AFRICAN THEATRE

INTRODUCTION

The roots of theatre in Africa are ancient and complex and lie in areas of community festival, seasonal rhythm and religious ritual as well as in the work of court jesters, travelling professional entertainers, and storytellers. Since the late 1950s, in a movement that has paralleled the political emancipation of so much of the continent, there has grown a theatre that comments back from the colonized world to the world of the colonialists, that discusses the shared experience in the shared languages, and reasserts its own cultural and linguistic integrity. Contemporary African theatre retains a sense of function in the sense that it serves a purpose within communities and cultures that is much greater than simply that of entertainment or diversion. This functional quality gives the theatre a sense of purpose, and influences not only its material but also the nature of its performance and reception. The present-day theatre is enriched and complemented by its co-existence with traditional forms, skills and understanding.

Its vitality, diversification and variety of form and content warn us against attempting too homogeneous a view of African theatre, but centuries of European economic and political domination have inevitably influenced Africa's cultural life, and especially its theatre. During the first half of the 20th-century indigenous theatre movements often reflected Western models, whether in the Nigerian and Ghanaian 'concert party', or the vaudeville presentations of southern African theatre. The Western influences were, however, effectively subverted and eventually dominated or replaced by indigenous forms. The influence of Western-style education continues to determine elements of theatrical form and language in much contemporary drama, but here again we can see playwrights and performers working increasingly on their own terms and asserting a powerful cultural and political identity. Theatre in many parts of Africa has been at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle, and has not relaxed its sense of purpose in the post-independence world. (Witness the banning of Hubert Ogunde's work not only by the colonial government of Nigeria in the 1940s but also by the independent government of the 1960s. Think also of the imprisonment of Soyinka during the Nigerian civil war, or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's exile from Kenya.)

In tandem with all the new activities in theatre, research predominantly by African scholars has pointed to the continuing vitality and relevance of the genuinely communal theatre manifested in festival, ritual and masquerade, with its sophisticated use of dance, mime, costuming and music, and its integral relationship between performers and observers – equal participants. It is the confidence of this resource that underlines the strength of contemporary African theatre.

FESTAC

The first 'World Festival of Negro Arts' was held in Dakar in 1966. This was followed in January 1977 by the second 'Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture' held in Lagos, for which the acronym FESTAC was coined. The festivals were planned as Pan-African celebrations; and the ingredients ranged from performance to debate, dominated primarily by dance and theatre. Further FESTACs remain an ambition; past ones evoke fond nostalgia.

MASQUERADES IN AFRICA

'Masquerade' refers both to a performance given by masked characters and to the masked performer. The term 'masquerade' will be used here to denote the performance, and 'masker' will refer to the performer. 'Mask' refers specifically to the face-covering.

The most important masquerades are those through which spirits enter the human world. In these, the human performer is not simply hidden from view, but is the embodied spirit. This supernatural and secret ability makes the mask, the masker and the masquerade sacred and powerful. The ambivalent visibility (there/not there; seen/not seen; concealed/revealed) is a visual mediation between the known world and the unknown world, legitimating temporary boundary-crossing between normally discrete categories of beings. Powerful masquerades such as the *egungun* ancestral masquerade of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, or the *dama* funeral and commemorative masquerade of the Dogon people of Mali, or the *nyau* initiation masquerade of the Chewa people of Zambia and Malawi are not performed often, and then only surrounded by considerable ritual and ceremony.

Masquerades assume many forms and can appear as spirits coming from the untamed bush into the domestic sphere, as feared and harmful spirits threatening death or destruction, or as benevolent spirits associated with abundance and the fertility of women or of crops. Whilst the majority of masquerades are specific to the people and area of their performance, some newer spirit masquerades such as *mammiwata* have a more widespread popularity.

