

THE EMERGENCE OF DRAMA IN THE AFRICAN CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

By  
Kona Khasu

---

Introduction

Every individual in our African society today - whether he is the so-called detribalised man torn away from the security of his tribal life, and plunged into the uncertainties of new situations; or the non-tribal person faced with the rapidly changing patterns of urban life - has in his being a deep unrest. Below the substratum of the apparent adjustment, lies an eroded mind. The old and secured ways of doing things do not hold up in the face of the new mode of life; the solutions we once gave to familiar problems seem not to suffice any longer. The old family relationships which were only yesterday quite satisfactory now seem to thwart our progress, or advancement.

Our situation is the result of the confrontation of two fundamentally different cultures: The spiritual, more subjective culture of the African and the technological culture of the West. By the 'Spiritual', I mean the things of the heart, the emotions, the soul, the human; by the 'Technological', I mean the mechanical, machine-oriented culture of the West.

African culture had a system of belief which was logical and unified. Whether it was in Medicine, Science, or Religion, there was an underlying unity based on the worship of the ancestors. Through this, African culture was capable of creating a host of artists: sculptors, musicians, dramatists, and dancers. Ancestors worship surrounded the culture with spirits. The men lived in an environment of lively action. There was action going on before their eyes continually. They danced and sang at the festivals un-

til they projected themselves outside themselves and then, acting as though they had entered into another body, another character, they emerged into new bodies whose innermost being they were able to penetrate. Each spectator at the festivals surveyed an entire cultural world about him. In this drunken state, this illusory dream world, he emerged an artist. He achieved oneness with his surrounding in such a way that he himself had become his universe. In this state of complete abandonment, of rhythmic intoxication, the spectator-participant became enchanted. The shy, self-conscious, conceited individual was annihilated. The self, the soul, the emotion was released from its corporal confinement. Once liberated, for an immense humanity.

---

Mr. Kona Khasu is an Instructor of the Government Junior-Senior High School, Monrovia, Liberia.

Enchantment has always been a precondition for art. In this enchantment, the reveler sees himself as a tree, an animal, and finally a god, who adjusts relationships. In his transformation, he sees a new vision. Now, he proclaims his freedom from the evil forces in his 'real' life through the medium of poetry, dance, music, and sculpture. This is the creation of art.

Some people think we can better understand our world by studying economics, engineering, etc. The fact is that the whole purpose of art from primeval time has been to help man understand the inexplicable universe which defies intelligibility. All man's artistic activities must be viewed then, as affirmations of a basic metaphysics of which the fundamental principle is the continuity of experience under which the past, the present, and the future are conceived to be an essential unity. But this unity of African culture has been subverted.

What happened in the subversion of African culture can best be explained in the words of the Liberian anthropologist, Dr. Augustus F. Caine in a speech delivered at the University of Liberia in December 1965:

We are taught that African ancestor worship which calls for offering food and drink to the dead in return for blessing is a primitive, superstitious idea; but that the practice of putting flowers on the graves of dead relatives and friends by the Christians is religious. The result of this attitude has been to kill the African psychologically and make him ashamed of his background.<sup>1</sup>

Since African culture was like a well-balanced troupe of snake dancers, damage in one area was reflected in all the other areas. African culture was then left standing like a hollowed tree whose inner fibre had been eaten away by termites, waiting, defenseless, for a small wind to topple it.

What can we do to remedy the situation? Some people say, we can find a solution through greater advance in technology. But we see from technologically advanced cultures that they too are faced with these same problems. And their technology has been of very little help in this regard. We hear of numerous conferences in these advanced countries to find solutions to their human problems. Their newspapers report cases of workers literally attacking machines for taking away their jobs. For me, one has to turn to the arts for the solution.

The solution that art is capable of providing does not entail

---

1. The quotation is from a recording of the speech delivered by Dr. Caine, by Momolu Perry of the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Monrovia.

-4-

the total acceptance of one culture and the total rejection of the other. The solution entails the reconstruction of our culture through a dialogue. Art brings us face to face with the question of how technological, political, or economic changes produce concomitant changes in the way the society thinks and behaves, and to a consideration of the consequences of these changes or individual responses to them.

#### The Role of the Theatre

I think the theatre is the best medium for this dialogue because it is a direct medium of communication. Furthermore, theatre is the composite of all these other forms of art, poetry, painting, sculpture, music and dance. In discussions about the role of theatre in the developing countries of Africa, one often has to face the question: "But doesn't this apply more to the industrialised countries? Don't you think African needs more technology?" I think this question arises out of a basic misconception about the nature of the theatre, and its historic role in man's life.

