

Origin and Forms of Drama in the African Context

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"The world is a stage and drama a mirror of society" — this expression is heard in many languages and countries. Probably it is as old as drama itself. The origin of drama is difficult to trace and its development in human society is hard to describe on the basis of verifiable facts. Originally the ancient Greek word drama means "action". This term is said to be used for the first time, in connection with what we call drama, about 560 B.C. by a Greek called Thespis when he enriched his religious singing and dancing choirs with a costumed, masked person who expressed a part of the action in meaningful words and gestures. Since that time drama has been the indication of that art which represents a human event in the presence of a more or less involved audience and which is focused on Man.

As to the origin of drama, we can only assume that it developed from religious rites, because examples of such development are found in different places of the world, in Africa and elsewhere. As far as Africa is concerned, one may think e.g. of the masquerades in Nigeria and a great many dances and rituals, as Okot p'Bitek describes in *Horn of my Love* (1974).

Dramatic ritual is functional in traditional society, because rites are efforts "to change the undesirable, or to maintain the desirable" (A. I. Richards 1956: 113). Therefore they must be performed impeccably. When something goes wrong or is omitted, the effect will be lost and it has to be done all over again. Dramatic elements cannot be ignored in magic rites, but one can only then speak of drama when a separation is effected between two groups, "where movement meets countermovement (. . .) where the leader of the dance separates himself from the choir and places himself in front of the others" (Van der Leeuw 1955: 86). Of course it is difficult to mark a clear limit between dramatic ritual and drama.

Originally everybody plays his part in the "action", although some people may participate more actively than others. Gradually, forms are developed which assign the dramatic parts to one or several actors, while the rest of the people become "audience". Thus a small group represents and expresses the preoccupations and emotions of the whole community.

The ancient literature has been transmitted orally from generation to generation. The story-telling performance itself is the essential part of oral literature.

In narrating the old stories the main point is the sung or spoken performance: music, singing, dancing, mimicry, masks and costumes may complete the oral "text". The narrator improvises on familiar themes, while the performance proceeds within a fixed frame of traditional ritual actions, formulas and refrains. A clear separation between oral literature and drama cannot be made. In fact, oral literature is always at the same time drama in a way, because the performance is such an essential aspect of this literature, just as in modern written drama. Sentiments, mimicry, gestures, intonation, rhythm and pause, variation of moods and reacting upon the moods of the public, this is all part of the oral character of the African non-written literature and it is also inherent to drama.

Ruth Finnegan (1970: 2) has emphasized that in the study of African literature its most basic characteristic has constantly been overlooked, which is the significance of the actual performance: "Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion — there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product". She says that the parallel is less to written literature than to music and dance, which also depend on repeated performances for their continued existence. Such is also the case of a play.

The question whether in precolonial Africa "real drama" has existed is one of those typical examples of western ethnocentric thinking. Several Europeans have denied the existence of African drama, before the arrival of the colonizer. Cornevin even dedicates his book on African drama to the father or the "bon oncle" of African drama, Charles Béart, director of the Ecole Supérieure of Bingerville in the thirties in colonial French West Africa. (Cornevin 1970: 52 ff.).

It is of course not correct to use Western drama, in the way it has developed during the last centuries, as a criterion to decide whether drama exists in other cultures or not! If, for instance, language does not dominate over all the other elements in the performance of a community this does not mean that there exists no drama at all in this community, as it has sometimes been assumed in western countries. One should always take into account the norms of the society itself with respect to the forms of drama it appreciates and performs. The above definition (Van der Leeuw) makes it possible to prevent such useless discussions. However, it has the disadvantage of not stating exactly which kind of representation is meant, which is the usual problem with such general definitions.

As we said, oral literature contains always at the same time elements of drama: the story-telling performance is a total happening, a total theater in several ways: in the first place because the narrator is often also a *poet*, a *singer*, a *musician* and an *actor*.

He is a *poet* because he re-creates in his own, improvising way, the traditional "texts". He is able to do so on account of his knowledge, his mastership and his command of traditional literature.

