

AFRICAN DRAMA: ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT.

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I. Introduction

In his article "Aspect of Nigerian Drama", J. P. Clark, the well known Nigerian Dramatist writes:

If drama means the 'elegant imitation' of some action significant to a people, if this means the physical representation of the evocation of one poetic image or a complex of such images, if the vital elements to such representation or evocation are speech, music, ritual, song as well as dance and mime, and if the Japanese say of their Noh theatre, the aim is to 'open the ear' of the mind of a spectator in a corporate audience and 'open his eyes' to the beauty of form, then there is drama in plenty in Nigeria, much of this distinctive as any in China, Japan and Europe. But drama of what beginning? Of how many kinds? Of what form? In what language? And are its functions solely aesthetic and entertainment as in the West today or have these functions, in addition, ceremonial and spiritual relevance for both actors and spectators?

Of the origins of Nigerian drama very little is known that is reliable and precise, for the simple reason that no comprehensive study has been made so far of the subject either by the old government sociologists or by the new drama experts of today.

..... The roots go beyond there, and one hopes, they are more enduring than that. Very likely, they lie where they have been found among other peoples of the earth, deep in past of the race. (1)

The above quote is taken from Clark's article first delivered as a lecture at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1964. J. P. Clark is one of the leading playwrights, not only in Nigeria; but also in the whole of Africa. When he writes on drama he writes from experience and involvement. The article is one of the earliest, of African dramatic criticism and an informative source on African Drama and Theatre.

From 1964 until the present time, many articles and books have been written on African drama and Theatre and many critics, both European and African have found in the drama of Black Africa rich, varied and interesting sources to follow up. But all without exception would agree with Mr. Clark's early observation of 1964 that the origin of drama in Nigeria go back to "where they have been found among other peoples of the earth, deep in the past of the race".

Later in his article, Mr. Clark contends that Nigerian drama falls into two kinds: traditional and modern. Traditional drama, he continues, has two forms: secular and sacred. The sacred drama falls into two categories: ancestral (or myth plays) and masquerades (or plays performed by village elders and religious groups). The myth plays, as Mr. Clark observes, derive their stories

directly from an ancestor or founder myth well-known to the audience, and the development is not so much by logic and discussion as by a poetic evocation of performer and spectators. For them the act is therefore one of worship and sacrifice. (2)

The secular drama, on the other hand, includes magic or tick plays, pastoral and puppet plays. It is a civic drama "mainly drawn from myths and rituals telling the history of the tribe", a drama which "consists of dance or song dramas" and has a narrative or epic style.

Modern drama has two kinds: the folk theatre and the literary drama. The literary drama in Nigeria is perhaps best represented by the plays of Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark, whose heart, many critics believe, is at home in Nigeria and whose head is deep in "the wings of American and European theatre". The folk theatre, on the other hand, can be seen in the plays of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola and Duro Lapidó.

This cursory survey of Nigerian drama is perhaps a necessary introduction to my work on African drama. What is true of Nigerian is doubly true of the whole of Africa. Nigeria, after all, is the base of the dramatic movement in Africa and all critics agree to this fact. A full history of African Drama, let alone Nigerian, has not been written yet

and surely a general study is needed. It is needed, simply because the rapid growth in Africa, on both levels, national and literary, is exemplary. "All black Africa" as Mr. Anthony Graham-White rightly observes, "has passed through the colonial experience, ... and all African countries share the same stresses between the traditional and the modern Western ways of life." (3)

There is one more reason why a general history of African drama seems to be needed at present. Apart from new scholars, most westerners seem to be ignorant of any dramatic movements in Africa. "The commonest comment", Mr. Graham-White notes when he mentions African drama to his friends and colleagues comes to his ears in the form of a question: "Is there any?". This shows how the African critics and publishers have not been able to reach a European audience in a way that makes African drama available to the majority of the Europeans.

II. Origins of African Drama.

The theatre is 'man's expression of his feelings, emotions and experiences; it is a creation by man and, as such, forms part of his culture. It is what has been created by man in society. The subject of theatre is Man. The theatre is the reflection of the psychology and behaviour of man. The theatre is 'an aesthetic language essential for the understanding of society.'

