

"SCATTERED SPOTLIGHTS IN THE SEARCH FOR CLARITY"

*The Drama of Black Africa.* By Anthony Graham-White. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1974

Scholarship in Sub-Saharan African drama and theater has been very slow in coming. This phenomena is not surprising when we realize that serious studies in drama did not begin in African Universities until the last decade. The dramatic activities of L'Ecole William Ponty which later spread throughout Dakar, in Senegal, were originally designed to show off exotic African talents to the metropolis, and the colonial governors, who accompanied the Africans on such tours, were often at pains to justify their art through double-talk. On the one hand, the artists were carriers of the authenticity and truth of the African world. On the other hand, however, they represented a synthesis; not merely the artistic synthesis of song, dance, music and literature which belonged to the African, but also the cultural synthesis into which the African has been transmuted in the process of colonial assimilation. It is out of the recollections of this experience that Bakary Traoré wrote his *Le Theatre Negro-Africain*, published by Presence Africaine in 1959, and later translated into English by Dapo Adelugba and published by Ibadan University Press (1972) under the title *The Black African Theater and its Social Functions*.

The next significant work to appear in this area is Anthony Graham-White's *The Drama of Black Africa*. Content-wise, *The Black African Theater* is a microcosm, and *The Drama of Black Africa*, a macrocosm, for while Bakary Traoré generalizes on African Theater through the glimpses from L'Ecole William Ponty and Fodeba's Theatre Africain, Anthony Graham-White approaches his study through a more intensive study of West African dramatic types, with frequent incursions into other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa. The result, Traoré's study is full of generalizations which have no textual support while Graham-White's work contains an abundance of critical references which do not necessarily fit into a historical or artistic pattern. This observation is material for a longer essay which I do not mean to pursue in the present context, and as such I would rather devote the rest of my comments to Graham-White's, *The Drama of Black Africa*.

In a discipline such as Drama/Theater where Western Scholars ask, relative to the African continent, "Is there any?", the need to provide information, no matter how sketchy becomes an urgent and necessary one indeed. Graham-White has doubly proved that there is an abundance of material on the drama in Black Africa, first to his Stanford University Drama professors; and secondly, through Samuel French Inc; he has brought this material to the wider world. One is therefore more tempted to praise the research efforts of Graham-White (as Dapo Adelugba does in his Preface to the work) than in raising questions based on scholarly-theoretical concepts on the quality and accuracy of the material, for nobody who reads *The Drama of*

*Black Africa* will fail to be impressed by the quantity and quality of scholarly sources quoted. These sources, secondary as they are, nevertheless constitute a major reference source to scholars interested in Drama and Theater in Black Africa. What advantages field trips and interviews would have provided have been comparatively attained through very intensive library research.

*The Drama of Black Africa* "is not a history of African drama", says Graham-White in his "Introduction", but a survey of the main dramatic types, "the scope of each", the "common themes and their development", thus indicating briefly "what may be the directions in which African drama is moving." (p. 1). Yet nobody who scans through the book will fail to be guided by its obvious historical and critical development or methodology. Thus, Chapter I begins on "The Origins of Drama in Africa" and the book ends with a "Conclusion" which speculates on the future of drama in Africa relative to the emergence of the African dramatist who is at once an individual and representative of his society, a situation the author compares with the English Renaissance period of dramatic history. Even the categorization of the main dramatic types into the "traditional, popular and literary" (p. 2), must be associated with historical development in the analysis and treated as such. From "The Origins of Drama in Africa" through "Drama of the Colonial Period" (Chapter 3) to "Drama Seeking Independence" (Chapter 4), the historical perspective is constant but instead of "literary Drama" and "Popular Drama" as headings for Chapters 5 and 6, Graham-White resorts truly to his "perspectives". Thus "Yoruba Opera" represents Popular Drama and "J.P. Clark and Wole Soyinka" stand for "Literary Drama". The result is that there appears to be no organizing methodology for the rest of the work and this leaves the reader not with the authority of Graham-White on African Drama, instead there are a number of voices, all speaking at the same time.

Graham-White is obviously handicapped by his lack of contact with Africans and their art (except for a brief period in London), especially in their own environment. This contact should have been necessary, at least before the publication of the book, to corroborate his earlier information most of which comes from anthropological sources. The three areas of dramatic types treated have become independent areas of research and nobody can supply very justifiable perspectives on them without some field work. Take the area of traditional drama for example. Elaborate dependence on the work of European anthropologists would have been unnecessary had the author observed at least *one* of these performances and investigated its sociological implications. This would have prevented the unfortunate untheatrical language as evidenced by "languages of primitive societies" (p. 9), "magic" as applied to masks and the indiscriminate use of "ritual" for traditional dramatic art. Also the reasons why women

would not be allowed to talk about the masked players, and why these characters would not perform after the rain, would have been dramatically justified. Although the tendency today is towards an interdisciplinary approach to African Studies, no scholar abandons his own field to dwell on the observations of others from another discipline.

