten students each. Focus group discussion was chosen as the primary data collection method to encourage dialogue and the co-construction of meaning among viewers (Jung and Ro, 2019). Each session lasted between 20 minutes and was moderated using a semi-structured guide centered on the audience's interpretive experiences, emotional responses, perceived spiritual impact, and aesthetic observations of the performance.

In addition to focus group discussions, a short post-performance questionnaire was administered to 120 students who attended the play. The questionnaire contained both closed and open-ended questions designed to capture initial reactions, thematic comprehension, and reflections on the spiritual atmosphere created during the performance. The combination of qualitative discussions and survey data enabled triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). All focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for patterns, reviewing and refining themes, and producing the final report. Particular attention was given to themes related to spiritual conviction, symbolic interpretation, and aesthetic appreciation. Codes and themes were further organized in relation to the two theoretical frameworks guiding the study—Reception Theory and Spiritual Aesthetics.

Ethical considerations were fully observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

To protect participants' identities, all responses were anonymized during transcription. Rather than using real names, each participant was assigned a unique alphanumeric code (e.g., FG1-P3 for "Focus Group 1, Participant 3"), ensuring confidentiality while allowing for traceable analysis across data sets.

The methodological choices in this study are guided by the need to foreground the lived experiences of the audience, recognizing that their reflections offer critical insights into the spiritual and artistic potency of Christian drama in contemporary Nigeria.

Synopsis of the Play

The Return of the Bridegroom is a Christian stage drama that vividly portrays the spiritual consequences of compromise, disobedience, and delay in a believer's walk with God. The story centers on the Bride, a symbol of the Church, who is eagerly awaited by her Bridegroom—Jesus Christ—for the long-promised union in His heavenly kingdom. However, when He arrives with great anticipation and joy, the Bride appears defiled and unready, having fallen into the seductive grip of worldliness and disobedience.

Despite warnings and constant guidance from the Comforter (the Holy Spirit), the Bride ignores spiritual counsel and is lured by the deceptive comforts of the Slave Master (symbolizing sin and the world). Her tragic unpreparedness leads to rejection at the critical hour. Yet, in a vision granted through divine mercy, she glimpses the bitter end of her carelessness and awakens with a repentant heart. The drama concludes with a hopeful note, as the Bride renounces the world, reconciles with the Comforter, and prepares again to receive her returning Lord.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of audience responses to *The Return of the Bridegroom* reveals a deeply layered engagement with the play's spiritual, aesthetic, and emotional dimensions. Through thematic analysis of focus group discussions and post-performance questionnaires, several key themes emerged: spiritual conviction and awakening, symbolic interpretation and visual engagement, emotional resonance and performative intensity, and audience identification and moral introspection. These themes are discussed in relation to the audience's interpretive agency and the spiritual aesthetics embedded in the play's performance.

Spiritual Aesthetic Elements in *The Return of the Bridegroom*

One of the most profound spiritual aesthetic elements in *The Return of the Bridegroom* is its evocative use of costume, color symbolism, and visual transformation to communicate theological depth. The transition in the bride's appearance—first from a black gown to a pristine white gown (Fig. 1), and then back to black (Fig. 2)—serves as a powerful visual metaphor for spiritual cleansing and subsequent defilement. Many audience members interpreted these shifts as representing the bride's salvation, sanctification, and eventual backsliding. One participant stated, "When she changed to white, I felt it was her being purified. But when it turned black again, it was like she had betrayed something sacred. That part broke me." This remark illustrates how visual cues served as non-verbal theological statements, fostering emotional and moral reflection.



Fig. 1: The Bride in a White Gown



Fig. 2: The Bride Returning to a Black Gown

Similarly, the radiant white robes worn by angelic figures, the Comforter and the Bridegroom, were consistently interpreted as signifiers of holiness, authority, and divine presence. Their appearance, often accompanied by solemn background music and radiant lighting, marked moments of heightened spiritual significance. A student remarked, "The white robes and calm movement of the Comforter reminded me of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't just an actor, it felt divine." This type of audience response exemplifies Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1982) theology of aesthetics, where beauty and form become vessels for encountering truth and the transcendent.