Other categories of masquerade represent humans and animals who are typically in marginal or temporary states. For example, foreigners such as traders from other areas, neighbouring people, the cattle-herding nomadic people, or Europeans are a popular category for poking fun at. Other masquerades such as the Yoruba *gelede* represent older women as 'witches' who must be appeased, but women are also represented as ideal wives, as prostitutes and as mothers. In all of these masquerades, it is male performers who represent female characters. Only rarely, as among the Sande (or Bundu) women's secret societies mainly of Sierra Leone and Liberia, do women wear masks. Other masquerades, such as those of the Idoma of Nigeria, represent diseased persons (e.g. victims of smallpox or goitre) as a gesture of support, placing them visibly at the centre of the society's concern. There are also many wild or imaginary animals, and while the sacred masquerades arouse awe and fear in the spectator, human and animal masquerades often contain a high degree of entertainment, comedy and informality and are valued for their play qualities. Masquerades can be used as a form of social control, and sometimes a masked figure will publicly reprimand an individual. Antisocial characteristics such as sexual profligacy, meanness, drunkenness or laziness are singled out and the culprit made the butt of jest and mockery. Masked figures often chase women and children to reinforce what is considered to be appropriate submissive behaviour.

The masked figure may be costumed in grasses or leaves or else in fabrics ranging from sumptuous and new to ragged and scruffy, depending

on the character. The mask itself is made of wood, grasses or leaves, or of textile. Sometimes the whole body is costumed in one piece, as with the basketry masks of the Chewa. Where the primary purpose of the masquerade is to comment on social change, topical elements such as aeroplanes, motorbikes, policemen and soldiers are carved as part of the masks. Carvers, who are sometimes also the performers, develop their own style and may experiment with bold colours in gloss paint.

Almost all masquerades are performed to music, and the individual performance of any masked figure is judged and appreciated by a skilled and critical audience both for the appropriateness of the movements to a character and for the degree of skill in matching rhythm to movement. Masked figures may move in a measured and stately way, as in the sacred ancestral masquerades, or may dart about and change their shape suddenly – as, for example, in the *ekong* masquerade of the Annang people or the Tiv *kwagh-hir*, or like the *onidan* performers in the Yoruba *egungun* masquerades. To be able to change shape is not a human characteristic, so such movements emphasize the masked figure as non-human. Great skill is needed by the performer in order to effect a transformation aesthetically, and how well it is achieved is one criterion of excellence. Similarly, the masker on stilts must negotiate the crowd without falling over, for his skill reflects the ability of the community to negotiate the difficulties in the times ahead. During a performance both comic and fierce masked figures may dash up to members of the audience, startling them with their sudden attention and making the crowd laugh with excitement and admiration of their control.

Powerful masquerades whose roles arise from religious or political beliefs change little in appearance and performance over decades, but new social and economic conditions create new concerns, and so in response new masks and masquerades are created or old ones revived such as the *ode-lay* masquerades of Sierra Leone. Some, like *mammiwata* – concerning a water goddess associated with sexuality and wealth – are popular in several countries of Africa, but nevertheless develop local usage, meanings and appearance, whilst others like the Tiv *kwagh-hir* continually develop new acts and characters but remain performed only by Tiv people.

Masquerades are performed by men even when they are representing female characters. All masquerades are a demonstration of supernatural power and, with few exceptions, men monopolize the performing. Strict rules govern the appearances of all masquerades, and some sacred masks cannot even be seen by any adult who is a woman. Most masked figures cannot be touched by women, nor should women know the identity of the mask-wearer, for to do so would acknowledge the presence of the human performer in the masquerade. Theoretically, transgressions can be punished severely – previously, even by death – but in practice women frequently do know all there is to know, and yet continue to provide the supportive role of audience and chorus in the masquerade. The threat of physical and spiritual sanctions is enough to ensure that most women publicly collude in maintaining the secrecy surrounding the masquerade – a *théâtre-de-complicité*.

It seems likely that, in performance, masked performers enter a state of altered consciousness; and ritualized preparations such as fasting, sexual abstinence, prayer and sacrifice, as well as drinking alcohol, costuming and covering the face, all combine to free the performer from personal and social constraints. Sacred masquerades are performed only by ritually appropriate groups such as a specific lineage or age set, but initiation into the more secular masquerades is open to most young men.

English-speaking Africa

The universities in the anglophone nations of Africa played an important part in developing theatre activities from the late 1950s onward, both through the playwrights they produced and through the establishment or encouragement of imaginative performance venues and initiatives. The latter ranged from the travelling theatres in Nigeria and Uganda to the Chikwakwa community theatre in Zambia. With much of the new drama emerging from the universities, it is not surprising that a certain 'elitist' tone characterized much of the work – either in terms of its concern with the problems of the young educated man or woman in conflict with traditional manners and attitudes, or in the choice and use of language.