The author makes the right observation when he writes, "Dramatic performances are usually given during a festival, just as in classical Athens plays were performed during the festivals of the Lenaea and Dionysus" (p. 33). I prefer to use the term "traditional African festival theater" for most African traditional drama because it is a much more comprehensive and organizing terminology. Festivity calls for entertainment and freedom from "real" life restrictions. And, Western Scholars can only arrive at an objective rather than subjective conclusions on traditional arts when they begin to see these arts as their owners see them, not just as "we are accustomed to". The terms religion and ritual have become bo-constrictors to the traditional African festival drama and other traditional arts. The persistence of these terms have resulted in a mental bloc for Western theater theoreticians. They simply cannot advance further. The production process is seen as ritualistic procedure although their own professional and amateur productions are art not ritual. Simply stated, this position is mere cultural and academic chauvinism because it claims a position of superiority over what it does not actually understand.

Ritual, as Graham-White remarks, "may develop toward drama in three ways: through the modification of the performance, through reason for the performance changing, and through its adoption by another people" (pp. 18-19) and he supports these with African and European examples. Also, drama may develop "alongside ritual, as a supplementary performance" or the after-piece of the ritual ceremony. This theoretical framework towards the relationship between ritual and drama, although not entirely new (See Jane Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* for example), nevertheless should help the researcher in making distinctions between mere religious ritual and art. But we need to go farther than this. Traditional theater being the product of the traditional society in which power and authority belong to the traditional priests who also control the land and the major means of production, it is little wonder why even secular entertainments must be hidden under the religious cloak. Thus, before European colonialism disrupted the dynamics of the African cultural growth, people knew when they were worshipping for practical results and when the license of entertainment takes over. Order had to be imposed in the manner of social sanctions and taboos because disorder would puncture the aesthetic baloon, the willing suspension of disbelief, and shock the performers and their audience into sudden reality.

What Dapo Adelugba considers "a masterly piece of critical insight" for which "many students will be grateful" (See Preface) is Graham-White's analysis of the plays of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark--both of whom he links with the English Renaissance dramatic tradition. Contrary to Adelugba's gratitude to the author, I consider this comparative analysis as farfetched and even patronizing. The reader is not spared the constant reminders that colonialism introduced literary drama into Africa. "The real contribution of colonialism, however, was to provide models for the development of a literary drama" (p. 59) writes Graham White (my emphasis). Later in the text, on page 92, he repeats the same idea, "Drama as a literary genre is a legacy from the colonial period and...African plays often have a tone and structure similiar to anyone accustomed to the British or French theatre." Elizabethan England and Africa are linked by the same sense of national pride (the latter, following independence) which nurtured great theatrical traditions in both places, traditions which depended mainly on foreign models (p. 161). Thus, Colonel Ojukwu during the Biafran crisis addresses newsmen in "sentences Edwardian in phraseology and attitude", J.P. Clark is influenced by Gerald Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and the Jacobean and Wole Soyinka has his models in John Donne, Ben Johnson and John Arden. Of course, it is almost impossible to find any art work conventional or iconoclastic which does not bear the historical imprints of the past. More so, the comparison between Elizabethan England and Africa is misleading because independence did not usher that kind of pride which the Elizabethans felt in the prosperity brought about by the expansion of their empire. In fact, the very things that made the Elizabethans brimful of pride dehumanized the African and ushered misery--for independence always involved the inheritance of empty coffers and real dependence on the colonial power. When, therefore, critics look at J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*, for example, as an imitation of the Greek model, and his *Masquerade Titi* as portrayed "like an Elizabethan heroine" (p. 120), it seems to me that the old prejudices concerning traditional art are being transferred to the literary rather conversely, for in traditional art the artistic intentions are denied, whereas in the literary, it is accepted only because it is the copy of the original. We know, however, that *Song of a Goat* is written after an indigenous African experience, especially the spirit-mediumship which Orukorere represents and the traditional curse of infertility which besets Zifa. This cultural relevance, as in the plays of Soyinka and others, ought to be the major point of consideration when dealing with African dramatists, or any other dramatists for that matter. Style, especially in dramatic writing, can always be transmuted in the stage production, and this, rather than the literary style of the piece should concern the dramatic critic.

Notwithstanding the author's sweeping generalizations on literary drama and lack of authority on the traditional, *The Drama of Black Africa* is highly welcome to the dramatic world of Black Africa.

To the student, foreign and indigenous, of African drama and theater, it is an invaluable introduction to the subject, and to the theater scholar and researcher, the book provides scattered spotlights in the search for historical and critical clarity. No longer will people ask, "Does African drama/theater exist?" *The Drama of Black Africa* proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that not only does it exist, but the results of an investigation can be very rewarding for the determined, hard-working searcher. Dr. Graham-White has shown that this is possible.

-JAMES NDUKAKU AMANKULOR

*Amankulor is a doctoral candidate in Theater Arts at UCLA and editor-in-chief of this journal.*