Lighting design further contributed to the sacred atmosphere of the play. Strategic contrasts between light and darkness were used to delineate realms of righteousness and rebellion. Scenes involving the Bridegroom and angels were bathed in light (Fig. 3), while moments of temptation, disobedience, and spiritual decay were cloaked in shadow (Fig. 4). Several viewers described the lighting changes as “spiritually symbolic” and “emotionally powerful.” One participant reflected, “When the light faded and she was alone, it felt like God’s presence had left. That silence and darkness—it hit hard.”



Fig. 3: Lighting Design Highlighting Divine Presencees Fig. 4: Use of Shadow to Depict Spiritual Decline

Sound design also reinforced the spiritual mood of the play. The use of solemn, ambient music during scenes of divine visitation and judgment deepened emotional immersion. Silence was equally significant; moments without dialogue or music, particularly during the bride’s final realization of abandonment, created a sacred stillness that provoked internal response. A student observed, “The silence was loud. It made me think that it could be me, left behind because I wasn’t ready.”

Choreographed movement and posture added a ritualistic layer to the performance. The slow, deliberate actions of the slave master mirrored his imposition (Fig. 5), while the dancing posture of the bride waiting for the Bridegroom (Fig. 6), and the authoritative stillness of the Bridegroom mirrored ecclesiastical aesthetics familiar within Christian worship. This bodily symbolism created what Victor Turner (1982) calls a “liminal space”—a threshold where the sacred invades the secular, and audiences experience transformative reflection.



Fig. 5: The Slave Master



Fig. 6: The Bridegroom

Participants demonstrated a high level of symbolic literacy in their interpretation of the performance elements. Costumes, lighting, and stage movement were frequently mentioned as carriers of meaning. For instance, the appearance of angels in radiant white robes accompanied by solemn music was consistently interpreted as signifying divine authority and purity, while the characters engulfed in darkness were associated with spiritual deception and damnation. This interpretive process reflects the audience's active role in decoding layered symbols within the performance, supporting Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. Interestingly, some students referenced traditional Yoruba cosmology to explain their interpretation of spiritual entities, blending indigenous aesthetic categories with Christian themes. This intercultural reception suggests that spiritual aesthetics in Nigerian Christian drama are enriched by local performative traditions, consistent with Fosudo and Babatope's (2017) insight that Yoruba performance codes remain potent in religious visual culture.

One participant reflected, "The darkness that followed the bride after she firmly told the Conforter to leave her alone felt like a cloud of confusion and regret, and it wasn't just lighting, it was like a warning." This response reveals an acute sensitivity to visual cues and their metaphysical implications. Another viewer noted, "The way the angels didn't speak but just moved slowly with light shining on them made me feel like God was present in the hall." These interpretations affirm that the audience was not merely consuming spectacle, but engaging with the visual language of the play as a theological medium. Such embodied perception supports Balthasar's (1982) view that sacred drama functions as a space where beauty and truth converge, allowing divine realities to be sensorially encountered. The fact that these symbolic interpretations occurred instinctively and across multiple focus groups reinforces the argument that spiritual aesthetics, when culturally resonant and dramaturgically intentional, can provoke profound religious insight and emotional impact. Collectively, these aesthetic choices demonstrate that *The Return of the Bridegroom* is not merely a didactic Christian drama but a carefully constructed spiritual experience. Through its integration of costume symbolism, lighting contrasts, sacred music, and ritualized movement, the play invites the audience into a space of heightened spiritual awareness. As

another viewer noted, "I came expecting drama, but I left with a message. I saw the gospel in action."