The language debate remains a crucial one: Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues that only by rejecting English can he 'decolonize the mind'. Calls have been made, by Wole Soyinka amongst others, to replace English with a Pan-African language. The Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi proposes 'the domestication of the English language – handling it within the terms of traditional linguistic identity'. A positive move is also being made by younger dramatists towards exploring the use of pidgin as a lingua franca. It is important to remember that in notionally 'English-speaking' nations, indigenous languages are often paramount both in terms of day-to-day usage and in government and culture. Swahili, for instance, is the language of much theatre – published and unpublished – in Tanzania and elsewhere in East Africa, including the important plays of Ebrahim Hussein. Yoruba in Nigeria is the appropriate language of the immensely popular theatre of 'Baba Sala' as well as the 'operas' of Duro Ladipo, celebrating as they do the myths and history of the Yoruba people. Shona and Ndebele are the languages of much new writing for the theatre in Zimbabwe.

Growing alongside the literary theatre has been a dynamic popular theatre, often using indigenous languages and unscripted, improvised material. The nature of this theatre ranges from broad farce to serious commen-

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tary and protest. Protest theatre itself is, not surprisingly, at its most effective and dynamic in South Africa, where 'township theatre' has not only produced an exceptional group of playwrights and performers, but has also determined a political agenda. One of the intriguing questions for the future of South African theatre is how a theatre geared to protest – whether through the relatively sophisticated productions of the Johannesburg Market Theatre or Cape Town's Space Theatre, or the street theatre productions of transient radical groups – will accommodate itself to the changing political scene. Having found such a challenging role in effecting change, will the theatre be able to change itself, and contribute to the new dialogue in a post-apartheid, majority-rule South Africa? South African playwrights and performers are exploring the exciting potential of interculturalism within their own nation.

Theatre-for-development, a community theatre activity designed either for propaganda (health care and hygiene, literacy, good agricultural practices and so on) or, in a more radical context, as a vehicle of conscientization, has also been experimented with and applied in many areas of the continent. The Botswana *Laedza Batanani* (*The Sun is Risen, Come Out and Work*) initiative in 1974 set in train one of the most interesting contemporary explorations of the potential of theatre, to some extent running in parallel with the experiments of practitioners outside Africa, such as Augusto Boal in Brazil, and complementing similar movements in other developing countries. The ideology and the practice of theatre-for-development has been tested and extended by the practitioners themselves in conferences and workshops, and in action through the work of companies and individuals. Typically, Oga Steve Abah in Zaria, Nigeria, through the Samaru Project, has used the resources of a university drama department to contribute to the conscientization of rural communities. Zakes Mda in Lesotho (*When People Play People*, London, 1993), Penina Muhando Mlama in Tanzania (*Culture and Development: The Popular Theatre Approach in Africa*, Uppsala, 1991) and Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh in Cameroon (*Hammocks to Bridges*, Yaounde, 1986) have all made important contributions to the critical and methodological literature of what has become one of Africa's most buoyant theatre movements.

French-speaking Africa south of the Sahara

'Francophone' sub-Saharan Africa is the term used with increasing frequency since the 1960s, in both English and French, to describe a group of sixteen African countries where, as a result of French and Belgian colonial rule (roughly between 1885 and 1960), French is the language of government, business and administration. While these countries, from Senegal in the west through Zaire in the centre to Chad in the east, each have a unique cultural identity, they have also evolved, by virtue of their similar colonial experience (especially those under a centralizing power like France), a distinctive modern African culture.

This francophone African culture, a synthesis of local African and imported French and Belgian traditions, has found expression in many forms: in the popular music of a Franco or Tabu Ley (Zaire), in the cinema of a Sembène Ousmane (Senegal) or a Souleymane Cissé (Mali), and in the philosophical writings of a Paulin Houtondji (Benin) or Yves-Valentin Mudimbé (Zaire). But it is in literature that it has found its most powerful voice. The earliest practised genre was poetry in the 1930s, with Léopold Senghor; then came fiction in the early 50s with Camara Laye, Mongo Beti and Abdoulaye Sadji, and almost a decade later, in terms of significant published works, theatre dominated.

