

Analyse the Impact of Colonialism and Western Influence on African theatre traditions, including the Introduction of European Theatrical forms and Performance Styles

Selwyn Ofori

Theory and Criticism in Performing Arts, Professor Heather Hamilton

Abstract

This research seeks to address the notion that; Africans had a story to tell but the documentation of these stories created that misinformation of the continent not having a story entirely. How the Western influence has affected the African performance styles is also worth talking about. However, the arrival of the Europeans labelled our theatre performances as primitive ignoring its uniqueness.

African playwrights tried to create and gather all the African stories in a book which helped to preserve our identity and nullify the perception that Africans never had history.

Keywords: African, Identity, Tradition, Theatre

Pre-colonial era:

In many parts of Africa, music and dancing are generally activities of social occasions, that is, occasions on which the members of a community or a social group meet for recreation or for the performance of a ceremony or a rite (Merriam 107). Africans have little to no worry when it comes to being socially active or organising recreational ceremonies for a performance. Africans pride themselves with music and dance which stems from our forebears. Ghanaians will opt for *mboguo* which means call and response in music. The *mboguo* is when one person in the group raises a song, and everybody joins in the song to create a symphony. It could be any song, but once the crowd is familiar with it, they run with it. Theatre is one of the cultural elements that best describes the African arts. It is at the crossroads of the sacred and the profane, orality and the written word, of inner roots and external adjuncts (Diakhaté and Hansel). Whether oral or written tradition, its stance is to preserve history through rituals and ceremonies of the African, to convey wisdom, and entertain audience. The sacred and the profane is mixed up to tell the true African stories which are rooted in the religious beliefs. Colonialism created chaos in the African system of governance and to a large extent the African culture. It is a complex packet of weapons and strategies which the West has used in many parts of the world and Africa is today a symbolic victim of this system (Soyinka 9). It is a pity that colonial powers sought to assert dominance over indigenous cultures and enslaving their minds. Colonialism was strategically belittling all that Africans had as people when the western missionaries introduced Christianity to Africans making the traditional beliefs of the people inferior. On the other hand, European theatre forms such as realism, naturalism, classical drama and many others had their way of putting up a show. Realism emphasizes the depiction of ordinary people, places, and events rather than

grand historical or mythological themes. Every theatre form is unique but as Africans, they don't have an idea of what each means. In this piece, I will explore how colonialism has impacted African theatre traditions including the introduction of theatre forms and performing styles.

It is important to describe what Africans were made of before the advent of Europeans on the continent. Every country within the African continent had their fair share of Western infiltration but the dates differ. Fernandes opines that:

In Africa, oral traditions in the form of proverbs, riddles, and folktales are handed down to us by our forefathers. We learn enormously of precious traditional beliefs, customs, and taboos of our people from these art forms. These folktales are centered on animals that often play the role of the protagonist. One of the reasons for the personification of animals is the fact that, it would be arduous to understand our identities as human beings, had it not been for other animals who serve so conveniently and appropriately as a structure for us humans to identify our own activity and reflection (Peek & Yankah)

Oral tradition has been our tool to prove that indeed Africans had a history. The level of education was low for the indigenes to read and write. The forebears knew that Africans couldn't read, so these historical events were in a form of riddles, folktales and other forms passed down from generations to generations and that has stood the test of time. In Ghana, they make mention of a protagonist called "Ananse" which translates as spider. The spider is seen as wise and witty in every story narrated; those traits are not left out. If it is a lion, then the person is brave and can be a leader. A tortoise, then patience and moving steadily is the person's hallmark. Animals symbolise specific human traits which could be good or bad. Also, when these animal characters are deliberately introduced in folktales, they are accompanied with moral lessons to teach the children how to be morally upright in the society. According to Brunvand, folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples. (2-3)

According to Rotimi and Julien, the dramatic genre that most Africans were used to was realism. This genre made sense to the people due to obvious reasons. Most of these theatre enthusiasts couldn't detach the stories from reality. Every message was real to them including the characters in the play.