Spiritual Conviction and Awakening

A dominant response across all focus groups was the theme of spiritual awakening. Many participants described the play as more than entertainment; they saw it as a "wake-up call" to spiritual accountability and readiness for the return of Christ. This aligns with Jauss's (1982) notion that texts acquire meaning through the horizon of expectations brought by the audience, and in this case, a Christian student community already primed to interpret the message in eschatological terms. Several viewers recounted being emotionally "struck" by the scenes that portrayed the suddenness of the return of the bridegroom and the fate of the bride who was lured away because she felt the life of waiting for the bridegroom was boring. One participant remarked, "I've heard sermons about the second coming, but watching it happen on stage made it real in a way I've never felt before." This response supports Balthasar's (1982) theological aesthetics, which holds that divine truths are not only spoken but also seen, felt, and embodied. The dramatization of judgment and redemption allowed viewers to experience spiritual truths through symbolic representation and visceral performance.

Another participant shared, "The part where the bride was distracted and missed the groom's return made me think about how easily we get caught up in the world." This insight reflects not only an emotional reaction but also a moment of moral introspection, as the audience member identifies personally with the character's lapse. A similar sentiment was echoed by another viewer who said, "It felt like the play was talking directly to me. I started evaluating my own readiness. Am I truly prepared if Jesus comes today?" Such comments reveal a profound internalization of the play's spiritual message, suggesting that theatrical representation particularly when infused with theological symbolism, can serve as a mirror for self-examination. This aligns with Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, which asserts that interpretation of symbolic narratives often leads to deeper self-understanding and transformation (Ricoeur, 2024). Through performance, the audience is not only moved emotionally but also provoked to re-evaluate their spiritual posture in relation to divine truth.

Emotional Resonance and Performative Intensity

Emotional responses were central to the audience's engagement. Descriptive terms such as "fear," "hope," "conviction," and "tears" appeared frequently in the feedback gathered from focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses. Participants did not merely watch the unfolding narrative; they were emotionally transported into the dramatic world. This emotional immersion reached its peak during scenes of divine judgment, particularly the Bridegroom's sudden return, and the moment of realization that the entire narrative was a divine revelation. The bride's desperate cries, her pleading for mercy, and the haunting silence that followed captured the audience in what Turner (1982, as cited in

Wels, van der Waal, Spiegel, & Kamsteeg, 2011) refers to as a “liminal space,” wherein spectators experience ritual-like transformation through their emotional engagement. One participant remarked, “It felt like I was there on the stage. I could feel the panic.” This statement encapsulates the audience's capacity to enter into the sacred symbolic world of the play and allow themselves to be affected by its emotional weight. Another student admitted, “I cried when the bride realized it was too late immediately the Bridegroom returned. It was like watching someone lose everything because of one careless mistake. It shook me.” These kinds of visceral responses demonstrate that the drama's affective strategies—its use of sound, movement, and expressive acting—successfully elicited catharsis, a classical function of theatre and a critical component of religious performance. A particularly striking comment from a viewer underscored the intensity of the moment: “When the background music changed and the bride fell on her knees, I felt like doing the same where I sat. It wasn't just acting; it was ministry.” This testimony highlights the performative blending of artistic expression and spiritual engagement, suggesting that the stage became a space of sacred encounter. These reactions support Olatunji's (2024) conception of Christian drama as “a theatre of the soul,” a space where internal reflection is catalyzed by external representation.

Such emotional realism and performative urgency confirm the relevance of Schechner's (2002) idea of “restored behavior,” where theatrical actions, especially those grounded in ritual and spiritual significance, carry real-life transformative power. By invoking deep emotional resonance, *The Return of the Bridegroom* becomes more than a play; it becomes a site of spiritual reckoning and personal rededication.