In spite of its relative youth, the theatre is now a vital aspect of the literature of sub-Saharan Africa in French, accounting for an important corpus of some three hundred pub-

lished plays. Many of these, by playwrights like CHEIK NDAO (see Senegal), BERNARD DADIÉ (see Côte d'Ivoire), SONY LABOU TANSI and TCHICAYA U'TAMSI (see Congo, Republic of), and GUILLAUME OYONO-MBIA (see Cameroon), are of the highest standard and are regularly produced in francophone Africa. Some have been performed in France – at the Avignon Festival, and in Limoges, at the Festival International des Francophonies, launched in 1985 to promote world theatre in the French language. The Théâtre International de Langue Française, a troupe founded in 1985 by the French director Gabriel Garran, has been producing plays by U'Tamsi and Labou Tansi in theatres in Paris and its districts, while Françoise Kourilsky's Ubu Repertory Theatre has been promoting francophone African theatre in New York since 1987, by organizing staged readings and performances of plays by ZADI ZAOUROU (see Ivory Coast), SENOUVO ZINSOU (see Togo) and Maxime Ndébéka (b. 1944).

Over the years, francophone Africa has also produced actors of talent like the Paris-based Senegalese Bachir Touré and Douta Seck, Cameroonian Lydia Ewandé and, more recently, Malian Bakary Sangaré. The first three played roles in the 1960s in productions, mostly by Jean-Marie Serreau but also by Roger Blin, of plays by Jean Genet, AIMÉ CÉSAIRE (see Caribbean Theatre, Introduction) and Kateb Yacine; while over the past five years Sangaré has appeared in plays by Abdou Anta Ka, U'Tamsi and Césaire, and in a production by Peter Brook of *Woza Albert*.

That the theatre should prove an attraction to francophone Africans and become a crucial cultural nexus in their region is hardly surprising. Such a potential had always existed in this area of millennial cultures, where the performance of ancient oral narratives such as the Sunjata and Mwindo epics of old Mali and Zaire respectively by traditional bards, commonly known in francophone Africa as *griots*, as well as the enactment of rituals, takes on the quality of drama and theatre by the very circumstances of their performance. It is this potential, recognized in the 1930s by French educators like Charles Béart, and developed in their African students first at the Ecole Supérieure Primaire de Bingerville in the Ivory Coast and then at the École William Ponty in SENEGAL, that gave rise to the first dramatic compositions in French by sub-Saharan Africans. The best of these – Dadié's *Assémien Déhylé* (1936), for instance – were taken on tour to Paris for the Colonial Exhibition of 1937 and published in *Traits d'Union*, the cultural organ of French West African countries.

The subsequent development of francophone theatre was the result of concrete measures taken by the colonial authorities and later by the governments of some of the independent states. These include the building of theatres like the Daniel Sorano in Dakar; the founding of theatre arts institutes in Abidjan and Bamako, and other cities; the organizing of drama competitions by Radio France Internationale; and, in the immediate pre- and post-independence periods, the sponsoring of tours to Africa by French theatre directors and critics, including Raymond Hermantier, Henri Cordreaux and Jacques Schérer, to spot talent and train theatre specialists, and by theatre companies like the Greniers de Toulouse and the Théâtre des Amandiers.

Francophone African drama falls, in terms of themes, into three broad categories: historical, social and political. The first accounts for most of the plays produced so far. In exalting language, Ndao's *L'Exil d'Albouri* (*Albouri's Exile*, 1967), Jean Pliya's *Kondo le requin* (*Kondo the Shark*, first published 1966) and Séydou Badian's *La Mort de Chaka* (*The Death of Chaka*, 1962), for example, depict the careers of various 19th-century warrior-kings. In their heroic struggles to defend their territories, often against France, is conveyed a living sense of pre-colonial societies at their most glorious. This predilection for history is as much a legacy of the history-conscious oral traditions of the dramatists as it is a felt, nationalist need to pre-

sent a dramatic corrective to the colonial view of the African past. With dramatists like Dadié or Charles Nokan, however, history (whether factual or legendary) is used not for glorification but for the framework and necessary safe distance (from the censor?) that it offers for a critical reflection on the present.

