

DRAMA AS POPULAR CULTURE IN AFRICA

By

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Philippe Van Tieghem opens his book, *Technique du Théâtre*, with the assertion that the text is the essence of a drama performance. As he puts it:

*Dans une représentation dramatique, ...le texte reste la matière première sans laquelle ce genre de spectacle ne saurait exister.*¹

He is even more pungent and categorical when, a few pages later, he writes: "Pas de théâtre sans texte."² This is not Tieghem's idiosyncrasy; in spite of Artaud and the other Western exponents of non-verbal drama, the view expressed here by Tieghem is shared by most critics in Europe and America. These critics regard the text not as just the starting point and the permanent record of a play, but also as a major determinant of its stage success.

A corollary of the view that a text is a prerequisite for drama is that drama can only exist in literate societies. This is patently untrue, for drama is not an exclusive activity of literate societies. It is not concomitant with literacy or economic advancement. Indeed, it is an activity which is common to human societies irrespective of their levels of education, scientific or economic development. As Oscar G. Brockett has rightly observed:

*Theatrical and dramatic elements are present in every society, no matter how complex or unsophisticated it is. These elements are as evident in our own political campaigns, parades, sports events, religious services, and children's make-believe as they are in the dances and ceremonies of primitive peoples.*³

In this regard, it is pertinent to recall that drama has featured prominently in the cultural life of preliterate African society. Even today it remains a favourite artistic activity among people where literacy is not yet universal. The number of studies already published on traditional African drama makes another extensive discussion of it here unnecessary.⁴ What needs to be remembered is that traditional African drama, as Wole Soyinka points out,

*is sophisticated in idiom. Our forms of theatre are quite different from literary drama. We use spontaneous dialogue, folk music, simple stories, and relevant dances to express what we mean.*⁵

However, with the introduction of Western education to Africa, Africans have been able to develop a tradition of literary drama on the European model. This type of drama is usually written in European languages and addressed primarily to the intellectual elite, although its audience now includes practically both the educated and the illiterate in countries where television is available. Many Africans have already distinguished themselves as authors, producers or actors of this form of drama. As it is obviously an arduous undertaking to list all its African exponents, we can mention only a few of them. Prominent among African playwrights are Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, Efua Theodora Sutherland, Christiana Ama Ata Aidoo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bernard Dadie, Cheick Ndao and Guillaume Oyono-Mbia; the renowned producers include Ola Rotimi, Dapo Adelugba, Joel de Graft, Bob Leshoai, Sonar Senghor, Mikanza Mobiem and Ambroise M'Bia; and finally, the well-known actors are Jimmy Solanke, Jab Adu, Bachir Toure, Douta Seck and Lydie Ewande. As is often the case in drama, some of them combine various roles of playwright, actor or producer at the same time.

But an equally interesting and significant development is that African playwrights also rely more on improvisations than on texts in producing plays meant primarily for the "delight and instruction" of the masses. Generally, these plays are either not scripted at all, or only their barest outlines are. The fact that large and enthusiastic audiences acclaim such plays in several parts of the African continent is a definite proof of their popularity. The concert party, the modern Yoruba travelling theatre and the new Black South African theatre are notable examples of this type of modern African drama. We shall now briefly examine each of them.

The Concert Party

The concert party was started in 1918 by the one-man shows of Master Valley who was headmaster of an elementary school in Sekondi, Ghana. Two years later the first concert party troupe, "The Versatile Eight," was formed and, in 1930, Ishmail Johnson (alias Bob Johnson), Charles B. Hutton and J. B. Ansah founded the first professional concert party troupe, also in Ghana: "The Two Bobs and their Carolina Girls." Since then there has been a remarkable upsurge in the number of concert parties. Today they are one of the most popular means of public entertainment in Ghana.

A concert party play is unscripted. Actors learn only the story-line of the play and are left to improvise during a performance. Thus the play is the creative endeavour of the whole cast. Another point worth noting is that a concert party performance usually requires a relatively short period for rehearsals since actors do not have to commit lengthy passages to memory.