The characters of pre-colonial African theatre can be said to be suggestive of realism. They are portrayed to the audience as realistic individuals. Although some are non-human, all characters in pre-colonial African theatre embody one or two important traits, such as malice, jealousy, greed or cunning while also holding the key to a theatre's development. They are never really developed (Rotimi 255 and Julien, 1983: 150).

The characters are presented to the audience as believable in terms of their traits. Whether jealousy, greed or cunning as they are, it serves as ways to advance the course of the play. Sometimes these characters are strategically placed in the play to cause fear and make the audience (mostly children) cultivate some respect for what is sacred. For instance, there are days to visit the farm as a hunter. Forbidden days to visit the farm would be amplified in the story and the next caution would be, one cannot visit the farm on those forbidden days because the gods will come out to purify the land. These were powerful ways to instill discipline and growth in the society.

According to Diakhaté and Hansel, the African theatre and the Western world had different approaches when it comes to theatre. Look at what entails in the soul of the African theatre setting:

...what if anything African theatre could offer the Western world: The short answer is that Africa can teach the West that to be human is to feel as well as to know. Intellect and emotion are indistinguishable in the soul of African theatre and are expressed in the rhythms of song, dance, and traditional chants - rhythms that, despite the advance of urbanization and technology, remain in harmony with the rhythm of a specific cosmology.

The intellect and emotions are expressed by Africans in the songs and dance. South Africans tell their apartheid stories and don't forget to use songs and dance to express their emotions. In *Sarafina*, a film by South Africans, it narrates how the apartheid (colonial rule) ensued and how they gradually liberated themselves from the shackles of the colonists. They sang sorrowful and pitiful songs while in chains in the prison to appeal to the senses of their rulers. The traditional chants are also heard during festivals to re-enact a past event on the calendar of the people. For instance, the people of the Central Region of Ghana who are mostly fantes have their own chants that commemorates the times that they migrated from Bono Region (Techiman) in Ghana to now the Central Region of Ghana (Mankessim). The Fantes believed they were led by three warriors namely, Oburumankoma (Whale), Odapagyan (Eagle) and Oson (Elephant). These are animal names to describe how powerful the warriors were in leading them peacefully to their present-day settlement. Despite the advent of technological advancement, the African heritage is still intact. Modernisation has taken place, but the African story is still the same.

Western Culture Influence:

It is imperative to know how colonialism and the influence of Western culture have had a toll on African playwrights. Before colonisation, many or no persons had received formal education. Sirayi lets us in on how African playwrights fared when they came into contact with the Europeans.

So, all the oral traditions have no place to be unless by word of mouth. Contemporary African drama may, therefore, be seen as the meeting-place of both pre-colonial African and European drama traditions. Many African playwrights in South Africa base their plays on oral genres, such as oral history, epic, myth, oral narratives, and animal stories, integrating these with European drama traditions, such as an envelope of auditorium, stage, scenery, lights, actor, stage direction and playwright. Some African playwrights borrow their themes from the oral forms mentioned above, whereas others draw on indigenous cultural practices, such as "lobola, intlombe yamagqirha", initiation ceremonies or the authority of parents over their children and combine them with European drama traditions. (250)

Once formal education is in the picture the tendency for African playwrights to dilute the Oral tradition from our forebears will be felt. These oral forms serve as rich sources of cultural knowledge, values, and storytelling techniques. Nevertheless, some playwrights made it a point to stay true to the oral tradition of old. The involvement of stage, scenery, lights, stage directions could be used by African playwrights to paint a theatrical performance to all, but those elements are alien to Africans during the pre-colonial era. Africans were familiar with the ceremonies and rituals and the art of storytelling were realised when the older folks in the society sit to narrate stories to the people in the community. However, African playwrights had to modernise the African story when the indigenes also learnt the theatre experience from the Whites. The African stories were told on stage to audience who patronised theatre like the Concert Party of Ghana did. The issue of cultural identity is always prominent in the stories. Themes like "lobola" (bride price), "intlombe yamagqirha" (traditional healing rituals), initiation ceremonies used by the South Africans, to exercise authority of parents over their children. In a way, the African story is sold to people who have no idea of the culture.

