

AFRICAN DRAMA

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PART I : Early 20th Century African Drama

This week the course introduces the student to African drama—traditional and modern. Indigenous dramatic traditions of Africa will be evoked to provide a context for examining the emergence of modern drama. What is the function of drama in society? It is intended to undertake a systematic survey of these forms and to provide students with the critical tools to both evaluate and appreciate this important art form. Room shall be created for students to have the opportunity to observe and participate in theatrical manifestations such as plays and festivals. We shall examine further the literary and performance aspects of modern African drama. The study begins by locating African drama in the context of oral performance and then examines how the genre has been impacted by the infusion of European literary traditions while retaining indigenous forms. We will examine the theory of African drama and the various theatrical practices that operate in the continent, including the rise of the popular traveling tradition of drama.

Like the other two genres of literature (fiction and poetry), early modern drama in Africa explored subject matters which give expression to Africa's socio-cultural life before the incursion of Europeans. Early modern African drama deployed folk/traditional forms to explore this subject. Although most of the subjects of the plays are derived from history, they equally draw attention to the popular subject of the period—cultural conflict. The relevance of itinerant/travel theatre tradition should equally be considered in the evolution of modern drama in Africa. These early plays, like the novel, gave expression to the beauty of the African culture in order to demonstrate that Africa had cultural standards before her encounter with Europe. Playwrights drew more from indigenous traditions such as folklore, myth, and other oral art forms to accentuate the claim of Africa having a distinct worldview and organized cultural codes before Africa's contact with Europe. Most of the plays are based on traditional wars which celebrated the exploits of some African warriors. These kinds of themes are usually noticed in the itinerant theatre tradition and the very early scribal tradition of drama in Africa.

Early African drama explored issues bordering on the colonial distortion of African history and communal relations among African communities before the Western incursion into Africa. Invariably, most of early modern African drama dramatized the process of transition of African traditional societies into modern ones.

Required Text:

Wole Soyinka. *The Lion and the Jewel*, London: OUP, 1963.

Other Readings:

Olaniyan, Tejumola. *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African American and Caribbean Drama*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

Ojaide, Tanure. "Teaching Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* to American College Students," *College Literature* 19-20.3-1 (Double issue), 1992 Oct-1993 Feb; 210-14.

Chris Dunton. *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970*. London: Hans Zell, 1992.

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

Biodun Jeyifo. *The Truthful Lie: Essays in the Sociology of African Drama*. London: New Beacon Books, 1985.

Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*. New York: Norton, 2002.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981.

Athol Fugard. *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 1972.

Discussion Questions:

How does early modern African drama re-create African history? "No matter how modern African playwrights try to Africanize Western drama, modern African drama will always remain a product of dual heritage." Discuss this statement with reference to the text required for this week. Taking Baroka and Lakunle as symbolic characters, how does Wole Soyinka in *The Lion and the Jewel* show that the trusted old ways are better than the untried new ways in a period of transition?

Part II : Late 20th Century African drama

Modern African drama exhibits an easily discernible ideological commitment which makes it differ from the preceding generation. Modern African drama deals urgently with subjects that are not only contemporary but also border more on social problems in Africa with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the prevailing decadence. Modern African drama deals with subjects as topical as the phenomenon of armed robbery, students' rampage, class struggle, and corruption, among many others. The playwrights, through different dramatic strategies, advocate social revolution as the most pragmatic way out of the tangle. In addition to reenacting the politics of history, modern African drama recreates the social and epistemic tensions one notices in the continent especially in the relationship between Africans and their leaders. Drama in Africa appears to be very sardonic and satirical since its major function is to dramatize everyday existence with politics occupying a very important space.

What we intend to examine this week is a whole ensemble of social, economic, and political conditions in which modern drama comes into production, is consumed and interpreted and assimilated into African the worldview or belief systems. While traditional drama speaks for the community as a whole expressing traditional and communal beliefs hinged on certain religious practices, modern African drama has become the ideological projection of the social and economic problems brought upon the African people by bad governments. Invariably, modern African drama explores topical issues which border on the asymmetrical or lop-sided relationship between the rulers and their followers on the one hand and bureaucratic failures of government.

Required Text:

Ngugi wa Thiongo and Ngugi wa Miri. *I Will Marry When I Want*. Oxford, UK: Heinemann, 1977.

Other Readings:

Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981

Olu Obafemi. *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies.

Discussion Questions:

What does the title of the required drama text say of the Kenyan society? How does modern African drama address pressing postcolonial concerns in Africa?