A concert party is therefore able to build up its own repertoire quite rapidly. Also, the actors' resort to improvisation allows for easy replacements whenever some of them are unable, for whatever reasons, to play their parts at a scheduled performance. Since a concert party relies heavily on improvisation, no two or three of its performances of the same play are exactly the same. This is evident in the dialogue, gestures, and more importantly, the language which the actors vary from one performance to another, depending on the occasion and their own mood as well.

Indeed, it is not uncommon for a concert party to present a play in English or pidgin English in one performance and then use an indigenous language in the next performance of the same play. The recourse to an admixture of two or three languages in the same performance is not even as rare as one would imagine. The changes inherent in the productions of a play by a concert party tend to discourage its transcription and consequently published concert party plays are hard to come by. However, few attempts have been made to record, transcribe and publish some concert party plays but such works are, at best, true reflections of the particular performances which were recorded. In any case, the published plays have not been worth the efforts as they give only faint ideas about the actual performances themselves.

It is possible to perform a concert party play anywhere, including the village square, classroom or modern theatre. There is a minimal reliance on props and lighting effects. Indeed, all the light needed is to enable the spectators to see the actors and this can be supplied by a few electric bulbs, or a handful of gaslight, if there is no electricity. A few concert parties now possess small mobile generators which they take to the venues of their performance. The Ghanaian concert party play is always presented on a stage; if none is available, one which consists of a platform of planks placed on cement blocks or of tables joined to one another is improvised. The stage has a dressing table in one corner and no curtains are used. The stage is kept open in this way so as to enable the spectators to watch the action which may begin right from the time the actors are dressing up for the performance.

Sometimes, parts of the play are performed among the spectators in order to get them more involved in it. The costumes used in the play are a combination of realism and fantasy. They play a vital role in two respects. Firstly, they are used for characterisation. Thus the actor who plays the character of a "been-to" or a dandy dresses gorgeously, while a villager or a jobless person wears tattered clothes. Secondly, as the costumes are invariably overdone, they are a source of humour.

As in the traditional African drama, music, dance and song are the pith and marrow of the concert party play. Initially,

most of these elements were borrowed from American and English musical shows which were then in vogue. At present, troupes explore mainly indigenous music, dance and songs, especially highlife. The significance and predominance of these choreographic elements stem from the fact that the concert party play is essentially a musical comedy. The music, dances and songs also serve another important purpose; they are the main factors in stimulating audience participation, which is one of the distinguishing features of a concert party production.

In addition to joining in the dancing and singing voluntarily or at the actors' instigation, spectators participate in the play in other ways. For instance, an actor may engage the spectators in a conversation. On their part, the spectators may cheer or jeer at an actor at will. Again, a spectator may walk up to the stage to put any amount of money (a note or a coin) on an actor's forehead or wipe his face with an handkerchief as a mark of his appreciation of the actor's role or talent. Conversely, he may show his disapproval by showering abuses on or throwing fruits, papers or in extreme cases even eggs at the actor.

It is important to stress that a concert party play is both a source of entertainment and a means of satirizing anti-social behaviour and attitudes, unbridled love for and aping of alien cultures as well as unreasonable attachment to the outmoded indigenous mores.

The concert party also enjoys a wide popular appeal in Togo, where several troupes now exist. It is easy to understand why the concert party has caught on in Togo if it is recalled that Ghana and Togo are neighbouring countries and that the inhabitants of their respective capitals, where most of the concert party troupes are centred, belong to the same Ewe ethnic stock. The Togolese concert party bears the unmistakable imprint of the Ghanaian concert party not only because Togolese troupes borrow the plays they present to their public from the Ghanaians but more importantly because most of their members are trained in Ghana.

But there are still a few differences between their performances. However, unlike the Ghanaians, the Togolese intersperse their dialogue in local languages, with both French and English expression, the English expressions having been borrowed from their Ghanaian neighbours. Again, unlike the Ghanaian concert party, the Togolese concert party shows a marked preference for performances in bars before beer-drinking spectators. Togolese concert parties have the habit of going to perform in the villages just after the planting or harvesting season, when the farmers have very little work to occupy them. During such tours, they perform in classrooms or in the village squares. For perform-

ances which take place in the village squares, the troupes recruit young boys to fence the squares and ensure that only those who pay gate fees are allowed to watch the performances. In addition to watching the performances free of charge, the boys are paid a fee. A concert party may also be invited to perform a play during the funeral ceremonies of a dignitary. On such an occasion, the host provides the troupe with refreshments and, if necessary, accommodation, in addition to paying a pre-arranged fee.