African theatre has had a great deal of influence from the West through colonialism. Aside from the main idea of propagating the gospel to the indigenes to instill some godliness in them, there was also the drive to educate the indigenes to understand either the English or the French language for the trade to be seamless and the African story to be documented. African playwrights have contributed immensely to the development of theatre on the continent by deepening the African story in its raw form. Here is what Banham opined as part of efforts to highlight the works of dramatists across sub-Saharan Africa. Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Cameroon are amongst the countries outlined here:

Ghana produced two of Africa's most-accomplished women playwrights, Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo. Sutherland's plays were written in Akan and in English. *Foriwa* (first performed 1962) and *Edufa* (first performed 1962) dealt with political issues relevant to the challenges of independence. *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) is a witty but still politically relevant comedy in a form she described as *anansegoro*—that is to say, the creation in dramatic form of *anansesem*, the stories about Ananse the spider man, trickster, and entertainer. Nigeria stands out in the continent for the vigour and range of its theatre. The rich cultural heritage of the nation, particularly of the south, made performance the natural means for political debate, social cohesion, celebration, and lament. The Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, Africa's leading playwright, acknowledged the influence of such artists as Ogunde upon his work, and modern Nigerian theatre also owes a debt to James Ene Henshaw, whose well-crafted popular plays (*This Is Our Chance*, first performed 1948, published 1956; and *Medicine for Love*, 1964) can be seen as the beginnings of a literary drama. South Africa achieved majority rule at the end of the 20th century, but a powerful alternative theatre articulated the struggle against apartheid from the mid-century onward. The collaborative work between Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona (*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island*, both 1974), had an international impact, as did *Woza Albert!* (first performed 1980), by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, and Barney Simon—a brilliant political satire that sets Jesus' Second Coming in apartheid South Africa. Theatre had a strong, if variable, presence in the French- and Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa. Cameroon had an active theatre with a significant base in the universities, and it produced two major figures of the Francophone theatre, playwright Guillaume Oyono-Mbia and the director-devisor-playwright Nicole Wéré-Wéré Liking. Mbia was noted for his broad comedies—for instance, *Trois prétendants...un mari* (1964), *Le Train spécial de son excellence* (1978), and *Le Boubier* (1989).

Oral tradition has been our best as Africans. People outside the continent of Africa are of the view that Africans didn't have any history, same with armchair journalists. How did our theatrical experiences start, where and whose play are we using as case study. Here is an account of how the Whites have influenced the African culture.

Another important aspect is the attitude of the audience. Unlike in pre-colonial African theatre, the audience of Mutwa's play does not participate. There is always a boundary between the audience and actor, for the actors are on a stage designed for them, and the audience is in the auditorium. These spaces are fixed. The actors do not move to and from the audience. The static nature of such drama is attributable to the influence of European drama on pre-colonial African theatre (254).

A prominent South African traditional healer, author, and cultural historian; Credo Mutwa wrote a play with the title, *uNosilimela* where he points the distinction between African and European drama. Breaking the fourth wall is always done in an African play but with European plays, actors are sometimes allowed to do that. Considering that the play is being staged on a proscenium stage, it is either the actors can be

amid the audience as a narrator or when a song is sung in the play, the actor will engage the audience in the play. This cuts across all the African countries during pre-colonial rule. Credo states how European theatre has influenced the African theatre.

In what has been described as a traditional performance, many of the African dramatists have been amplified the African culture and others and their personal interest.

