

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN THEATRE

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Overview Ritual, music, mask making art, dance, narrative genius: all these expressive components, which root deep in African cultures, play their parts in the making of African theater. (One realizes at once that these same ingredients, blended also with native religious traditions, were the raw materials of ancient Greek theater.) Dating the evolutions of such theater is almost impossible, either at the origin end, or the other end, when it comes to the mergings of popular with formal, 'literary' theater in the most modern and international sense.

From the time of the Bantu migrations (1000-1700 C.E.) At the origin end one wanders in the largely unrecorded population movements of the 'Bantu migrations' (1000-1700 C.E.), which were instrumental in shaping the populations of central and southern Africa, and in which the formative societal (family/clan/tribe) traits of sub-Saharan African society were being formed. (That collective familiar life-styling lies deep in the African sense of theater as *community* in ritual action.) At the point of writing this, the 'present,' we can look around and see that from its deep-rooted communal setting native African theater has morphed into a contemporary international art-form of great achievement, which preserves its distinctively African quality.

Early stages of African theater (15th-18th centuries C.E.) From the first Portuguese commercial explorations of Africa, in the fifteenth century, through the Colonial invasion, from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, western observers freely expressed their astonishment, at the to them unknown social life styles of the Africans they encountered. The great Yoruba Egungun dances, masquerades celebrating god-power in dance ritual, were known to outsiders from the 15th century. Early Malian religious dance shows observers startled by the ease of interaction between 'spectators' and performers; and by the readiness with which the simple dramatic narrative of Malian plays replicated the social classes composing Malian society. Gikuyu circumcision dance-theater, in Kenya, startled travelers and missionaries from one century to the next, exemplifying the kind of 'primitive' naturalness for which African theater and spectacle was becoming known--and misunderstood. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, spiritual possession rituals, a kind of theater in themselves, drew missionary attention, and traveler fascination gravitated to makeshift dance theaters throughout the continent. It was in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the slave trade, trans-Saharan commercial transport, and the serious execution of colonial rule took effect, that the reality of the African cultural difference made itself evident.

The popular modes of Colonial era African theatrics (19th-mid 20th century C.E.) New theatrical forms--*Concert Party* and *Yoruba opera* are keys to look for here--grew out of the rich anti-colonial awareness of West Africa, and out of the area's exuberant discovery--in the century of colonialism which prevailed far into the 20th century--of the unique blends of theater latent in African popular culture. Especially in West Africa (Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria) there was during the period in question a fermenting of new theatrical forms--its components were anti-colonial satire and mockery, vaudeville, high life music, dance cabaret urbanity, a sense of the 'trendy'. Travelling theaters, stock-performing theater groups, mountebank and acrobat enriched stage dramas drew turbulent crowds into explosively growing (and politically restive) cities like Accra, Lome, and Lagos.

Concert party and Yoruba opera 'The *concert party* play is basically a slapstick musical comedy, with a strong seam of pathos, and a very prominent moral tone running through it. It is performed in indigenous languages and the drama is shot through with highlife music, which continually punctuates it...' The narratives are involved with issues of daily life, for ordinary Ghanaians or Nigerians, and the audience is very much part of the point of the whole, as it had been already in the early Malian dance mentioned above, and as it tends to be throughout the evolution of African theater. *Yoruba opera* emerged in the 1940's and for decades served as travelling theatrical entertainment in the Yoruba language, and throughout Yoruba land. Interestingly, though the narrative, acting, and music are largely derived from Christian liturgical themes, the everyday, often slapstick, themes of Yoruba life are held up for high fun, laughter, and mockery.

The transitions to high drama (1950--) It seems a jump from the still 'popular' character, of the West African traveling theater, to the emergence of international level art-theater in many parts of Africa. When we come to the mid-twentieth century, an explosion of distinguished drama comes to mind: in Ghana, Eflia Sutherland's *Edufa*

(1962), and Anna Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965); in Kenya, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Trial of Dedon Kimathi* (1976); in Nigeria, J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1964), and Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963); in Cameroon, Bole Butake's *Lake God* (1986). This random mention, of a few of the territory-opening works of newly independent Africa, will excite the obvious question: where did this breakthrough come from? Independence? Internationalism? (Many of the writers involved had had significant exposure to western writers, and University learning environments in the United States and Britain.) Simple cultural maturing, as African cities grew and elites formed?

A thread of continuity? When one puts together some of the fragmentary evidence for continuity in African theater, threads of continuity emerge. The Bantu migrations helped to consolidate an African family-tribe-clan structure which translates into the 'family drama' later portrayed in theater. The masquerade and dance-theater elements, noted from the 15th to 18th centuries, promoted multi-media cultural blends--dance, music, theatrical narrative--which built onto the earlier acquired sense of performance as total social engagement, audience as part of the creation. The popular theater of the Colonial era not only melded dance, music, and narrative performance, with frequent applications of vaudeville and slapstick, but sharpened the socially critical edge of the resultant drama, which bit the 'colonial masters.' The sophisticated dramatic upgrade, of work created in Sub-Saharan Africa since the sixties, has moved its cutting critical edge to regions of more nearly universal meaning, than it had reamed in its developmental stages.

Reading

Bame, K.N., *Come to Laugh: African Traditional Theater in Ghana*, New York, 1985.

Barber; Collins; Ricard, *West African Popular Theater*, Bloomington, 1997.

Chernoff, John Miller, *African Religion and African Sensibility*, Chicago, 1979.

Etherton, Michael, *The Development of African Drama*, London, 1982.

Jahn, Janheinz, *A History of Neo-African Literature*, London, 1968.

Kerr, David, *African Popular Theater*, London, 1995.

Discussion questions

In what sense has African theater always been 'popular,' that is sensitive to the people on the street?

Is it appropriate to concentrate on *sub-Saharan theater* in a discussion of African theater in general? What kind of theatrical traditions belong to North Africa? Are they sharply different from the sub-Saharan contribution?

Is the history of African theater at all the history of great actors? Are great actors important elements in this drama? Or is group setting the predominant factor in such drama?

Does contemporary African drama tend to represent 'Africa' as a whole, or is it tied in closely to the national traditions behind the authors who create it?

Is there still an active tradition of village theater, or of night-club slapstick, in Africa?

Is there a distinctive Islamic theater-aesthetic at work in Africa? Is there, for instance, a sub-Saharan Hausa theatrical tradition in Nigeria?