What do we mean by theatre? There are two ways of answering this question. One way is to say that there is theatre when there is a written play performed by actors, in a prescribed area, with scenery, costumes, and lights. But we can also have theatre in another sense. When children play "Mama and Papa," or the villagers sit around the fire and recount the stories of past hunts, we have theatre also. This concept of theatre takes us far back to the paleolithic caveman dressed in the mask of a stag participating in a dance designed to lure, or increase the game. When the gods in those early rituals were represented on stage by visionary figures, the theatre began in its formal sense. Even today we have this form of theatre alive.

-5-

consider two contemporary uses of the theatre referred to above. At a recent tribal burial ceremony in a village, the speaker entered masked and asked the guests why they had come. A spokesman for the guests replied that they had not come for anything. And was the village so inhospitable that they would dare question these travellers without giving them the news of the village? Finding himself tricked, the masked man enacted the whole death of the man. Brooding on the memory of the departed man, he became consumed in a spiritual contemplation of the man's life ahead. For the dead man was not dead. He was gone to the sick bush, he said.

The speaker was an accomplished actor. Soon the spectator-participants began to give a joyful sob. The impetuous comparisons of the masked speaker, his instinctive conviction, his delicate use of imagistic language, transformed these spectator-participants into another world. Instinctively, they projected the shape of the god that was magically present to their mind into this masked speaker. Their new world was now clearer, more comprehensible, more affecting; hence, more satisfactory. It must be pointed out that guests had gone to the village to attend the burial; and that the villagers knew this, but the assumption of awareness was all part of this tradition.

The other example is a custom in the Bassa tribe. They believe that children who wet the bed at night can be cured of this malady if they imitate the chicken. It is common belief among the Bassa that the chicken does not urinate. Early in the morning the children to be cured of this habit are dressed in masks and garments which make them resemble chickens. These children are then taken around the village, from one house to another, with a chorus singing and dancing behind them. The family of each house is required by custom to pour the coldest bucket of water on them. The children are then

-6-

cleansed of that malady forever. This practice is followed today, even in Monrovia. Here again, is a very practical use of theatre.

Some people may feel uneasy about theatre because it feeds on tradition, and hence may foster stagnation. They will point out that the future of Africa lies in the present. It is true that the future of Africa lies in the present. But it is also true, that Africa needs a constant reminder of its traditional nature, for the present is the outcome of the past; and to understand the present, one must have an awareness of the past. The kind of theatre that African culture needs is the theatre which helps the inhabitants of the culture to understand the stress and strain to which their culture is subjected, to be able to take a discriminating approach to the new influences, to make an intelligent choice between alternatives, and lastly, to appreciate the choice they make.

For the majority of the modern Western theatre-goers, the play has become an academic thing. Because they have lost their rituals, their plays are divorced from life. The play, for them, is a subject for academic gymnastics, in which the intellectuals who dissect the play, get their enjoyment from the process of dissecting, rather than the message of the play.

African writers must return to the ancient task of unifying man and his universe within the theatre. The theatre in Africa must confront us with a true replica of actuality. The African writer of today must be a commentator, as well as a visionary, a prophet. It is not sufficient to glorify the past. It is necessary to look at the contemporary condition. The African writer must be to society what the barometer is to weather forecasting. A barometer is useful not only because it can register the air pressure of the prevailing weather condition; but because it can also predict the future weather conditions. Unless our artists can satisfy these two conditions, they are deficient in my opinion.

### Theatre in West Africa

Let us see what some of our African neighbours are doing to avert what Mr. S. Momolu Perry has termed, "the technical assassination of our culture." In many African countries, there are state-run national theatres. In Ghana and Uganda, particularly, there has been great advance in the idea of a nationally supported theatre programme. Particular attention must be paid to Nigeria which has managed to carve itself a place in African Literature as the most productive country, so far.

Nigerian writers such as Clarke and Soyijka are already providing the kind of search which is necessary for cultural reconstruction. Clarke's play, "Song of A Goat," is a story about a barren family. In traditional African life, barrenness is the greatest single curse. In this family, the husband is impotent. The wife seeks sexual fulfillment through her husband's brother and bears him a son. In the end, all of the family die - husband, brother, child, and wife. They expatiate their evils by their lives and deaths.