It is well known that the theatre of ancient Greece developed from the recitation of dithyramb poetry, in which Greek tragedy finds its origins. People gathered round from all places and sang and danced tragedies representing the history of various peoples. Around a tomb, people would group, offer a sacrifice, mostly a goat, dance and sing 'mingling the dead with the living.' In honouring the dead, mostly heroes of the past, the Greeks created the cult of their heroes. The gods in ancient Greece, were but the ancestors of the people. The Greeks, in reciting the legends and perpetuating the memory of their heroes, could keep alive traditional beliefs, both tribal and national, and heroic narratives. Hence the cult of Dionysus, and the ritual that this cult involves. Religion in Greece involved initiation into dance and participation through music.

In Africa, it is claimed, the same kind of ceremonies existed in the past; they are characteristic of the 'growth of the theatre in Black Africa as much as they were in Ancient Greece.' In Greece, however, drama became a literary genre, independent of religion, while in Africa religion continued to play the greatest role in drama. African men and women would gather inside or around a temple, or a sacred cave, and act out the battles of the past. The basis of cults in Black Africa is a dance which honours the spirits of ancestors - their gods.

In Greece, the theatre was born out of the cult of Dionysus. In Europe, the theatre was born from the Christian Mysteries. And in Africa, the theatre finds its origins in mythology, history and in customs:

Theatre was born from religious and cosmic ceremonies. The Africans' sacrifice to their Gods "Sango" or "Ogun" resembles those of the Greeks to their altars or shrines of Apollo. (4)

Africa is rich in history. It abounds in traditions. J. P. Clark observes that:

An aspect of Nigerian drama acclaimed by even those who do not as yet acknowledge the existence of this art so expressive of our culture is the wealth and variety of its masks, costumes, and make-up. (5)

Well before J. P. Clark, the Arab Ibn Batoutah observed:

(I) was amazed by its administrative organization and the order and security which reigned there. (The Mandingo civilization) shone brightly in days gone by. (6)

What else could the theatre require? Here is a people, a sense of civilization and a rich heritage of masks, costumes and make-up.

The theatre finds its subjects in and originates from myth, legend, tradition, story-telling and short pieces of prose and verse, in satire, and folklore. In China, for example, the earliest form of drama of which scripts survive (The 13th Century Yuan Drama) has its origins in story-telling. In India, the first forms of drama were performed in temples. In other countries, folklore was the origin of drama. Africa is not an exception:

The absence of written texts in the African languages certainly diminishes the influence of this theatre but does not subtract anything from its original value. (7)

Truly so. The African theatre would not claim that it had influenced other theatres in the world. It is sufficient

that it fights for recognition of its existence and continuity on the African soil and among the African people, at least for the present time. Who knows but that in future African theatre and the theatre of the third world, will not play a major role in the universal theatrical movement. No wonder. Peter Brook is engaged in a serious research and study of Tazyeh play - the martyrdom of Al-Husein. (8) For its part the African theatre finds its origins in the enactment of battles, hunts, and historical events. Yet, these remain some kind of ritual rather than having evolved into drama or theatre, as Mr. Graham-White observes. A ritual, White claims, may develop toward drama in three ways:

- a. through the modification of the performance.
- b. through the reason for the performance changing.
- c. through its adoption by another people.

Although "it is absolutely hard to find an evidence that African drama has developed from ritual", it is known that a ritual will have consequences beyond itself and is functional in that it is expected to produce results in the future. But as Mr. White observes:

Life has to be fought for and won by the concerted effort of men. A program of vitality will furnish the necessary replenishment of life and vitality. Man dramatizes the crises of his own life: notably birth, puberty, marriage and death. It is believed that through dramatizing these homologous relationships man can exert some control over the immanent energy that runs through them all. All traditional performances of whatever nature (profane or sacred) have spiritual dimension: performances whether ritual or drama contribute to the welfare of the community. (9)

Hence, the ritual is performed to bring about an effect in African communities. In Ethiopia, for example, fighting takes place in the ritual of New Year between two groups of people. It used to take place in a river and would continue until blood coloured the water of the river, or a death occurred. The fighting here is acted to bring about an effect of cleansing and purifying. But at present death is no longer required. Another example of ritual performance comes from Morocco, where students would elect one of their number a king for the year. It is reported that the tradition continues until the present and the real king of

Morocco attends the ritual and participates in crowning the student King. The Yoruba Alarinjo masqueraders perform another kind of ritual. Their origins lie in the Egungun society, which deals with the worship and appeasement of the dead. The Egungun himself is the dead liege head who, upon being evoked, appears in a masquerade.