Audience Identification and Moral Introspection

Many audience members reported a strong identification with the character of the bride, whose struggle with spiritual complacency mirrored their own experiences. This connection served as a catalyst for moral introspection. One student admitted, “I saw myself in the bride who kept feeling that the monotonous life of just reading the Bible, praying, and singing is boring. That was me. It felt like God was speaking directly to me.” This kind of personal reflection illustrates the capacity of narrative structure and character development to provoke deep spiritual engagement. According to Reception Theory, meaning is not embedded solely in the text but is actively shaped by the audience's lived experiences and interpretive frameworks (Becker, 2023). For the students at Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU)—many of whom are immersed in a Christian academic environment—the play's themes of accountability, loyalty, and readiness for Christ's return resonated profoundly.

Another participant reflected, “When the bride began to drift and justify her decisions, I felt exposed. I've made excuses for my own inconsistency in prayer and devotion too.” This statement underscores how the drama functioned as a mirror, reflecting back the viewers' own spiritual struggles. Another student confessed, “I realized I've been postponing repentance. The play brought that to my face.” Such honest self-assessments demonstrate

that audience engagement extended beyond emotional reaction into the realm of ethical and spiritual transformation.

These testimonies reveal that the spiritual power of the drama lies in its ability to dissolve the boundary between stage and spectator. The audience did not merely watch the bride's journey but experienced it as an extension of their own. This reflects Gadamer's (1975) concept of the "fusion of horizons," in which the historical and theological world of the drama intersects with the personal world of the viewer, producing a dialogic understanding that invites change (Liakos, 2023).

Furthermore, one student commented, "The moment the bride lost track of her identity and forgot her preparation, I began to question how seriously I take my own spiritual commitments." This moment of identification transformed the play into a participatory space of moral and spiritual interrogation. It is through such intimate engagements that the play transcends performance to become an instrument of personal, spiritual, and communal edification—affirming the efficacy of spiritually charged drama in nurturing moral consciousness and spiritual renewal.

Also, a particularly striking symbol that resonated deeply with many audience members was the depiction of the Holy Spirit as a Chef—an unconventional yet profoundly spiritual representation (Fig 7). Dressed in a chef's outfit, the character of the Comforter nourishes the Bride with fruits (Fig 8), a clear allusion to the fruits of the Spirit outlined in Galatians 5:22–23. Several participants interpreted this metaphor as a vivid dramatization of the Holy Spirit's role in sustaining and sanctifying the believer's soul. One student reflected, "Seeing the Holy Spirit as a Chef made it feel so personal. It reminded me that spiritual growth isn't automatic—I have to be fed and choose to eat well." This moment of reflection showcases how creative symbolism can provoke a reevaluation of one's spiritual discipline. As the narrative progressed and the Bride began to crave "junk," symbolizing sin and spiritual shortcuts, viewers were confronted with their own tendencies to abandon divine nourishment for temporal gratification.



Fig. 7: The Comforter and the Bride



Fig. 8: The Comforter serving the Bride

Moreover, the transformation of the stage in the final scene—where the Comforter and the Bride together decorate the space with flowers—was interpreted by many as a spiritual rebirth. Audience members saw this act as emblematic of the Holy Spirit's restorative

power. One participant remarked, “When they started redesigning the set with flowers, I saw it as my own life being rearranged by God. Like, there’s still hope if I return.” This artistic transition from chaos to order helped many internalize the theme of redemption, emphasizing that restoration is possible even after spiritual decline. The act of set decoration became a symbolic restructuring of the Bride’s (and by extension, the viewer’s) inner life, visually expressing the theological promise of renewal.

These elements of symbolic performance not only deepened emotional resonance but also encouraged sustained introspection. For many viewers, the realization that divine nourishment requires intentional consumption—and that disorder can be realigned by the Holy Spirit—was transformative. Such nuanced representations elicited responses that were more than cognitive; they were spiritual awakenings shaped by artistic embodiment.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the reception of spiritual aesthetics in *The Return of the Bridegroom*, it is not without limitations. One key limitation is the demographic homogeneity of participants. All respondents were students from Joseph Ayo Babalola University, a faith-based institution with a predominantly Christian population. This spiritual and institutional context may have amplified the receptiveness to the play’s theological themes, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to more religiously diverse or secular audiences.