He is a *singer* because he sings the complete text or a part of it, and a *musician* when he accompanies himself on his own instrument. Sometimes there is a whole orchestra of percussion-instruments, drums, xylophones and so on.

He is a *actor*, because he interprets different roles with voice and mimicry. It is also total theatre in another sense, namely by the active participation of the audience. *Dancing, music and singing have a community character and are concentrated on the dialogue between two groups or between a single person and a group.* Dancing and music are still an important part of African drama, also in the plays written by western-influenced playwrights.

In the history of literature and culture, it is never possible to bring about a clear separation between eras, periods and movements, because they always influence one another. This certainly holds also for oral and written literature in Africa, which unfortunately are treated too often as if they were two completely distinct matters. Likewise, in the case of drama, it would be absolutely incorrect to treat traditional drama-forms as one thing and the so-called modern drama as another thing. The oral tradition continues partly in written literature and traditional drama influences very much written drama in our time. In more than one play the narrator functions in a similar manner as he did traditionally. The same holds for a number of other devices in African contemporary drama.

Before going into the subject of these devices, it is perhaps useful to pay some attention to the different traditional genres, as far as their influence can be traced in modern drama. Unfortunately we cannot do much more than enumerate the best-known genres and give a few examples in this paper.

-- The idea of *myth* as a genre is difficult to define and most controversial. I would rather call the stories based on myths "stories from the beginning" as Tom Omara does in his *The Exodus* (1972: 48). The events take place centuries ago in what is nowadays called Acholiland, east of the Nile, in the north of Uganda. Originally it was an aetiological story in which it is explained why two related clans do not live on the same side of the river. The play as Omara wrote it some years ago, is introduced by a narrator who sits among a group of children, before the stage or among the audience. The children ask questions and are answered by the narrator, until they arrive at the point where the play is taken over by the "real actors". Omara adds explicitly that this first scene of the play can also be substituted by a narrator summarizing this part, as it surely has been done traditionally. In the version with the children, an old song forms the obligatory transition to the performance of the ancient events:

„3rd Boy: The story of the beginning. Yes, I know it.

Narrator: Tell your brothers and sisters, then. Tell your generation. Your mothers should have told you this. My mother told me; and my mother's mother told her. That is how the story has lived on. Tell them, my son.

3rd Boy: Long, long ago, before anyone was born, God, the Moulder, the

Nameless One, lowered to earth the First Man. Lwo was his name. Then the world was bare, like an egg's surface. There was nothing like buildings, cars, clothes, or even people except for this single man, Lwo. So that from Lwo spring all the people now alive, you and me. Isn't that right?

Narrator: Go ahead, boy, you know the story.

3rd Boy: Lwo had a grand-daughter who bore forth triplets. These brothers lived a life cursed by their own quarrels and jealousies among themselves. And one day there was such a big quarrel among them that they split up, and for ever after lived on opposite sides of the great river (. . .) But we could put this story on the stage and act it, sir.

Narrator: So that these people would come back re clothed like spirits of our ancestors, do you mean? (. . .) Then let us sing the song that tradition says must precede such a revelation.

They sing the Acholi song Canna. Our attention moves to the stage. (Omara 1972: 48).

Further on, the narrator does not appear any more. The language of this short play is solemn, the dialogues are written in free verse. There is hardly any music in it, no singing, except the song *Canna* in the beginning, and no dancing. It ends with a ceremony in which the brothers swear on their crossed spears that they will never meet again. Omara's *Exodus* indeed stands very close to the traditional way of story-telling.