There are many examples in African folklore which illustrate drama in Africa developing from story-telling, because 'story-telling moves towards drama if performers other than the narrator are added.' In the Congo, among the Ijaw of Southeastern Nigeria and among the Ashanti of Ghana, a singer's narration is acted out by mime. In the Congo also, a narration is acted out by a masquerade and puppets. In Sierraleone, actors impersonate the characters of the story, and in Zair, villagers invite someone famous for his impersonations to their village. He plays the narrator-hero in the dramatization of a historical episode, and brings other actors with him. These examples show that:

story-telling is an informal activity but it is a form of entertainment and so development into drama occurs simply through changes in the method of presentation; and it may be seen that it is a source of drama in Africa. ⁽¹⁰⁾

The origins of the African theatre, as we have seen, deal with Man, who is the main subject of the theatre.

Theatre whose roots are emotionally grounded in the African soil forms a link with the peasant, the family and the cults, aiming to perpetuate the vitality of community. ⁽¹¹⁾

Indeed, the whole of the community is involved in the African drama and theatre. It is, as it is known in its old forms, in one sense, 'a total theatre.' Music, dance and song play a major role in the African theatre. Oral literature is equally important. Narrating the stories of the glories of the past, appease ancestors, and reciting epic poetry would continue for several days (usually seven) within a village yard.

III Drama in Africa

In 1801, a British theatre was founded at the Cape of Good Hope. In 1880, Africa was entirely occupied by the European Imperialist. European colonialism contributed to the decline of traditional performances in Africa. Christian

missionaries, since about 1700 A.D. in Africa, had paved the way for new colonialism. With colonization, the African theatre was cut off from its ancestral source. The European suggested new directions in which drama might develop providing new subject matter. The hostile attitude of the Christian, particularly missionaries, toward any form of pagan celebration, led to a weakening of the religious roots of the performances. The speed at which these changes occurred, was increased by the colonization. Economic pressures on masquerading and a performances in the villages, such as taxation, led many young men to leave the villages and go to the towns and cities. Colonial rule also led to greater borrowing of dances and masks. Masks once were feared but by 1940, they had become very popular. A young African was quoted in a demonstration in the square of one African village: "We want masks, not in the old way, but because they are a force against the foreigner." It is recounted how in many countries the colonial authority collaborated with the mission from mother country. Converted Africans were often accused by relatives of being on the side of the occupier. The colonizers did not understand the old traditions, and conflicts regularly arose between the population and authority. Mr. M. Schipper observes:

While reading African literature one realizes that Western influence had an enormous impact on African culture. The people's reaction became stronger as this cultural imperialism grew.

The theme of white domination is almost exhausted in independent Africa, but in South Africa it is today more topical than ever. ...

Colonialism is severely condemned as being inhuman. In the theatre there are varying views. There are good and bad Africans including those who exploited the colonial situation to better their position. (12)

Modern African drama has been greatly influenced by the colonizer. This influence has led to some kind of assimilation, reflected in the drama. In some plays, we are introduced to characters who reject their own past and become more and more westernized. These characters admire the west, its way of life and everything associated with the white people: "Yes, he died without having the opportunity of becoming white," says one character in a modern African play. But this remains the exception, and in many cases the writing satirises one group of people. M. Schipper rightly observes:

These plays illustrate the circumstances surrounding the meeting between white and black in Africa. A few privileged Europeans and a handful of assimilated Africans exploit the rest of the population and the characteristic traits of the colonizer are often perpetuated by the "new elite". (13)

In opposition to colonialism, however, an anti-colonialist movement was formed in Africa, on national, political and literary grounds. African drama participated in this movement:

Instances have come to light of anti-colonialist feelings being expressed in music and story and one may infer that it was also expressed in drama. (14)