Another limitation is the singular performance setting. The data were collected following one performance at a specific venue, which may have influenced the mood, technical quality, and audience engagement in ways not replicable in other environments. As such, the responses may not fully reflect how different audiences in alternative settings such as urban theatres, churches, or non-faith-based campuses, might interpret the same performance.

Additionally, while focus group discussions and surveys provided rich qualitative data, they may have been influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in a religious setting where students might feel pressure to respond in spiritually appropriate ways. Future research could incorporate more varied contexts and longitudinal methods to better understand evolving audience perceptions across multiple viewings and environments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to explore the spiritual and aesthetic reception of *The Return of the Bridegroom*, a stage play written by Mike Bamiloye and directed by Festus Dairo under the Zion Royal Theatre, through the interpretive lens of an audience-centered approach. Conducted at Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU), the research revealed that Christian drama, when rooted in theological depth and executed with emotive intensity, holds significant potential as a tool of spiritual engagement, reflection, and transformation. The audience responses demonstrated that the play did not merely convey a message but created an immersive experience that provoked personal introspection, emotional

resonance, and renewed spiritual commitment. This confirms that Christian theatre in contemporary Nigeria continues to function as a form of performative theology—a site where doctrine, imagination, and experience converge.

One of the key insights from the study is that the audience is not a passive observer but an active participant in meaning-making. Viewers brought their personal, cultural, and spiritual frameworks into the interpretive process, decoding the symbols, narratives, and performances in ways that were deeply rooted in their lived experiences. The contextual setting of a faith-based institution like JABU further amplified the receptivity and theological engagement of the audience. However, even within this spiritually charged environment, there was notable diversity in interpretation, including critical voices questioning the emotional strategies employed in the play. This diversity affirms the importance of Reception Theory in understanding how religious performances are negotiated by different viewers, even within a shared doctrinal community.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that Christian drama ministries systematically incorporate audience feedback into their creative and evaluative processes. Post-performance discussions, surveys, and focus groups could offer valuable insights into how plays are received and where they may require further theological or artistic refinement. In addition, the use of Christian drama should be expanded within formal and informal educational settings. Faith-based universities and theological colleges can integrate drama into their spiritual development programs, recognizing it as a powerful pedagogical tool capable of making abstract doctrines more tangible and emotionally accessible to young people.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to provide structured training for Christian dramatists in areas such as spiritual aesthetics, performance theory, and audience engagement. While many practitioners possess spiritual zeal and narrative talent, equipping them with theoretical and critical tools will enhance the depth and impact of their productions. Such training would help balance doctrinal clarity with artistic excellence, ensuring that the message is not only understood but also deeply felt. Beyond the current study's scope, future research should consider exploring how Christian drama is received among more religiously diverse or secular audiences. This would contribute to broader conversations on inclusivity, intercultural reception, and the boundaries of gospel theatre in pluralistic societies.

Lastly, the documentation and archiving of Nigerian Christian theatre deserve greater scholarly and institutional attention. Many significant productions, including those by Mike Bamiloje and his contemporaries, have contributed immensely to the religious and cultural landscape, yet remain under-researched. Preserving these works through critical scholarship and digital archiving would not only support academic inquiry but also serve as a legacy resource for future generations of performers and theologians alike.

This study makes a unique scholarly contribution by foregrounding the interpretive agency of audiences within Nigerian Christian drama and demonstrating how spiritual aesthetics

can serve as a conduit for theological reflection, emotional transformation, and moral renewal in faith-based theatrical performances.

The Return of the Bridegroom demonstrates that Christian drama remains a compelling medium for spiritual engagement and moral awakening. Its capacity to provoke emotional, intellectual, and spiritual responses affirms its place in the broader ecology of faith-based communication in Nigeria. By centering the audience's voice, this study underscores the life-changing potential of theatre when it speaks not only to the mind, but also to the soul.

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