

THE AESTHETIC PROBLEM IN THE  
CRITICISM OF AFRICAN DRAMA

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*No man can understand another language he does not speak--and  
by language we do not mean verbal craft but a cultural view.*  
Chinua Achebe<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation aptly summarizes a battle of words which has been raging for the past decade, between African critics and their Western counterparts, over a large body of literature which African authors have produced. This literature, while written by Africans, has been derived from the Western genres of the novel, poetry and drama. Along with this Western formalism has been added the historical experience, with its mental conditioning from traditional backgrounds, Western education, colonialism and post-independence experiences.

The various phases have been categorized under negritude, commitment, relevance, synthesis, return to cultural roots and authenticity. The African critic claims to have an in-depth knowledge of the works while their Western counterparts refuse to budge from universal standards.

In a way, this argument has involved prose-fiction writing, specifically literary modes, more than it affects drama. This may be due to the following facts:

- (a) There are as yet only a few African drama critics.
- (b) Drama, unlike the novel, cannot be exclusively claimed by any one culture. The novel is an essentially bourgeois Western art form.
- (c) Plays rely less on the verbal crafts for their appreciation than the novel, and therefore the success or failure of a play could be more readily proven by the audience's response.
- (d) There are few literary or theater magazines concerned with projecting criticism of African drama.

There is growing resentment from Western theater critics, over the tendency of Black or African theater practitioners to classify every theatrical performance as drama. In the words of Andrew Horne:

*There is little point in calling a leopard  
an animal when we can call it a leopard,*

thereby differentiating it from pythons, plants and men. Indeed to refuse to distinguish between the leopard and the tabby cat, however structurally similar they may be, allows us in the end to effectively deal with neither.<sup>2</sup>

Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, denounces Western compartmentalization:

*The question therefore of the supposed dividing line between ritual and theater should not concern us much in Africa, the line being one that was largely drawn by European analysts.*<sup>3</sup>

Scott Kennedy, in his In Search of African Theatre does not see any contradiction in the composition of African drama, dramatic elements and rituals. This he explains is because:

*African theatre may be viewed as a total creation, a volcanic eruption of the art forms caught in the middle of the culture of a particular African society.*<sup>4</sup>

African theater is closely connected to the "culture concept" and "integrated arts concept" which explain why ritual, regalia, music, dance, poetry and the visual arts can exist in a production without any contradiction. Critics must endeavor to understand the basic difference in form and style between Western and African theater in order to understand the standards of beauty, and why some plays are more successful in portraying this beauty than others. For example, Hubert Ogunde's plays are successful African plays; nevertheless, they lack the qualities of beauty inherent in the plays of Duro Ladipo, whose dramatic sources are more traditional.

There is also a need to understand that the African world view offers the traditional dramatist a reality that is incomprehensible to the Western critics of drama. Why, it is asked, do Africans laugh when watching Western tragedy? Why are impotence and barrenness such tragic themes in African drama when to Western drama they are merely on the fringe of dramatic conflict? The African has diverse views of death, the dead and their relationship with the living that are very different from Western views, and it is difficult for the superficial Western critic to grasp their essence.

The practice of African theater offered no conflict or

problem to the society until the African elite, having benefited from Western education, sought to convert their African experience of traditional theater to drama by writing plays in the Western forms and styles. The plays sought to justify Aristotle's poetics. Among these are the early plays of Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Efua Sutherland and Ene Henshaw. Through these works the Western critics saw familiar landmarks and rushed in to establish themselves as authorities on the new African plays. The honeymoon was short lived for, soon after independence, these playwrights began to desert the familiar landmarks of Western plays. Wole Soyinka's plays assumed a more celebrated nature of African communal fetes; J.P. Clark no longer "expressed himself best" in English but went back to traditional roots to write Ozidi (this attempt was only half successful) and subsequently translated the entire Ozidi saga (traditional plays which last for several days) into a text. Efua Sutherland found Edufa and Foriwa inadequate as African plays and in her children's plays, as well as in Anansewa, found a new dramatic form utilizing folktales, dances, mime processions and festivals. In East Africa, Elvania Zirimu and Nuwa Sentongo, while espousing the European absurdist tradition, also enfolded into the tradition myths, legends and an African world view that considers the dead and living as existing side by side. It is pertinent to say that even the absurdist style they chose was conditioned by a social and political reality of the time. For, in absurdist symbolism they could afford to criticize social or political order without being declared subversive by totalitarian regimes like Idi Amin's Uganda.