Yet, colonialism "was one factor that perhaps encouraged the continuance of traditional performances", by inciting anti-colonialist feelings. It also provided models for the development of literary drama. As a result, Africa witnessed the growth of a national literature, particularly in drama. Yet the body of dramatic literature in any African country is still very small, if compared to that of drama elsewhere in the world. One African country might be exempted from this generalization; Nigeria. Nigerian drama has flourished and is gaining world-wide recognition. But North Africa, namely the Arab countries, still lacks the experience in dramatic arts:

The people of North Africa have quite different customs and traditional values and beliefs from those of most of the rest of Africa. There has been a good deal of influence from the Arab countries across the Sahara and down the east coast of Africa but, since Islam is antagonistic to drama, this has not led to any theatrical development. (15)

I quite agree with Mr. White. There is little evidence of any theatrical development in the Arab countries of North Africa; but Islam may not be the only influence that hindered the theatrical movement. Mr. White himself mentions somewhere else in his valuable book on African drama that one style of African drama is "a prayer by a Moslem ascetic sung in Arabic from North Nigeria." This is significant. If Islam is antagonistic to the theatre, how can African

Moslems practice their prayers in a theatrical way? Theatre, in any Arab country where Islam rules supreme, is still way behind the recognized theatres. But what is true of African countries is probably doubly true of the Arab World. The Arab World, too, has suffered from many invaders, occupiers came to the Arab land settled for centuries. When the 'Arab Sun shone on the West', then, there were perhaps tales of battles, stories of heroes, ceremonial appeasements of ancestors and many theatrical demonstrations, both ritualised and dramatic. Suffices it to mention 'Tazyeh', a development from ritual to drama, 'The Tale of Saif Bin Ziyar,' 'The Epic of Bani Hilal,' and last but not least, the whole of Arab poetry in the pre-Islamic period and after, which, with its narrative style, heroic nature and descriptive, lively structure, contains the ingredients of a total theatre. The Arab social and folklore history is wonderfully rich in costume, dance, and music. The stories of love and romance in the court of Haroun Al-Rashid, mentioned with great vividness in "The Arabian Nights", are nothing but kinds of manifestations of theatre. If theatre in the Arab Countries, where Islam rules, has not developed we must search for reasons other than religion as sole cause. There might be sociological, ethical or even political reasons. For example the life of an Arab in the past, crossing from one desert to another, looking for an oasis, leading a nomadic life might have hindered him from settling down and founding forms of theatre. But Arab poetry has flourished, due to the nature of this life. There may also be a cause in the political history of the Arabs. The colonizers have tried to cut the Arab from his cultural roots. The colonizers have tried, and perhaps succeeded, in making the Arabs follow and imitate foreign forms of theatre. This may be explained if we look at the Arab theatre and drama in the 1880-1900 period. All the attempts and preserved texts prove that the Arab pioneers of theatre and drama imitated, and sometimes performed in translation, the works from Italian, French and English theatre of that period. (16)

This brief excursion into the Arab world, theatrically speaking, is not altogether irrelevant to a study of African drama. More than two thirds of the Arab population inhabit the African continent. Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and the Arab Sahara are all Arab countries of the African Continent. A research project on the theatre in the Arab World is a must. It is apparent from any study of African theatre that there is a wealth of material as yet unexplored. Perhaps in the future, Mr. White and other critics of the theatre will contribute to this research project once begun.

Whether Arabs contributed to the development of the theatre in Africa, or not, one cannot deny the concern and interest of Arabs in a modern Arab theatre. If the Arabs could not recognise the importance of the theatre in the life of the people in the past, it is impossible for them to

ignore recent theatrical development throughout the Arab countries. It is a case of better late than never. The Egyptian theatre is known world wide to many scholars and perhaps to the general public. The theatre in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, in the words of Mr. B. Traore, is developing and gaining recognition. "In Morocco" Mr. Traore writes, "the private company of Saddiki should be pointed out. This seems never to have had any official grant but in its ten years of existence it can count to its credit twenty-nine productions (consisting of ten original plays and nineteen adaptations) Tayeb Saddiki, whose youth, enthusiasm and devotion won acclamation at the first Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, improved on the lapidary formula ..." Mr. Traore later quotes Saddiki saying: "If you want to make a nation, start by creating a national theatre". This reflects Saddiki's awareness of the importance of the theatre. In Algeria, "The history of the theatre," adds Mr. Traore, "epitomizes the position of the African theatre, Algeria has always had musicians and poets who sang the beauty of their land, the trials and joys of their people." As Mr. Traore continues I find my conclusions concerning the colonizers in the Arab World paralleled in this particular statement from his book on African theatre:

If the 1830 conquest - the colonial take-over and the ensuing alienation - succeeded in driving Algerian culture away from the towns, it could never water it down nor stamp it out. And folk traditions, songs, epic poems, laments and lullabies became enriched with new accents as national consciousness became awakened and the rejection of the colonial system gained ground. In this battle for the survival of a culture, theatre obviously had a great part to play. The colonial masters realized this when they reduced the Arab-speaking theatre to a political entertainment. But, as those responsible for Algeria's destiny say, in spite of administrative sanctions and pressure the standards of Algerian theatre were improved, its form and content revitalized: the political wind of nationalism caught up with it. (17)

Later Mr. Traore adds:

Through its theatre, folklore and music, Algeria is in the process of self rediscovery. Specialists on theatre have not failed to put Arabic theatre people on their guard against certain temptations. Yves Lorette writes: 'It

is essential that the first concern of Arabic theatre practitioners should be to examine the traditions and form of popular expression belonging specifically to each of their countries. The scarcity of playwrights, in the Western sense of the word, should not be an impediment to the normal development of the Arab theatre'. And M. Jean Duvingnad, a lecturer in Sociology, states with precision: 'Draw from your traditions. Turn away from Europe. Be yourselves. There probably exist Islamic dramatic forms which can act as a springboard for new creative effort'. (18)

I have quoted at length from Mr. Traore. He is perhaps the only scholar and critic, to my knowledge, who gave my theoretical thoughts and speculations some ground of truth. I can safely say that rituals in the old Arab cultural history have not developed towards drama not only because Islam has been antagonistic to the theatre and the personification but also because the whole cultural milieu during the birth of Islam was not prepared to take the risk or venture in such arts as theatre. This is, in some respects, similar to what happened in Rome, and even in Europe, during the Middle Ages, when the theatre witnessed the worst period in its history since the Greeks.

However, the theatrical movement in other Arab countries has just started. In Kuwait, for example, scholars have started to do academic work, toward M. A.S, and Ph.D.S, on the theatre in Kuwait. In Syria, more than seventy-five plays have been published, since 1975, and most of them performed by the Syrian National Theatre.

However, African traditional drama survived the pressures and antagonism of the colonizers. 'A masquerader dancing through the village accompanied by his attendants', is the commonest dramatic figure in West Africa, and can still be seen in many African villages. The commonest form of African traditional drama, 'comic sketches relying upon action rather than words and alternating with songs and dance', is still performed in many African countries. 'The Ikaki masquerade' and the 'Kalabri' masquerade are still common in many festivals and annual celebrations of 'cult group societies'. The longest, among five major festivals in Africa, lasts for seven days. A festival usually contains ritual and sometimes drama. Among many tribes performed are also given at domestic occasions, such as weddings and funerals. The masqueraders wear masks during these festivals. The masks are usually used for entertainment, but they serve a great variety of purposes other than entertainment. The masqueraders, wearing the masks, patrol the village in dry seasons. The mask hides and protects the body of the performer. Most masks are made of wood, cloth or felt, or clay mixed with cow dung. Masks usually represent a

human face or animal head, or a fusion of the two ⁽¹⁹⁾. There still exist at least three kinds of African traditional drama: satiric comedies, associated with fertility, sowing and harvest, historical re-enactments, affirming traditional values and the unity of these values which are close to Africa in the past; and mimetic representations. Tragedy, however, does not seem to have existed in traditional drama in Africa - 'to express sorrow is to invite it' ⁽²⁰⁾. The colonizers, after all, have not succeeded in severing modern African drama from its oral traditions.