The dislocating effects of modern culture on traditional beliefs and customs, and the retrograde nature of some of the latter, constitute the second, social, category of mostly comic plays: such as Oyono-Mbia's *Trois prétendants ... un mari* (*Three Suitors, One Husband*, 1964), Guy Menga's *La Marmite de Koka Mbala* (*Koka Mbala's Pot*, 1969) and Protais Asseng's *Trop c'est trop* (*Enough is Enough*, 1981). The third group of plays by, among others, U'Tamsi (*Le Destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku, The Glorious Destiny of Marshal Nnikon Nniku*, 1979), Maxime Ndébéka (*Equatorium*, 1989) and Sony Labou Tansi explore the political corruption and ugly tyrannies that have sprung up in post-colonial African societies.

Over the past decade or so, francophone African theatre has moved in new directions. In the plays of dramatists like NICOLE WEREWERE-LIKING (see Cameroon) or Zaourou (*La Termitière, The Anthill*, 1981), ritual ceremonies – especially healing, initiation and purification rites – have provided the bases, in content and structure, for a new type of drama.

In terms of form, francophone theatre is heavily influenced by oral performance modes and the conventions of traditional genres. Elements of this influence include the episodic and undramatic nature of the action in many (especially historical) plays; the tendency to give epic grandeur to the most factual of events; the display of a vivid sense of spectacle through recourse to colourful ceremonies and to the visual and rhetorical presentation of the heroic deeds of the main characters, as in Pliya's *Kondo le requin*; the use of the cultural figure of the *griot* either as a character integrated into the action as in Eugène Dervain's *La reine scélérate* (*The Villainous Queen*, 1968) or as presenter of and commentator on the dramatized events, such as the ghost-provocateur in Ndébéka's *Equatorium* or the public entertainer in SYLVAIN BEMBA's (see Congo, Republic of) *L'Homme qui tua le crocodile* (*The Man who Killed the Crocodile, 1972*). The *griot*'s technique of acting several characters in the course of the same performance is also widely used: in Zinsou's *On joue la comédie* (*We are Acting*, 1972), for instance, in which the presenter Xuma acts the hero Chaka in a playlet within the play.

The use, as in traditional performances, of music, song and dance is also widespread. These elements signify and can contribute to dramatic action, as does the *lagyah* tune, for example, in Thiérno Ba's *Bilbassy* (1980). Sometimes they are used to entertain or to involve the audience in the action. Often, however, they degenerate into folklorism. A final legacy of oral performance to the modern theatre is to be found in the conception of scenic space as consisting of both stage and auditorium. Thus in Oyono-Mbia's *Trois prétendants ... un mari* it is the entire village community that is the stage.

Francophone theatre does not, though, merely borrow elements of form from tradition. It dramatizes actual *texts* of that tradition: that is, 'autonomous and isolated works ... highly organised as full and independent imaginative statements' irrespective of their orality, as the critic Abiola Irele has noted. An example is Dervain's *La reine scélérate*, which is a staged version of the Da Monzon epic, an oral chronicle of the 19th-century exploits of the Diarra dynasty of the Bambara people of Mali. Nor is theatrical activity in francophone Africa limited to 'art' or 'university' theatre. There also exists a dynamic modern popular theatre in the 'concert parties' and *kantatas* of Togo, and in the plays of Souleymane Koly of Côte d'Ivoire, for example, and of Zomo Bel Abel, Daniel Ndo and Jean-Michel Kankan of Cameroon.

A common thread runs through this activity: there are no scripts; the plots are improvised;

the themes treated are topical and of concern to the mass of the urban poor or unemployed who mostly constitute its audience; the language is a pot-pourri of pidgin French and local languages; and the action is conducted mostly through song and dance, though through dialogue too.

Another type of theatre in francophone Africa is the community development theatre, or theatre of social intervention. Its aim is to use the medium of the theatre to enable various target communities to better understand and participate in the development projects conceived for them. The plays are in the local languages, the actors are mostly drawn from members of the communities concerned, and the forms adopted are taken from their cultures. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are the great practitioners in francophone Africa of this type of theatre.