Oyegoke is of the opinion that borrowing in literature, in particular drama, is an age old practice that, within reasonable bounds, violates no known law. The African dramatist has been uniquely placed to borrow extensively from the level of cultural production identified as 'traditional performance' and the foreign literary traditions of Europe and further afield. The variety and frequency of experimentation in African drama using foreign models could be explained in terms of influence. Many of the African dramatists have, through Western education, had prolonged contacts with playwrights operating in different climes and cultures, and have as a result been exposed to foreign influence that has had a salutary effect on the quality of their products. (146, 149)

Most African playwrights take their inspiration from the African stories or the folktales of old. Ghanaian playwright, Efua Sutherland demonstrated that you could stay original to your roots. She made "Anansesem" (tales of the spider) which was told during the pre-colonial era into Anansegoro. Anansegoro was her own concept, but it suggested that all the stories of old were codified in one piece called Anansegoro. The Anansegoro was later attributed to Efua for the work she has put in over the years in telling the Ghanaian story. African playwright due to their exposure could have the opportunity to borrow from the foreign literary drama and that of the traditional African drama to tell the African story. However, the prolonged Western education these African playwrights have with the whites can either make or mar the African story.

Here is a perfect description of how Theatre performances are dished out to audience during the pre-colonial era. These performance spaces can be found in the community and accessible to the indigenes. These serve as a source of entertainment aside from other functions.

Performed in the same types of spaces as the rituals, such comic performances are still primarily done as entertainment. As with ritual events, no admission is charged. Performed in public squares or in courtyards, the shows are done with the audience standing in a circle around the actors. A tree might serve as a stand for props and costumes, as well as a backdrop. (254)

Before the arrival of the Europeans, Africans had their source of entertainment figured out. These recreational facilities are mostly open-air spaces which barely requires admission or a charge for patrons who want to enjoy the performance. There are no backdrops to tell the setting of the play being performed. Mostly, these performances are done in the day, there are no lights in the night. To avoid any of these, during the day that is where performances are done. There is little or no props on stage. A tree can serve as a backdrop; costumes and any other aesthetics needed on stage. The message is the most important tool used by people to get along with their lives. These stories are traditional, or folktales narrated to the audience. The fourth wall is broken anytime because the actors engage the audience mostly when it is time to sing. These songs are properly part of the play to advance it from one scene to the other. The message of the play is embedded in these songs and chants by the actors.

To conclude, in as much as the African has had to grapple with maintaining the African stories of the past devoid of any influence from the Western world it is commendable to appreciate how far Africans have come as far as folktales, myths and legends are concerned in the African setting.

The African culture has evolved over the years, but the content is and must be undiluted for the African identity to be protected. The co-editor of the *Africa volume of the World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Diakhate and Hamsel, A Professor at the University of Yaounde in Cameroon opine that:

...it cannot be ignored that the evolution of African theatrical art was interrupted by foreign invasion and incursion. First by Arabs and then by Europeans, these invasions affected all aspects of society including the theatre. Certainly, the Arab conquest, dating from the eleventh century, and the subsequent introduction of Islam, did much to redirect—if not to stifle—indigenous artistic expression. Christianity, later, changed the direction once again. Both these religions grafted themselves onto an existing system of thought that was quite rich and most original.

Theatre over the years has evolved. Foreign invasion and incursion were big on the African continent which had its pros and cons. Some people have opined that the advent of the Whites on African soil has inured to the benefit of Africans. The African can now read and write which has gone a long way for African playwright to write the African story to preserve the cultural heritage. It is worth noting that this European invasion did not only include theatre but religion. Africans had their gods that they prayed to, and the Almighty one was also known by the indigenes. Africans practiced their traditional beliefs with the goal of using God as the ultimate. Christianity as many put it was a bait to help the whites trade amicably with the indigenes.



Pre-colonial era: Gule Wamkulu a secret cult, involving a ritual dance practiced among the Chewa in Malawi, Zambia, and Mozambique



Post –colonial era: Cape Town Opera stages The Mandela Trilogy in Wale

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