Clarke and Soyinka are steeped in the mysteries and rituals of their culture. Soyinka's "The Strong Breed," is based on an old custom of the Yorubas, in which persons are used as scapegoats to drive out the evils of their society. Egan, the central figure of the play, when a young man about to undergo circumcision, breaks a strong taboo just before his circumcision, and is forced to run away. He leaves behind the pregnant girl, Omas. During his absence, Omas dies during child birth, because Egan, the father of the child, belongs to the "Strong Breed," and no woman has survived the birth of a child into this line. In the end, Egan, now an educated school teacher, in an effort to save a weak crippled child, Ifada, volunteers to become the village 'Carrier.' In so doing, he resumes the function or his clan which he sought to evade by leaving the village.

Soyinka's comedy, "The Trials of Brother Jero," is most pertinent as an example of how the African writer could use the theatre as a medium of enlightenment. Jeroboam is a rogue disguised as a prophet, "By birth and by inclination," as he describes himself. He proclaims: "I think my parents found that I was born with rather thick and long hair. It was said to come right down to my eyes and down to my neck. For them, this was a certain sign that I was born a natural prophet."

In this play, Jeroboam is the charlatan prophet who uses one character against another. His faithful lieutenant, Brother Chume, is used in the same way he uses the membership of his church. Standing on the beach alone Jero says: "It becomes important to stand out, to be distinctive. I have set my heart after a particular name. They will look at my velvet cape and they will think of my goodness. Inevitably, they must begin to call me... The Velvet-Hearted Jeroboam. Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ Crusade... Well, it is out. I have not breathed it to a single soul; but that has been my ambition. You've got to have a name that appeals to the imagination - because the imagination is a thing of the spirit - it must catch the imagination of the crowd. Yes, one must move with modern times. Lack of colour gets one nowhere, even in the prophet's business." And later on, he says: "I am glad I got here before any customers - I mean worshippers - well, customers if you like. I always get that feeling every morning that I am a shopkeeper waiting for customers. The regular ones come at definite times. Strange, dissatisfied people. I know they are dissatisfied because I keep them dissatisfied. Once they are full, they won't come again. Like my good apprentice, Brother Chume. He wants to beat his wife, but I won't let him. If I do, he will become contented, and then that's another of my flock lost forever. As long as he doesn't beat her, he comes here feeling helpless, and so there is no chance of his rebelling against me."



-9-

Chume is the faithful apprentice. He embodies all the traits of the young, ambitious, hopeful of Nigerian, African society. Substituting for Brother Jero at one of the prayer meetings, Chume prays: "Yes, Father, make you forgive us all. Make you save us from palaver, save us from trouble at home. Tell our wives not to give us trouble... Tell our wives not to give us trouble. And give us money to have a happy home. Give us money to satisfy our daily necessities. Make you no forget those of us who dey struggle daily. Those who be clerk today, make them chief today, make them senior service tomorrow. Those who are petty trader today, make them big contractor tomorrow. Those who dey sweep street today, give them their own office tomorrow. I say those who dey walk today, give them their own car tomorrow. I say those who dey push bicycle, give them big car tomorrow. Give them big car tomorrow. Big car tomorrow."

In the end, Chume discovers Jero's trickery, and means: "What for... why, why, why, 'e do'am? For two years 'no let me beat that woman. Why? No because God not like 'am. That one no fool me no more. 'E no be man of God, 'e say 'im sleep for beach rain or cold weather. But that one too, na big lie. The man get house and 'e sleep there every night. But 'im get peace for 'im house, why 'em no let me get peace for mine own? Where? When? What time 'e know say na my wife? Why 'e day protect 'am from me? perhaps na my woman dey give 'am chop and in return, he promise to see say 'im husband no beat 'am...Mmmmmmmmm. 'Almighty! Chume, fool! O god, my life done spoil. My life done spoil finish. O god a no' get eyes for my head. Na lie. Na big lie. Na pretence 'e de pretend that wicked woman! She no' go collect mating! She no' mean to sleep for outside house. The Prophet na

'im over. As soon as 'e dark, she go in go meet 'im man. O god, we ting a do for you wey you go spoil my life so? Wet ting make you vex for me so? I offend you? Chune, foolish man; your life done spoil. Your life done spoil. Yeah, they don; ruin Chune for life...

In these selected passages from Soyinka's "The Trials of Brother Jero," you can see the blending of several contemporary elements of every day modern African which make the play extremely pertinent. The language, too, helps to give character to the figures in the play.

The most original and innovative of all the present African playwrights is Duro Ladipo. In "Oba Koso", performed at the 1965 Commonwealth Arts Festival in London, Ladipo presented a new art form that was neither opera, ballet, nor poetic drama; but all the three fused perfectly together. The drama critic of the "Spectator" wrote: "The point is the drumming and singing go like clock-work, interlocking flawlessly with brilliant mime, comic dance play, cut-and-thrust dialogue - all without a conductor. In our theatre such ensemble feats are unheard of. Sitting down before Nigerian opera, white directors sighed admiringly. "Here was something Europe simply can not do." And the critic of the "Guardian" said: "We have been trying to achieve something similar for two hundred years or more."