— It is impossible to distinguish in oral literature between *history* and epics and this holds still more for the plays which are based on these genres: the result depends on the way the writer adapts his source. It is striking to see how many playwrights choose a historical subject as the main theme of their plays. We find a lot of them in West Africa but also several examples at the other side of the continent, e.g. in Zambia, where Masiye adapted his play *The lands of Kazembe* from existing journals and documents. This historical play dramatises "the first major Portuguese attempt, undertaken in 1798, to cross Africa from Beira to Angola through the country of the fabulously rich and powerful empire of Mwaata Kazembe" (Etherton in Masiye 1973: V). Another East African example is of course Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* which has been inspired by historical events. Hussein says himself in the introduction that the "Kinjeketile of the play — *Kinjeketile* — is not an historical evocation of the real man. Kinjeketile here is a creature of the imagination, and although the 'two men' closely resemble one another in their actions, they are not identical. I have had to mould my character, to suit artistic needs, borrowing freely from the imagination when historical facts did not suit my purpose. History should not be used as the measuring stick for this play therefore, rather, its failures or successes should be gauged against rules determining a work of art" (Hussein 1970: v).

Hussein's approach of the historical facts is freer than Masiye's, but he does not treat his hero in an epic way in the traditional sense either.

— Another literary genre of oral tradition is the *epic*. Heroic poetry occurs

everywhere in the world. The traditional epic is much more than a reflection of historical events. The dramatic narrator wants first of all to fascinate his audience, and being an artist he subordinates history to his own imagination. However, there remains always a ground of truth from which the creative imagination of the poet-narrator starts. The epic always describes the illustrious achievements of one or more historical persons, living on in the memory of later generations. A characteristic of the epic is the fact that the main figure, the hero, has really existed. Historical elements like battles, conquests and so on are authentic. In the epic however, the hero becomes braver and his achievements more marvellous and courageous than they might ever have been in reality. Witchcraft and magic may also appear in the epic and sometimes gods and ghosts play a large part in it. The hero becomes more than a human being, he is more than an ordinary ancestor and often honoured as a divine person. Epic heroes are e.g. Soundjata of the Malinke and Ozidi of the Ijaw. Of course, Chaka is one of the best-known heroes of African literature. It seems most remarkable that Chaka has so often been chosen as an epic hero in West-African plays written in French. What might be the reason that a number of modern West-African writers were inspired to write free dramatizations based on precisely this story of the South African Zulu hero? Senghor (1964), Seydou Badian (1962), Djibril Tamsir Niane (1971), Abdou Anta Ka (1972), and Condetto Nénékhaly Camara (1970) have all used the Chaka theme in a different way, according to their own ideas and inspiration, but all tried in their plays to restore the glorious past and to square up with the colonial domination which denied this past. That's probably why Chaka became a "King for all seasons" in the words of Ogunbesan (1973).

— *Traditional Stories about common people*, wise and foolish people, happy and unhappy people, exist in great abundance in Africa. Sometimes a play is based on such a story. One may think of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970), which dramatizes the well-known story of the wilful, beautiful girl who rejects every lover her parents propose. She wants to make her own choice, only to find out afterwards that she has married a devil. This teaches everybody to hold on to the existing rules, which means that women should have little to say in marriage-affairs — just see how badly things turn out for the girl. Ama Ata Aidoo has adapted this old story and put it in the time in which the slave trade flourishes.

Sometimes, in oral tradition, the world of ordinary people meets the world of the spirits, as it happens in Peninah Muhando's *Tambueni Haki Zetu* (1973), which means *Recognize our rights*. In fact this play is based on the political theme of oppression: the local tribal story gets much wider dimensions, because the dramatized events which here confront the world of the spirits and the actual world "could also take place among African groups, in the larger domain of world history, and in particular the history of colonialism and all forms of oppression" (Mbughuni 1976: 91).