Modern African drama, to a certain extent, is but an extension of the older forms. Yet here the influences of the Western theatre are more than obvious. In modern African Drama, the verbal element is more important than music, dancing, and singing. The language of the written text is either French or English. The distance between the audience and the stage has increased, and the curtain is added. In traditional drama, the acting area was usually undefined, performers moved among spectators. The play is presented in a more concentrated form and in a much shorter time than in most traditional performances. Modern performance are frequented by a small upper class group of the population. Most of the plays are published by European publishers. Themes, also, have changed. This change, in most cases, is the healthy norm. Society is bound to change. Even African society is not an exception. Playwrights, among many other people, are always interested in the contrast between the traditional and the modern 'in terms of the generation conflict when young and old confront each other'. The old generations argue that the ancient values 'ought not to be lost'. The young generations are always concerned with the usurpation of the parental authority. Modern African dramatists 'choose to support or oppose the norms that govern society, whether they are existing taboos, tribalism, marriage and dowry, emancipation, or even ritual sacrifices. The Nigerian playwright, Wole Soyinka, for example, reports about a sacrifice he has recently witnessed:

The worship of the Voodoo god Damballa Quedo would seem to require periodically the sacrifice of a human being, and in the distant past human may actually have been so sacrificed. Since it is not likely that the law would connive at such practice in any modern society, however, the custom may have started of substituting a goat for the human victim. ⁽²¹⁾

Modern theatre in Africa surely, is no longer primarily preoccupied with such ceremonial rituals, the oral tradition or myth and the old epic tales. As W. Soyinka has previously remarked they appear now and then on different levels. The

major preoccupation of modern African drama, as the plays I have read clearly show, is the struggle for liberation of Black Africa. Many plays are reflections of African life today. The hatred between two tribes is another main theme in African drama of the present time. The conflict between father and son, between two brothers and their families and between the generations can be easily traced through many plays. The education of the sons outside Africa, in Europe or America, leads to such conflicts. Women and their role in society play another major role in African dramas. Dramatists, most often, show great sympathy with women. They present the conservative authority as opposing women's struggle for liberation. Many plays present young men who want to marry virgins and expect they will remain faithful to their husbands. In several plays, women "indeed adopt something of the Western woman's drive for liberation; but it is also true that modern African society mirrors that of the west in some respects." Hence the 'problems of unmarried pregnant girls in the city', is a main subject of social change in Africa. The problem of slavery and the revolutionary ideas against slavery can also be detected in several plays. One woman in a play addresses a gathering of women:

I want them to free themselves from slavery,
I want them to respect their bodies and minds,
I want them to break away the chains
That have so long bound them. (22)

The role of the African woman is best expressed in Achebe's words:

In traditional Africa women were the biological embodiment of the mythic cycle, by virtue of procreation and childbirth. But there were spiritual leaders, priestesses and shared in mythical and rituals through sacrifices. (23)

The world of the big city is, again, a major theme in African drama. People have emigrated from the village to the city in search of work. The cities have expanded tremendously and the urban community life has changed completely:

When traditions stop being important to a community the risk is greater. African cities are a mixture of local and western elements, of screaming advertising and grey misery,

modern skyscrapers and vast slums. As in all cities right belongs to the stronger. (24)

The African dramatist of the present day has witnessed all this. He has also experienced life under the occupier and seen the results of the occupation. Modern theatre in Africa, therefore, is inspired by this kind of life in the city. It 'originates from a mixture of western and African elements that rise out the social conflicts in the big African cities'. It speaks of "opposing forces of the rich and the poor, of the masses and the elite", and:

In the city ideas concerning family relations, friendship, marriage, morals and clothing change.....

for young people the city has a magical attraction. Life seems richer and more exciting, even if it is only because of the electric lights, the cinemas, the bars and the night clubs.

In the cities unhappy experiences are more common than happy ones. One can earn more money; but the struggle for life is hard, corruption is wide-spread and the weak are often tramped on by the strong.....

Tribal relations often play a part in the national politics. It can be vital to have a brother who is a minister or a secretary of state, because such a person can get you a job that you would never have found solely by virtue of your abilities. (25)

I have quoted at length because it is relevant. 'High life and misery', 'big and small profiteers' whenever you read, are the themes which will strike you in modern African drama:

The high life of the elite is enjoyed at the cost of the masses for whom independence has brought nothing. The poor are unable to change their miserable situation. (26)

Modern African theatre seems to be preoccupied by these themes: - spiritual and political corruption; political struggle for independence from white rule, and struggle against economic neo-colonialism post independence; th

emotional stresses inherent in the traditional way of life; the tribal pattern of village life in conflict with the missionary way; the impact of contact with the white man's city; the liberation of woman; the African way of life in the present time and oral and ceremonial traditions. With all these themes in mind, African dramatists of the present time reflect a vital active people with a long history of civilization:

I want to teach my readers that their past
- with all its imperfections - was not one
Long night of savagery from which the first
European acting on God's behalf delivered them.

