

AFRICAN DRAMA

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DRAMA IN PRE-COLONIAL ERA

- Before Africa's contact with Europe's colonialism, Africans were already accustomed to treating political and religious matters in their drama. Performances reached the highest state of artistic inclusiveness and excellence during festivals at which certain central myths and rituals were reenacted by the people as a whole, and which also provided opportunities for the treatment of purely social issues through the use of masked characters, puppets, and other techniques.

THE MASK



- ◉ The use of masks for character representation had the effect of liberating the actor from psychological inhibitions and imbuing him at the same time with the sacred essence that, by convention, enabled him to be unique and to project a role that nobody would dare challenge or contest. The masked actor thus embodied the holy actor, spirit essence, ancestor, or supernatural essence the dramatic role transformed him into.

COLONIAL ERA

- ◉ In the contact with the colonial administration the mask was a symbol of both mystical and political authority, hence the reluctance of masked performers to submit to colonial law enforcement.
- ◉ Nor has the situation changed in postIndependence African states
In Nigeria, where a rich diversity of performances is sponsored by cultural associations, masked performers have often been known to clash with the police. In the cosmopolitan city of Lagos, *Èyò* performances hold sway, and efforts by the police to control their activities have often ended in social disorder.

THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON AFRICAN PERFORMING ARTS

- ◉ British colonialism came down heavily on indigenous African culture, especially the performing arts.
- ◉ The Igbo in Nigeria created new plays featuring British colonial officers—administrators, police, missionaries—and their families as characters to replace the banned traditional characters.

CHARACTERISTICS OF AFRICAN PLAYS IN COLONIAL ERA

- ◉ The new plays were satiric comedies imitating the manners and foibles of the European in a very broad sense, but also more incisively where historical circumstances provided materials on such characters.
- ◉ The colonial district commissioner
- ◉ The policeman
- ◉ the *ikoro* drum
- ◉ dancers

COLONIAL THEATERS

- ◉ there was no lack of enthusiasm by the British to build theaters, especially in the cosmopolitan cities where the seats of government were located. As early as 1800 Sir George Yonge had built the African Theatre in Cape Town, South Africa.
- ◉ Colonial theaters were designed as institutions to showcase European culture and civilization, a function that church organizations and educational institutions were later to help promote and perpetuate.

COLONIAL THEATER

- ◉ the theater of Europe "did not even superimpose itself onto the traditions, but rather led an isolated existence related only to the needs of the few who fell within its ambit"
- ◉ the major aim of colonialism was not to promote indigenous culture and give the Africans a sense of pride in themselves and in their institutions, but, to the contrary, to "civilize" Africa, which means bringing up its people in the image and likeness of the colonizers.

FIRST ENGLISH AFRICAN PLAYS

- ◉ In South Africa the formation of the Bantu Dramatic Society in 1933 led to the production of English plays, the first being Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* .
- ◉ Herbert I. E. Dhlomo's . *The Girl Who Killed to Save* 1935

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FIRST ENGLISH AFRICAN PLAYS

- ◉ A combination between tradition of the Western church-oriented morality musical plays and the indigenous aesthetic conventions.
- ◉ Hubert Ogunde in Nigeria
- ◉ The moral religious emphasis is evident in his first two plays, *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God* (1944) and *Worse Than Crime* (1946), which respectively deal with Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, and the evils of the slave trade.
- ◉ the African Music Research Party
- ◉ Acknowledging the reality of his indigenous Yoruba culture and its influence on him
- ◉ the fight against colonialism with such plays as *Strike and Hunger* (1945)

INDEPENDENCE

- On the eve of the 1960s, when the majority of African countries were granted independence by the British and the French, some African playwrights had started to demonstrate sufficient mastery or competence in the dramatic form to declare their independence from the earlier religious, educational, and cultural tutelage of the churches, the schools, and the British Broadcasting Corporation.
- Plays from West Africa, like Kobina Senyi's *The Blinkards* and J. B. Danquah's *The Third Woman* (both from the Gold Coast), were already exploiting the themes of social responsibility and the cultural image of the African in the light of his acquired European civilization.

NEW THEMES

- ◉ a balance between traditional African and European cultures so that the African might still identify with the masses in the rural villages as well as the elite in the urban environment.
- ◉ In Nigeria, the same concern with the conflict between indigenous and European cultures marked Wole Soyinka's early plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, written between 1957 and 1958.

THEMES

- ◉ Unlike the healthy conflict and optimism of the West African plays on the eve of independence, the plays written by Africans at the same time in South Africa were rather less robust and more pessimistic. Dhlomo's *Dingane* (1959), like his earlier play, reveals a fixed pessimism from which there appears to be no relief except for the moral religious recourse to forgiveness.

THE BBC "AFRICAN THEATRE"

- ◉ The British Broadcasting Corporation, an active partner in the cultural formation of Africa in the European tradition, played a significant role in the development of contemporary African theater of English expression.
- ◉ designed to encourage dramatic creativity among African writers and to further the cultural development of the theater through the medium of radio.

THE BBC "AFRICAN THEATRE"

- ◉ The BBC "African Theatre" audience was very narrow indeed.
- ◉ the plays were beamed especially at the educated African class "able to speak and think comfortably in English ... people who have undergone some course in higher education"
- ◉ It hindered the integration of indigenous and western dramatic tastes and concepts.

POSTCOLONIAL THEMES

- ◉ social relationships and institutional changes affecting marriage and family life, ethnic taboos, prejudices, chauvinism, and social responsibility.
- ◉ Political themes, including corruption among the ruling classes, are also explored by the playwrights.
- ◉ Even religion, especially the conflict among the new religions and their corruptive influences, finds its way into the plays.
- ◉ The theme of conflict between African and European traditions .

THEMES

- ◉ With regard to political themes, Soyinka is at his best with the satiric portrayal of corrupt and power-hungry political figures. *Kongi's Harvest*, *Opera Wonyosi*, and *A Play of Giants* are full-length plays dealing directly with politics and power.
- ◉ In Ghana, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, and J. C. de Graft have played major roles in the establishment of contemporary drama and theater. Efua Sutherland especially has worked consistently since the days of Kwame Nkrumah in the early 1960s toward the founding of a national theater and dramatic culture in Ghana.

FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS

- ◉ Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* (1967), *Foriwa* (1967) : The theme of the play is obviously national, namely, the promotion of a new national spirit in Ghana that would encourage inter-ethnic cooperation and openness to new ideas.
- ◉ Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970): Both plays deal with the role of positive communication and mutual confidence, or the lack of them, in the relationship between men and women.