The other major difference between the Ghanaian concert party and the Togolese concert play is that the latter does not insist on presenting its plays on stage. For instance, the Happy Star Company, which is probably the best known Togolese troupe, did not undertake serious rehearsals or perform on a stage until it was invited to the World Drama Festival in Nancy in May, 1973.⁶

It is equally noteworthy that the concert party had a tremendous success in Nigeria in the 1950s. It was popularized by Hubert Ogunde, the oldest and leading theatrical personality in Nigeria. In 1948, Ogunde took his African Music Research Party -- which turned professional in 1946, barely a year after its formation as an amateur dramatic group -- on a tour of Ghana, with an opera entitled "King Solomon." The trip was a total failure as the opera could not attract the large crowds which Ogunde had expected because of the Ghanaian public's preference for the concert party. He returned to Nigeria with a little less than a dollar in his pocket and "owed his cast a month's salary and the lorry-owner the fare."⁷

Ogunde's disastrous experience with "King Solomon" led him to develop an interest in the concert party. His tour of Ghana later that year with his first concert party production, "Swing the Jazz," was so successful that, for over a decade afterwards, Ogunde produced only plays in the concert party tradition, with the exception of "My Darling Fatima." Significantly, he also changed the name of his troupe to Ogunde Concert Party during the same period. Although influenced by the Ghanaian concert party, Ogunde Concert Party had its own peculiarities. In spite of the experience he gained from his Ghanaian debut, when he had to perform "Swing the Jazz" in English in order to be understood by his audience, Ogunde continued to present most of his plays in Yoruba to his Nigerian spectators, while drawing most of his songs from popular European and American tunes.

The more striking peculiarity of Ogunde Concert Party was its use of the "opening glee," which consisted of an entrance song and a dance ensemble. It served as a prayer to the gods to solicit their protection and guidance during the forthcoming presentation, and as a chorus to summarize for the audience the

action which was soon to be performed before it. It was a clear evidence of Ogunde's indebtedness to Yoruba traditional theatre. In fact, the "opening glee" as used by Ogunde was the modification of the "ijuba" of the traditional drama which, as Joel Adedeji, describes it,

contained the 'pledge' and the 'salute' chanted together sometimes in a particular order of succession, sometimes in any order. The pledge called Ipesa, was addressed to Esa Ogbin, the foremost Masque dramaturge and the founder of the first professional guild. The salute, as a form of acknowledgement, varied from troupe to troupe. It was, however, important that the troupe leader paid certain respects or homage: first, he acknowledged the lineage from which he drew his inspiration or the leader from whom he received his training; he then addressed the unseen forces and lastly praised himself.⁸

Modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre

The origin of modern Yoruba travelling theatre can be traced to the establishment of African Churches in Nigeria early this century. These Churches were themselves products of the cultural nationalism of repatriate and educated Nigerians, mostly of Yoruba origin, who craved to retain their indigenous culture while remaining Christians. The failure of the European Churches in Nigeria to africanize Christian worship by incorporating in it traditional songs as well as elements drawn from traditional mode of worship prompted these Nigerians to establish their own Churches such as Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Aladura Church and Apostolic Church.

Like the European churches, they soon began to explore drama for the purpose of evangelisation; they enacted Biblical stories to strengthen the faith of their members, or win new souls for Christ and raise funds. Their favourite presentations included the "Nativity," "Adam and Eve," "Joseph and His Brethen" and "David and Goliath," etc. Not unexpectedly, the presentations were in Yoruba and a lot of Yoruba songs were infused into them. By 1914, this drama, inspired by both Christianity and Yoruba cultural nationalism, had become a frequent activity of the new African Churches and their various organisations in Lagos and Abeokuta but its development was inhibited by the First World War and the economic depression which followed it. It was not until the late 1930s that it regained its former vitality.