When the Western critic (and this also includes Africans who only use Western critical criteria) was confronted with the metamorphosis, it was realized that:

*The critic of African playwriting and theater from outside the continent of Africa used to say the British or American drama critic may have to accept a different set of criteria if he or she is to come to terms with African drama and understand it.<sup>5</sup>*

While the problem of new aesthetic criteria was identified, the problem remained unsolved for a long time. African critics sought a revision of earlier works. Clark was denounced as slavishly courting Western approval and Soyinka as being high-brow, elitist and irrelevant. The earlier dramas, in the words of a Nigerian critic, did not pretend to address the generality of Nigerian people. For one thing, the masses were essentially gross illiterates (sic). The plays were written and produced basically for a small university audience and literate elitist

groups and sometimes for a foreign audience.

This criticism was not without substance. J.P. Clark's three plays were closely modeled after classical Greek tragedy using "appropriately" elevated speech whose rhythms are alliterative and foreign to African speech patterns. Although Soyinka is undoubtedly the greatest African playwright and his plays appear to have achieved a synthesis between the traditional form and foreign style, his major works have come under heavy criticism as being obscure, irrelevant and elitist. These major works are contrasted with his earlier plays: The Swamp Dwellers, Trials of Brother Jero and The Lion and the Jewel. The earlier plays still enjoy great popularity with the masses and continue to be performed all over Africa. In contrast, A Dance of the Forest has not been performed anywhere since its premiere in 1960. In fact, A Dance of the Forest, The Road, Madmen and Specialists have been baffling pieces to both the masses and university professors alike. This, paradoxically, is because of the richness of traditional materials used in the plays. They are overloaded with symbols and symbolic actions which caused one Nigerian critic to accuse Soyinka of behaving "like the Okanjuwa character in a Yoruba folktale who, coming on a rich store of nourishing food, eats far more than he can really digest."<sup>6</sup> An American critic, Bernth Lindfors, attributes the failure of Soyinka's arty structure to the playwright's "ultracleverness so as to sustain the interest of the supersophisticated"<sup>7</sup> and of also playing mostly to the pit.

It is a lamentable fact that the great bulk of African dramatic criticism seems to concentrate too much on African plays as literature. Both African and non-African critics are yet to come to grips with African plays written in English, French and Portuguese as plays meant for performance. This literary approach has proved an inadequate critical tool for the evaluation of African drama. A play on the stage assumes a different dialectic with the audience through its subtext. This is realized not only through the written dialogue but also through stage movements (stage directions), mime, spectacle and the mood caused by songs, dances and stage props. For example, Ama Ata Aidoo in her play Anowa offers a subtext that involves stage props, mimetic action and music. The Atenteben flute is used as a symbol to emphasize the wild and restless nature of Anowa. An empty gilded chair on the stage carries with it several associated symbols and logic. When the twin slave boys fan the empty gilded chair and then later Kofi Ako comes to sit on it and a funeral dirge is played, the literary approach might miss the serious message if it failed to record these stage movements. The empty gilded chair in the center of Kofi Ako's room is a symbol of impending doom and the emptiness of Kofi Ako's slave-trading venture. The fanning of the empty chair is symbolic of

cruelty to women and is also tied to the issue of barrenness which is central to the theme of the play. When, after the chair has been fanned, Kofi Ako sits on the chair and a funeral march is played, death is being symbolized. All the symbols are unified with props, dialogue, myth, mime and dance to create a unity of theme expressing Aidoo's views on the position of women in society.

The basic issue in defining African aesthetics and the African social reality and world view revolves around the problem of multi-ethnicity. Africa south of the Sahara contains many diverse communities and cultures. Each nation state is a conglomeration of hundreds of ethnic cultures, each having their own forms of traditional performances and oral traditions which are very much alive. How then can one come across a critical opinion that is representative and relevant to all the cultural identities?

It is logical, while searching for an African dramatic aesthetic, to go to African oral tradition. Yet, it must be admitted that African exoglotic drama and literature cannot totally operate within the aesthetic milieu of traditional art. The African dramatist, writing plays in a foreign language, has two handicaps:

- (1) The translation of traditional thought to a foreign language involves a certain loss or modification of the traditional thought.
- (2) The life experience of the playwright—who is a product of Western education—also bears tell-tale signs in his/her plays.

How then can a total application of traditional aesthetics convey the treasures of these works to the reader?

Those that advocate a celebrated return to traditional roots commit the blunder of classifying "traditional" as African and "modern" or "contemporary" as Western or "rural" as African and "urban" as Western. These are baseless assumptions that tend to consider as unAfrican plays written by Africans on contemporary issues in Africa, i.e., such authors as Sarif Easmon (Dear Parent and Ogre), J.C. de Graft (Through a Film Darkly), Zulu Sofola (The Sweet Trap) and a host of others who treat diverse problems and issues which range from urbanization to conflict among the elite. This school of thought has, in fact, set an additional ballast to an already complicated situation that has given rise in the works of the younger playwrights to the need to Africanize their plays by a mere incorporation of traditional rituals, dances and legends. This is, of course, total fallacy. Nevertheless, there is a problem for the critic to develop a critical perception

and awareness that can identify and discriminate between plays that meaningfully incorporate traditional styles and those that shallowly and peripherally absorb these for exotic reasons yet achieve no synthesis.