— There are also a great many *traditional stories about animals*, often entire cycles. However, modern plays based on animal stories as a genre are not very numerous. As a matter of fact, I know them solely from Ghana, where, among others, Efua Sutherland has dramatized some of them, especially the ones called *Anansesem*, which means literally Ananse stories, but the name is also used for the body of stories told and for the story-telling performance itself. Efua Sutherland developed this traditional genre in the drama-studio in Accra. The spider Ananse is a kind of Everyman showing the people who they are and how qualities such as greediness, ambition, silliness or slyness affect the community. One may laugh tremendously about Ananse and his tricks, but no one ignores the morality of the story. Ananse is, artistically, a medium for society to criticize itself, as it can be seen in the expression: "Exterminate Ananse and society will be ruined" (Sutherland 1975: V). *The marriage of Anansewa* (Sutherland 1975) is such a story-telling drama as the author calls it. Indeed, the story-teller plays a large part in it. He is omniscient as he always can be in oral literature: as of old he knows all that is going to happen, he intervenes in the action and gives his comments. He also is the one who involves the public and goes round among the public to ask their reactions and advice with respect to some awkward situation in the play. Efua Sutherland also maintains the musical intermezzos called *Mboguo*: they are part of the stories themselves and are performed in context, led by the story-teller. But it is a convention for *Mboguo* to be contributed by other people present. They are permitted to halt the narration of a story to make such contributions" (Ibid.: VI). The *Anansesem* are always introduced by one or several *Mboguo* and a libation is necessary before the story-teller can start — as it is often the case in tradition. The singing of the *Mboguo* is accompanied by handclapping and drum-rhythm.

— The last genre to be dealt with here is the *farce*, the short comic play, which existed also in the African tradition before the arrival of the Europeans. Its form is quite special. The farce is played by different actors, each of whom represents a well-known type of the village-life. Hunters, warriors or farmers play the principal part. The best-known subjects are the jealous husband who is ridiculed, the frivolous wife, the braggart, the caught lovers, the scoundrel, the glutton and so on. The farce is a comical genre which is practised everywhere in the world, to teach and amuse the public. Everything has always to end well: the problems are solved, the battle-axe is buried, the evil is punished and virtue is rewarded. The success of this kind of drama depends for the greater part on the talent for acting and improvisation of the actors, in fact they make the play while performing the comic events. There is a succession of quick actions which leave little rest and space for much singing and dancing. Someone always gives chase to someone else in the farce. An example is Mukasa-Balikuddembe's *The mirror*. He heard the story for the first time when it was told in the Runyoro/Rutoro language, one of the languages spoken in his country Uganda. He has jotted it down, translated it and dramatized it himself. It

deals with the rewarding subject of supposed infidelity. In *The mirror* we meet Bamuroga, his wife Kabuleeta and a neighbour. Bamuroga has bought a large mirror for his wife, while she is away from home to visit her parents for a few days. It is the first mirror in the entire village! When Kabuleeta returns, her husband is not at home. She looks in the mirror, but draws the wrong conclusions when she sees her own reflection in the mirror:

"So, there's another woman in the house. My husband has found someone to replace me in my absence, has he? I'll tell her what I think of her. (She *addresses her own reflection*). I can see that you have assumed complete authority in this house. Let me warn you beforehand that I shall not cook under the same roof as a sneaking harlot. You see these cups, these plates, these pots? Well, I bought them with my own money from my mother, and I shall take them back with me. You will have to buy your own" (o.c.: 138).

When Bamuroga enters, unsuspectingly, a serious fight is inevitable. It ends with the intervention of the neighbour in the matrimonial quarrel.

Over and again it appears how strongly tradition continues to persist in contemporary African drama. This is not only so regarding the *genres* we talked about, but also when one looks at the use of *devices*, which derive from tradition. We mentioned already the function of the story-teller who introduces or frames the play, dances, singing, and music. Another important device is the use of *traditional language*, which even in English or French translation sounds different from European French or English: e.g. the proverbs and images have their own function in the dialogue. A typical aspect of urban African drama is the use of *different languages in the same play*. People in the African towns often understand and speak several languages. The popular playwright exploits this situation in order to give a special dimension to his play: the audience understands immediately why this or that actor speaks one language or another. In Kisangani in 1965 I saw the performance of a Christmas-play. It was played in the local language, Kiswahili, but the actors who played the roles of the soldiers spoke Lingala, which is the language used in the army in Zaire. Finally, the civil servants – in the scene where everybody is ordered by the emperor to be registered, spoke French, the language of the former colonizer as well as the one used by the administration. This example shows how significant the choice of the language can be in an African popular play.