The year 1945 marked a turning point in its evolution. In that year, Hubert Ogunde secularized it by blending Church songs with jazz in his plays and by presenting it under his own auspices and no longer under the patronage of the Church and reli-

gious organisations. He then set it on a new course of commercial professionalism. Ogunde thus became the leading exponent of this new drama. He performed his plays drawn from the Bible mainly in Lagos and Abeokuta but took them to other important Yoruba towns as well. He soon broke away from the unwritten tradition of this drama by scripting his plays -- a fact which takes their examination outside the scope of the present study. Of more immediate interest here, therefore, are the works of other practitioners who remained faithful to the unwritten tradition of the modern Yoruba travelling theatre. In this regard, the plays of E.K. Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo deserve special attention.

E.K. Ogunmola began his theatrical career in 1948. At first, he drew his plays from the Bible but he later explored fairy tales of which Yoruba oral literature is so rich, as exemplified by the novels of Fagunwa. In his adaptations of fairytales, spirits always intervened as *deus ex machina* to put an end to the heroes' ordeals. From his headquarters at Oshogbo, he travelled to several Yoruba towns and villages, particularly in his native Ekiti Province to perform before appreciative audiences. It was probably because of his keen interest in fairytales that Professor Geoffrey Axworthy and Professor Collis then of the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, succeeded, during Ogunmola's stint in that department, in persuading him to produce Professor Collis' adaptation of Amos Tutuola's famous novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.⁹ As it turned out, Ogunmola's reputation abroad rests on this play which was performed to great acclaim at the Panafrican Festival held in Algiers in 1969. However, at home, Ogunmola is best remembered for his "Love of Money," a social satire based on the story of a rich and happy man who brought about his own ruin through foolish ambition. Ogunmola did not follow Ogunde's example of using jazz in his productions. Rather, he explored highlife music, which he produced with mostly traditional musical instruments.

Duro Ladipo, who was also based Oshogbo, began his Yoruba Easter Cantata based on the crucifixion of Christ. He followed it up with other plays inspired by Biblical stories such as "Olori" and "Kobidi" inspired respectively by the story of Samson and Delilah and that of David and Goliath. He also produced a few morality plays but his most enduring works are deeply rooted in Yoruba legends and history. "Oba Koso," his masterpiece, which won prizes at several international festivals, "Oba Moro," "Aaro Meta" and "Otun Akogun" belong to this category.¹⁰ Ladipo offered the following explanation for his interest in Yoruba history legends:

My plays amply demonstrate the dignity and respect with which the Yorubas treat their Kings.... I wrote these plays for the following reasons: first, to ensure

*that Yoruba folklore and traditional stories are never forgotten; secondly, to amply demonstrate the richness and uniqueness of Yoruba culture, a culture which resisted the assault of white Christian religion; thirdly, to ensure that the dances, the music and the splendour of Yoruba as a language never become things of the past, a splendour so easily discernible in such traditional chants as 'ijala', 'ofo', 'ewi', 'oriki' which I have used severally in my works; finally, to proudly enshrine in our hearts the names of great heroes, for in the end, they are the real gods!*¹¹

Indeed, Duro Ladipo was remarkable for his extensive use of the whole range of Yoruba traditional musical instruments, dances and poetry in his drama. His was a case of total commitment to the perpetuation of Yoruba culture and of a fervent belief in the goals which instigated Yoruba intellectual elites to create their own Churches.

New Black South African Drama

In the mid 1970s, Black South African artists evolved a new form of drama to circumvent the strict censorship and restriction laws which had for long strangulated Black artistic expression in their country. Keyan G. Tomaselli has spelt out some of its essential features. In his words, it

*is rarely written down in text form and is, therefore, less controllable than other forms of media and more able to escape the attention of repressive state machinery. Here is a form of communication which is oral in tradition, oral in construction and oral in rendition.*¹²

To complete his brief description, it is necessary to add that it contains songs, music and dances, can be performed anywhere and does not require elaborate costumes and props and is therefore inexpensive to produce. This is of great significance in South Africa where capital is a monopoly of the dominant white minority.

The radicalization of Black South African drama in the 60s and early 70s by such groups as the South African Students Organization (SASO), the Black Peoples Convention (BPC), the Theatre Council of Natal (ECON) and the People's Experimental Theatre (PET) prepared the grounds for the emergence of the new drama. Its first, and probably its most remarkable manifestation to date was "Imbufuso," a play produced in 1976 by the women at Crossroads camp, situated just outside Cape Town. It was a realistic portrayal of the misery, frustrations and insecurity of the inhabitants of Crossroads camp. The similarity between lif

in the camp and life on the stage made a tremendous impact on the spectators. In addition to stimulating audience participation, the songs, which permeated the play and which were rendered in the indigenous language, contained scathing remarks about apartheid.