African playwrights in particular, and African writers in general, have tried to establish a truthful image of African culture in the mind of the ordinary African who has been overpowered by the images of the late European culture. It is legitimate to write about Africa, its culture, its people and its struggle for survival:

Of course these are legitimate themes for the writer but the fundamental theme must be first disposed of: it is that the African did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is that they must regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. (27)

This description of the preoccupations of African playwrights shows how their work reflects a lively, warm, enthusiastic and determined people. The story we read in any African play, is a very interesting one, not consumed by many tellings: "the African world view is not, however, even by implication, stagnant." It also shows that the African theatre today is a 'functional one, a committed theatre.' The African dramatists "are fully aware of the need of freedom in order to create any thing of literary value".

The role of the writer must never be depreciated.

There is no end to his good intentions or to the awareness of his duty. He sings of the wealth and soul of our culture and praises the hundred qualities in it but is careful not to delve into tradition and illustrate such treasures

Our literature is functional, not because it rejects aesthetic intentions but because it does separate aesthetic pleasure from the rest. What it wants to do is to be at the service of man and thus engaged in life. (25)

As to commitment we shall see that this committed modern theatre in Africa has contributed to the development of the world-wide literary movement, namely: Negritude, led by Senegalese president and poet, L. Senghore. The aesthetic problem, on the other hand, is very important to our study, because it brings the cohesion to the study and stresses the African originality in developing the modern theatre.

The Greeks referred to the theatre as a building; but also understood the word as everywhere possible for holding a performance. Every place where actors could perform and spectators could watch and participate, according to the ancient Greeks, would be a theatre. Like the Greeks, traditional theatre in Africa was known, and actually started in the village squares. It is very interesting to know that the word theatre, square, (fere) in Mandingo, and (pent), in Wolof, both African languages, signifies a gathering, as well as an open space to the sky. The village square is:

Generally situated in the centre of the village, its sole decore being some trees at the base of which are a few ritual canaries, this place inspires confidence and peace; it is there that popular wisdom finds a forum; it is there that the old man's words fall like divine judgement, plunging deep into young men's conscience; it is there also that marriages and circumcisions are announced; above all it is there that the collective consciousness of the community takes concrete form through the medium of theatre. The square symbolizes the village and the entire country. (29)

The idea of the village square is interesting; but more interesting is the development of modern African theatre from that village square. Modern African playwrights, to the present day, do not depend on scenery; instead they 'produce pictures and idea, popular in content and in realization, from which an entire people could draw a lesson and derive its spiritual food'. Tragedy and comedy, as in real life, are mixed in traditional African plays but the written text has become more important at present.

While the plot remains simple, the song and the narrative remain important in modern plays, especially in comedies which begin and end with songs and dances. The structure of the plays, though, follows the European pattern, in acts and scenes.

From an aesthetic point of view, therefore, African theatre and drama, remain linked to the past and derive their power of continuity from African traditions and history. Africa remains the main source for African literature, as well. We have seen that African themes and subjects fill the pages of African drama. From Africa and for Africa, Negritude emerged as a literary movement to guide and lead African literature, including drama.

Negritude, historically speaking, was founded by the Leopold Senghore and Aime Cesaire, the great Martiniquan poet, in Paris in 1930. Africa, in the minds of the leaders of the movement of Negritude, is the 'land of suffering':

We lived in an atmosphere of the rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it seemed to me that if what we want is to be establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are - that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black and have a history, a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value; and that negroes were not, as you put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations. At the same time we began to write people could write a history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made to contributions to the world. Therefore we affirmed that we were Negroes, and that we were proud of it, and that we thought that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity; in sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that' could still make an important contribution to the world. (30)