While all of this activity is, in one way or another, part of the new drama and theatre, francophone Africa is still home to a variety of traditional theatrical performances. The best-known is the *Kotéba* satirical theatre of the Bambara people of Mali, whose aesthetic is at the heart of current researches by the Groupe Dramatique of Mali to establish a new way of acting and writing.

Portuguese-speaking Africa

European theatre was introduced very early on, by missionaries, into the Portuguese colonies. The plays were religious in character, their objective being the propagation of Catholicism. The religion of the Africans was not taken into consideration: the settlers imposed on them their own religion and culture. The literary genre of drama, as seen from a Western point of view, appeared much later than poetry and prose in the Portuguese-speaking African countries. This can be explained by the fact that the colonialists provided very little in the way of facilities needed to perform a play, and that poetry could more freely express the violence experienced by the colonized peoples.

When independence was declared in 1975 in Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and São Tomé e Príncipe, illiteracy was higher than 90 per cent. This had affected both literary production and the people's interest in drama. It was very difficult to publish at all, and as writers had little incentive to do so anyway there came about a cultural stagnation. Portuguese colonialism had imposed severe

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censorship on newspapers and books: any expression of opinions contrary to those held by the ruling power would not be published. The principles of negritude and Pan-Africanism had formed the political and cultural background that had led to the armed struggle for liberation in 1961 in Angola, in 1963 in Guinea-Bissau and in 1964 in Mozambique. This anti-colonial war had led to their independence, after a coup in Portugal in 1974 that had overthrown the oldest dictatorship in Europe.

Negritude and Pan-Africanism influenced in part the dramatic production of these territories. Although some plays performed before independence directly challenged the ruling values, the majority were vaudeville pieces that came from metropolitan areas, their objective being mainly to amuse the white spectators. After independence Marxist regimes were formed, aiming to make good the damage done by colonialism and to build a classless society. Drama was often used as a means of politicizing people, as an instrument of the principles of socialist realism.

Angola

As elsewhere in Portuguese-speaking Africa, the subjects of the plays performed by the missionaries related to Catholicism. And as critic Carlos Vaz notes, 'the roles of the Infant Jesus, of the Angels and of Joseph and Mary could only be performed by white people, while the roles of Judas, Satan and even sometimes Herod were only performed by the blacks'. The vaudeville pieces staged mainly by theatre groups from the cities offered the only light relief.

Important 20th-century plays include Domingos Van-Dúmem's *Auto de Natal* (*Christmas Play*), performed in Luanda in 1972 and written in Quimbundo, a native language, as a reaction against the language imposed by the settlers and as a revalidation of the African culture; two plays by Orlando de Albuquerque, published in 1974, *Ovibanda* and *O filho de Zambi* (*Zambi's Son*), on Angolan religious themes; and the children's play *Os pioneiros do futuro* (*The Pioneers of the Future*, 1974), by Júlio de Almeida and Elsa de Sousa.

A month after Angola became independent in 1975, the Union of Angolan Writers was formed. They promulgated:

> At this moment when our people have just taken over full responsibility for their future as a free and sovereign nation, Angolan writers take their stand at the forefront, facing the enormous tasks of national liberation and reconstruction.
>
> Out literary history bears witness to the generations of writers who were able in their own time to keep alive the process of our liberation by expressing the deep longings of our people, mainly those of its most exploited classes. Thus Angolan literature emerges not merely as an aesthetic need but also as a weapon for the affirmation of the Angolans.
>
> The first step of direct armed struggle against colonialism has been made. Angolan writers in many different ways answered the call to arms, and some gave their lives on the field of honour for their fatherland.
>
> Today, our people have entered into a new battle in this centuries-old war for our self-assertion as a free nation, in Africa and in the world. Once more, as is their duty and tradition, Angolan writers are present at the heart of this popular resistance, joining the battle on the cultural front.

This statement encapsulates the themes that dominated literature in Angola during the first years of independence. Confirming this, the then president of the republic, Agostinho Neto, himself an eminent poet, declared that 'literature in this independent country of Angola, which is marching towards a superior form of social organization – socialism – must necessarily reflect this new situation'. However, two years later, realizing that art had merely served politics, had no autonomy, and had often been