Another original mind of the African theatre is Eugert Ogunde, who organised a folk opera group called the "Ogunde Concert Party." His performances are firmly grounded in Yoruba folklore and tradition. They are fresh and original in treatment. And the plays are in Yoruba. His theatre can be called a kind of popular theatre.

Theatre in Liberia

Here at home, the meagre output of plays - five plays in more than a century - places Liberia below the first rung of the dramatic

-11-

ladder in Africa. Two of these five plays are individual efforts. I have in mind Edith Bright's "The Diary," a verse play about the administration of President William V.S. Tubman, and Lester Parker's "The Human Vacuum". This play is about a Liberian family that has a lunatic son, Kamara. He can not be fitted into the life of the family. In the end, Kamara commits suicide. The remaining three plays are group efforts: The now famous "The Wind of Change," and "Dush School," written by the University Players, and performed at the Nancy World Theatre Festival earlier this year; and the National Troupe's dance-drama, "Love Comes to a Forest Girl."

Liberian writers have many springs of tradition from which they can water their artistic souls. Recently, I heard an account of an oracle in the Sasstown area. This oracle is said to have been worshipped for a long time by the people of Sasstown. I know of many masked festivals held in certain parts of the country.

What can we do to erase the despicable dearth of Liberian literature? We can do several things. But we can start with the following: Encourage our already established Liberian writers. The Liberian schools should incorporate in their curricula more Liberian literature. Our ballads and folk lyrics should be written down and made an active part of our literature. Teachers should be demanded to teach Liberian literature.

A considerable part of the literature section of the National Examinations should be about Liberian writers. What significance is Wordsworth to a Liberian student if Dempster, Moore, or Thomas mean nothing to him?

The schools should have more play reading in their literature classes. Shakespeare should be de-emphasized, and De Craft, Kershaw Clarke, and Soyinka emphasized.

The University of Liberia and Cuttington College have their drama clubs. And both clubs have presented many entertaining and educative

-12-

productions. But the efforts exerted so far have been far too small for the task. To stimulate more student activities, the faculties of these schools should consider giving academic credit to participants of these drama clubs.

Under the direction of Warren Ashley, the University Players began a season of African plays. Our last production was "An African Night's Entertainment", featuring two one-act plays by J. E. Henshaw, "Companion for A Chief", and "Magic in The Blood."

Our one big project here at the University is the construction of a small travelling theatre. We hope that this mobile theatre will give us the opportunity to take the theatre back to the people; to make it a popular theatre. By travelling with productions in different areas of Monrovia, and the counties, we hope to bring about a greater awareness of the ancient function of the theatre.

The recent talent shows in Monrovia are encouraging signs of imminent outburst of dramatic activity. Although these were largely skits, they had the effect of forcing their authors to think about their own situation. Some of the entries in the recent "Jabberwock Talent Night", were ingenious and skillfully written. B. W. Harris' presentation of "Chief Boat-swain" was well treated. And Monrovia College's entry about the man who interprets the Unification Policy in his own way was most amusing: to this man, the Unification Policy meant taking a wife from every Liberian tribe.

There ought to be a National Playwriting Contest, perhaps sponsored by the Department of Information and Cultural Affairs. This Department could also publish a cultural magazine. Cultural magazines are indispensable to culture. Furthermore, scholars would have a kind of forum for their creative works.

The abundance of Nigerian literature was made possible largely because of the availability of printing facilities. Although it must be granted that most of the literary products were cheap, squalid, sensational, and badly

-13-

written mediocrities, they provided a stimulus, an outlet. And at worse, they were examples to the serious student of literature of how not to write. Today, Nigeria is experiencing an artistic fermentation which can be traced back to the Onitsha Book Market.

The announcement of the first National Arts Festival is a very welcome news. The objectives of the festival will be determined by those who plant it. But my opinion is that the organisers of the festival must have two major objectives: First, to give traditional performers a sense of the dignity and value of their arts in the modern ferment of culture; and second, to find a place for these arts in the contemporary urban context.

If we begin now, we can rescue our culture from the technological colossus, and give it a chance to redeem itself; if we meander, if we sit idly by, we condemn ourselves to the fate of Zolu who, at the end of "The Wind of Change," cries:

What is this modern education doing to us? To our culture? and to our people? It has turned the heart of my son against his people! It has destroyed our way of life! Now I can never be chief again. A curse on such education!