Michael Etherton – who has edited two volumes of *African plays for playing* (1975) – arrives at the same conclusion in an article in which he discusses the use of language of popular playwrights, taking examples from the plays of the Zambian Kasoma and the Cameroonesse Musinga.

An example of the use of not only traditional, but also other excellent artistic devices is given by Ebrahim Hussein in his *Kinjeketile* (1969), as Mbughuni has already pointed out in his article "Old and new drama from East Africa": "Among these devices are spectacles, war dances, rituals and chants. Hussein's use of Swahili colloquial prose to distinguish between different cha-

racters and different states of being, i.e. when Kinjeketile is in trance he speaks differently, is highly commendable and thought-provoking. His sometimes jarring juxtaposition of philosophical ideas with metaphysical language leads one into new mysteries of thought and the complexity of human nature, especially in his portrayal of the relationship between nature, the gods, and man" (art. cit.: 89).

However, talking about traditional devices in modern African literature in general and African drama in particular, one should keep in mind the warning of Eldred Jones who states rightly that applying traditional devices does not automatically guarantee an artistic result: "The writer who will make the maximum impact would be the one who adapts these traditional elements to contemporary uses", he said at the International Seminar on African Literature in Leiden last year.

It seems to me that the large themes which preoccupy many modern playwrights are tradition and change and the problems of the big city, of course both of them are often intertwined. As far as East Africa is concerned one may think of e.g. Ngugi's plays *The black hermit* (1968) and *This time tomorrow* (1973) and of Rebecca Njau (1960 and 1964), Watene (1973), and Imbuga (1973) to mention only a few names. Their themes originate from and are related to the confrontation with the western world and urbanization.

The forms of modern written drama in Africa have also been influenced by western forms of drama:

1. The language is more often than not a western language, especially as far as the published plays are concerned, which besides are mostly published by European publishing houses.

2. The verbal element dominates the music, singing and dancing.

3. The distance between the stage and the audience becomes larger and the curtain emphasizes this distance once more, this means often more or less audience involvement.

4. The "artistic information" is offered in a far more concentrated form and conveyed to the public in a much shorter lapse of time than it usually happens to be done in the traditional situation: some hours instead of the whole night.

5. The themes have also changed, parallel to society itself.

6. The "modern performance, especially the one presented in the theatre is too often only attended by a small "elite", not in the least because one has to pay entrance tickets: different audiences exist in Africa today.

This last point is very significant. In his editorial to the special issue on drama of *African literature today* (1976), Eldred Jones quotes – on the subject of African plays and their performances – the well-known statement that "those which are popular never get published and those which are published are never popular". As a matter of fact, there is a growing gap between popular and literary drama.

Several young playwrights refuse to limit their work to a small public of school and university. Instead they produce popular drama mostly in the city. The popular playwright is not only inspired by the life of the common man in the townships but he also writes his plays for him. Etherton speaks in this respect of an urban pop culture, which is a mixture of traditional and new elements. Etherton compares popular drama as written by Kasoma with the Ghanaean Concert Parties and the Nigerian Folkopera or Sentongo's drama-activities in Uganda. Similar tendencies may be found in the work of South-African drama-groups in the townships of that country, especially those performed by the black students organization SASO. They usually work without an official text in order to avoid the problems of censorship and banning. People in the townships are very much interested in this kind of conscious-making drama which is directly related to the local context and their own situation.

Obviously African drama ignores the phenomenon of *l'art-pour-l'art* as it has been used from time to time in European literature. Music, dance and audience-involvement are still essential in most African drama. European and American playwrights and actors try in various ways to restore the relationships between drama and audience and also those between drama and society. In their search for new forms of expression it might be helpful for them to explore such relationships as of old they have been developed in African drama. Of course drama is in some ways distinct from dramatic ritual, but it seems to me that there should never be a complete divorce between the two, in order to keep the community participation – and therewith drama – alive.

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