Because of the composite nature of the African continent, where there is a confluence of the traditional and the modern, there is a need for critics to treat each work on its chosen theme and to assess the work—and its success or failure—by the goals set up by the playwrights. This is necessary if we are to avoid the mistake of generalizations and categorizations of plays into critical types that are false. In fact, it is as possible as it is true that an African playwright can operate in a contemporary or traditional setting or that s/he can even choose a mixed setting. S/he could write in standard English or in pidgin for an urban or rural audience. Zulu Sofola is a good example of this. In Wedlock of the God and King Emere, Zulu Sofola is operating in a traditional setting; in Sweet Trap and Old Wines Are Tasty, she is operating in a contemporary setting. In Wizard of Law, she is operating in a mixed setting and she appropriately changes her diction to pidgin.

It is perhaps worthwhile to examine whether or not it is possible for a set of criteria to apply meaningfully to all African plays in order to make our comprehension of them more thorough. I shall here try to examine how I have attempted to define some criteria in assessing some African playwrights who have also been involved in theatrical presentation.

The first criterion is the examination of goals set up by the playwright—in short, the social reality. This is used to examine whether or not the playwright is truthful to his/her chosen theme. If the playwright is using an African traditional setting, is the world view of his/her play authentically African? Is it consistent? Or, is it confused with a Western or alien concept like Christianity? For example, in Wedlock of the Gods, which is modeled after Romeo and Juliet, Zulu Sofola explores the love relationship between Uloko—a stong-willed and individualistic man—and Ogwoma, a widow. This love relationship runs afoul within the traditional community where a widow is still considered as the wife of the deceased. The tragedy of the death of the lovers, in hope of overcoming traditional sanction, is undermined if the critic realizes that Sofola is forcing a Christian viewpoint of life after death. Considered in African terms, Uloko's death is meaningless because, in the spirit world, Ogwoma would still be wife to her deceased husband. The criterion of social reality can be used effectively to discover when an alien viewpoint is masquerading as African.

There is also a great temptation to use this criterion

of social reality to determine relevance of dramatic works to specific sociopolitical situations. This view has been increasingly advocated in recent times. The supporters argue that the dramatist should not be concerned with art for art's sake or beauty for its sake only. They argue further that, since the African has been oppressed for many centuries, African artists should aim at improving the quality of life for the masses; in fact, plays should have a practical mission. This is what has given rise to the community theater course at the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria and in Zambia. In short, this school of thought advocates a theater of propaganda. Although a person's first reaction might be to retort, like Solomon Iyasere, that "literature should not be considered an equipment for living, nor an instrument for national policy."<sup>8</sup> Propagandist plays should not be censured just because they present propaganda. In fact, there is a legitimacy to plays that are committed to social change if one considers the composite role of the traditional artist who was also a political and religious leader as well as an artist. However, the opposite extreme is also to be avoided; an African play should not be condemned because the playwright has not been concerned with any propaganda. To put too much emphasis on the social relevance of a play is to lead to the falsification and corruption of African drama. To relegate the African or Black aesthetic to Addison Gayle's interpretation that the Black aesthetic is "a corrective means of helping Black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism,"<sup>9</sup> or that the world aesthetic is dangerous because it offers only half the solution, is to deny the validity of theater for the sake of entertainment.

The second criterion is to assess how traditional material is used in the play. If the play is derived from a folktale, how imaginatively has the folktale been reconstructed in a play situation? If dances are employed, how does the playwright discriminate in choosing appropriate dances or songs to depict joy, mourning, sacredness or ribaldry? In short, how does s/he depict the mood of the chosen reality? Are rituals, incantations and/or processions all integrated into a synthesis between form and style, or are they an appendage to the play for exotic reasons?

The third criterion is to examine the diction of the play in an aim to determine if language is used imaginatively and if it has aided the audience's understanding of the social structure and characterization in the play. If the playwright is using poetic diction, are his/her speech rhythms African? Or, does the language--as Clark's does--rise to an overblown poetic diction that serves a literary function only? Some scholars have argued that pidgin should be the language of dramaturgy, especially in African urban situations. The spontaneity of pidgin as well as the fact that it is a language of the African urban

masses and cuts across ethnic barriers, seem to be its major attractions. While efforts should be made to encourage mass drama and its pidginized expressional mode, caution should be exercised in the "return to pidgin" cry. Pidgin is now accepted as a growth language in its own right, and creole more absolutely so since it is by definition spoken as a first language. Pidgin therefore offers opportunity for linguistic experimentation. Nevertheless, the linguistic view must not be accepted to the exclusion of the cultural view, which regards pidgin as a corrupt form of a foreign language. Instead of using pidgin, African playwrights should be truthful to the African linguistic situation when an educated African speaks English or French to colleagues and foreigners in official situations and speaks pidgin or creole to them at informal occasions or to market traders. In the same breath, one may revert to the vernacular to talk to others within the same ethnic group. These areas of linguistic confluences should be highlighted in African dramaturgy. This is my concept of *total language*.