But the play was able to escape censorship because the agents of the racist minority regime, who did not comprehend their wordings, took the songs for yet another proof of the innate sense of rhythm of the African. Black South African artists were quick in exploiting this official weakness by producing several plays in which songs served as a means of political education of the masses and of indicting the racist regime.

In the aftermath of the racist government's repressions in Soweto in 1976, fleeing Black South Africans introduced this new form of drama to their compatriots in refugee camps situated in neighbouring countries. For instance, the exiles in Morogoro camp in Tanzania produced two highly successful plays: "Freedom in Our Life-time" and "Soweto Sequence." "Freedom in Our Life-time" traces the history of the liberation movement in South Africa between 1955 and 1961 when the African National Congress had to renounce its former policy of peaceful resistance in favour of armed struggle. "Soweto Sequence" is inspired by the heartless murder of a thirteen-year-old boy, Hector Peterson, by the racist police, which sparked off the riots in Soweto in June 1976. These and similar plays produced by South African exiles have proved to be an effective means of continuing their political instruction as well as strengthening their morale, and educating the citizens of their host countries about their plight that they have become a favourite activity of South African refugee camps.

Conclusion

The concert party, modern Yoruba travelling theatre and the new Black South African drama are some of the forms of improvised drama which is thriving in Africa today. They are products of democratic processes of creativity and are addressed primarily to the masses. Unlike literary drama which has a permanent record, they share with agitprop drama and the on-going attempts at improvised drama in Europe and America the defect of being impossible to preserve intact for the future. But unlike the latter which are still considered as experiments which are yet to win general acceptability in the West, these forms of drama enjoy a wide popular appeal in Africa. Their existence, therefore, proves that the claim that every drama depends necessarily on a text has no universal validity.

NOTES

- ¹ Philippe Van Tieghem, *Technique du théâtre*, (Que sais-je, no. 859,) P.U.F., Paris, 1963, p. 67.
- ² Tiegham, p. 20.
- ³ Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, 4th ed., Allyn and Bacon Incorporated, Boston, London Sydney, Toronto, 1981, P.T.
- ⁴ Vide inter alia:
J.P. Clark, "Aspects of Nigerian Drama," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 89, June 1966, pp. 118-126.
Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, "Nature and Variety of Tribal Drama," *Bantu Studies*, Johannesburg, XI11 91939, pp. 333-348.
Anthony Graham-White, "Ritual and Drama in Africa," *Educational Theatre Journal*, XX11, Dec 1970, pp. 339-349.
Henri Labouret and Travele Moussa, "Le théâtre Mandique" (Soudan Français), *Africa*, 1, Jan 1928, pp. 73-97.
Bakary Traore, *The Social Functions of Negro-African Theatre*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, 1972.
- ⁵ Quoted by Sophia D. Lokko, op. cit., p. 311.
- ⁶ Vide: Alain Richard, "The Concert Party as a Genre: The Happy Stars of Lomé," *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall 1974, pp. 165-179.
- ⁷ Vide: Egun Clark, "Ogunde Theatre: The Rise of Contemporary Professional Theatre in Nigeria 1946-72," in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., Nigeria Magazine, Lagos, 1981, p. 303.
- ⁸ Joel Adedeji, "Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre," *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, p. 239.
- ⁹ Vide: Ulli Beier, "Yoruba Theatre," in *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing*, Ulli Beier ed., Longman Group Ltd., London, 1979, p. 276.
- ¹⁰ According to Yemi Ogunbiyi, after coming first in the Berlin Festival in 1964, "Oba Koso" went on to win seven other awards at international theatre and cultural festivals. Vide: Yemi Ogunbiyi, "The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo," *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*, p. 345.

¹¹ Quoted by Yemi Ogunbiyi, *ibid.*, p. 340.

¹² Keyan G. Tomaselli, "Black South African Theatre: Text and Context," *English in Africa*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 1981, p. 51.

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