The above quote is Césaire's definition of Negritude. L. Senghor also said: "Negritude is simply the sum total of civilized values of the black world," and certainly there are many values in Africa which people of different standards can safely adopt and fight for. "The spirit of African civilization," says Senghor, "consciously or unconsciously, the best Negro artists of today, both in Africa and America." These values, celebrated to the full by African dramatists poets and novelists, inspired Jean-Paul Sartre in 1948 to write about negritude in terms of the poetic language, "always allusive, never direct" ⁽³¹⁾, which after all:

was nothing if not an exploration of the collective dreams of black men who had only just awakened from the nightmare of colonialism; and poetry, with its direct visceral routes to the psyche, or because of its spontaneity, became the essential medium for the expression of the 'negroness' of negro people. ⁽³²⁾

Negritude, however, has occasionally been looked at, even by black writers as "some aberration by a group of racially inspired black men", but mostly it has been considered as "part of an old, legitimate, even respectable intellectual tradition which goes back to Kant and the 'Critique of Pure Reason'". The major concern of Negritude as a literary movement, however, was "the rejection of existing European models in art and a revolt against colonial capitalism in politics; "but the most violent attack came against the black middle class they had left behind at home", the literature written by them and the literature written for them.

The relationship between Negritude and modern African drama is a close and relevant one. Most African dramatists of the present time are inspired by the African values which they believe are both 'legitimate' and respectable'. Many critics have found that "traditional theatrical forms ... continue to co-exist with the new drama of the scripted play."

There is no doubt that if African drama is to flourish in the future it will have to keep digging in its rich, varied and fascinating sources as engraved deeply in the past of the race. Furthermore, writers have to explore the relationship between people and place and how environment and locality can have the upper hand in shaping the mentality, the temperament and even the physiology of people. Social problems - particularly those related to generation gap, women liberation, family affairs, the

complex relationships between individual and society, traditional village and modern city and the question of adaptability in general - have to occupy an important position in the direction of an original African drama that may connect people with land and exploit every technicality to promote the concept of a theatre which is both artistic and committed. Certainly African writers can acquaint themselves with technicalities of Western drama and occasionally appropriate them for their own end, but if they develop certain devices springing from the circumstances of people's life then we can expect the emergence of a highly developed African theatre that may in certain cases (W. Soyinka and J.P. Clark are good candidates) match European drama and occupy an important position in world literature.

This study of African drama has concentrated primarily on contemporary themes. The colonial period distorted the roots of natural drama and the development of African drama in recent years reveals diverse influences. However, the main sources of inspiration remain to be African myths, folklore and oral literature.

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2. Ibid. PP. 21-22.
3. White, Anthony Graham; *The Drama of Black Africa*, Samuel French, INC. 1974. P. 120.
4. Bakary, Traore; *The Black African Theatre and Its Social Functions*. Ibadan U.P 1972. P. 56.
5. J.P. Clark. Ibid. P. 23.
6. Bakary. Ibid. P. 63.
7. J.P. Clark. Ibid. P. 18.
8. Shelbho sky, Peter (ed) *Ritual and Drama*, O.U.P. 1984.
9. White. Ibid. P. 180.
10. Ibid. P. P. 184.
11. Ibid. P. P. 69.
12. M. Leiris, "Les Nigres d'Afrique et les art sculpturaux" *L'Originalit des cultures*, U nisco, 1954 P. 24.
13. M. Schipper, *Theatre and Society in Africa*, Ravan Press, 1982, P. 79.
14. Ibid. P. 91.
15. White. P. 74.
16. Ibid. Schipper. P. 90.
17. For a more detailed and information study see: M. Azizah *Islam and the Theatre and Early Arab Drama* by Al-Khuzia.
18. Traore. Ibid. PP. 117-118.
19. Ibid. PP. 118-119.
20. Etherton, Michael. *The Development of African Drama*. Pitman. London. 1976. P. 43.
21. W. Soyinka, *Myth and Literature in Africa*. P. 60.
22. Achebe. Ibid. P. 74.
23. Ibid. P. 79.
24. Schipper. P. 68.

25. Ibid. P. 92.
26. Achebe. Ibid. P. 181.
27. Ibid. P. 184.
28. Nadine Gordimer; *The Black Interpreters*, 973 P.
29. N. Gordimer. P.P. 68-69.
30. Hamidu Kane, *African Writers on African Writing*. PP. 68-69.
31. Traore. P. 55.
32. Lewis, Nkosiki. *Tasks and Masks* London 1981. PP. 10-11.

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