During the decade, there have been several experimental works in African theater. Most of them are centered around the search for an appropriate linguistic medium. Special mention deserves to be made of Ola Rotimi who, not just satisfied with transliteration of Yoruba proverbs and poetry, has advanced towards pidgin which seems to satisfy his urban audiences. However, his pidgin plays  Holding Talks  and  Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again  lack the spectacle of his earlier historical plays  Kurumi  and  Oba Ovonramwen . In Sierra Leone, Ulisa Ahmadu Maddy has experimented with pidgin. His play  Take Dem Joe Di Rope  has been a huge success. At the department of English at the university in Zaria, there is a movement, led by Michael Etherton, advocating the use of pidgin plays and this has found expression in the works of most of the promising students who now experiment by adapting plays of famous writers like Brecht into pidgin.

There is another group at the Ahmadu Bello University involved in theater experimentation. The geographic area served by this university is very large and it encompasses more than a hundred languages. To compound the difficulty of communication, the use of pidgin is minimally restricted to the urban areas. In seeking for an artistic medium to serve these masses, pidgin was ignored as being unrealistic; instead, it was decided to use dance-mime-drama. This has been very successful: the dance-mime plays have enjoyed large audiences and the tradition is spreading to most of the television houses in the north. In 1976 a group toured Britain with these dance-drama plays, called *fadakarwa*, and from Aberdeen to London to the Devon countryside, the audiences understood the message clearly.

This theater group has also experimented with the con-

cept of total language which was mentioned before. In 1975, an improvised play, Lawal King Fu Kaduna, was produced and used English, pidgin, Hausa, Tiv and Zulu. The play was well received by university, urban and rural audiences. Further experimentation was done through Ziky Kofoworola's play Goran Gija which adapts Hausa narrative and makes use of performance forms such as goge music to preach for revolutionary change. My play Second Circle, which premiered to mark the 1978 Ahmadu Bello University Convocation, represents an experiment with Tiv traditional forms of dance, masquerade and puppets along with folktale and myth. It was also well received.

That Africa has produced more critics than playwrights is regrettable; and, it is even more regrettable that there are so few researchers. The task of finding an African aesthetic rests more on playwrights than critics. But, these playwrights must engage in a little research in oral tradition and traditional performance in order to share a truly African aesthetic without falsification. Let the critic heed the warning of Kofi Awoonor:

*No critical approach to African writing in English, French or Portuguese can ignore the aesthetic concepts of time, ontological systems and perception of the world which more of the writers bring to their work.<sup>11</sup>*

A critic of drama must be keenly aware if he is to understand the traditional aesthetic reflected in many contemporary African dramas. During a Tiv puppet performance that lasts for four minutes, there is a man with a stick trying to kill a lizard on a tree. Everytime he tries to kill it, the lizard changes position on the tree. A critic of Tiv puppet theater or forms of it should know that the performance serves to demonstrate Tiv solidarity and proves the truth of the Tiv proverb that a lizard on a tree cannot escape from two men.

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#### Notes

1. Achebe, 1962.
2. Andrew Horn, Seminar on Bori Medium Possession, Zaria, Nigeria, 1977.
3. Wole Soyinka, Myth, Literature, and the African World, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1976, p. 7.
4. Scott Kennedy, In Search of African Theatre, Scribner's, 1973, p. 42.

5. Banham and Wakes, African Theatre Today, Pitman, London, 1976, see Introduction.
6. Oyin Ogunba, The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1975, p. 2.
7. Bernth Lindfors, unpublished seminar paper.
8. S. Iyasere, in *West African Journal of Modern Languages*, Ibadan, Nigeria, Vol. 2, 1976.
9. Addison Gayle, The Black Aesthetic, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1971, p. xxii.
10. Michael Etherton, in *African Literature Today*, Heinemann, London; Africana Publishing Co., New York, 1976, Vol. 8.
11. Kofi Awoonor, in In Person--Achebe, Awoonor, and Soyinka at the University of Washington, K. L. Morell, ed., African Studies Program, Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies, Seattle, University of Washington; initial distribution by African and Afro American Studies and Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, 1975, p. 40.