African Drama

The origins of African drama are not different from Greek drama or European drama in general. Aristotle in his *Poetics* traces the origin of Greek drama to the communal celebration of Dionysus which gave place to formal acting. The plays of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus belong to the formal and written tradition of drama. African societies traditionally celebrated harvest and agricultural seasons with song and dance. The entire community participated in the performance. People wore masks, sported traditional "agbada" and sang and danced to the accompaniment of drums and horns. Besides the communal performance there was also the tradition of story-telling. Often the story-teller chose a story of a mythological character or a historical character whose life and adventure formed the basis for his narration. It is to be noted that the story-teller played the role of a central character and of other characters as well. Thus he was playing the twin roles of narrator and actor.

Unlike a modern play which is time bound and which is governed by classical rules of the unities of
time, place and action, the African oral performance lasted for several nights and the audience sat through the performance. Not only the narrator lived the role he played but made the audience identify with the character he represented. Thus there was a close relationship between the actor and the audience.

An other important development in the history of African drama is that festival drama and ritual theatre which for a long time confined to their respective communities later evolved into travelling companies. Joel Adedegi who has worked on Yoruba theatre discusses the basis of the travelling companies and suggests that they had derived from "Alarinjo" theatre, travelling groups of entertainers, which grew out of the Yoruba court and cult performances after 16, 17, 18 centuries" (Etherton p-35).

Hubert Ogunde's is the foremost among a very large number of travelling theatre companies. His theatre shows the influence of western dramatic modes combined with the Alarinjo theatre. The Egungun and Gelede, masquerades and the music traditions of the
different kingdoms in Yoruba land exercised a great deal of influence. It is Ogunde who started the dialogue drama. Ogunde's theatre reflected the modes of the people of western Nigeria between 1946 to 1966. He changed the style, the form and the content of his work to suit the territory in which he performed. He concretized a number of political issues through characterisation and story to Yoruba audiences. In all that he performed there is Ogunde's personality. There are four phases in the development of Ogunde's theatre. (1) the phase of cultural nationalism from 1944-50, (2) consolidation of the company through independence from 1954-64 (3) post-independence party politics 1964 to 66 (4) The company since the civil war 1972 and later.

(1) The period of cultural nationalism from 1944 to 50

Though Ogunde's first plays were folk opera meant for the church, his plays Strike and Hunger performed in 1945 had political dimension. It presented the hopeless conditions of labour in colonial Nigeria and it inspired the general strike of 1945. Another play
of his Tiger's Empire also attacked colonialism. The company he started called the African Music Research party indicated Ogunde's interest in Yoruba music which had been downgraded by the colonialists. He wanted his company to reawaken interest in Nigerian culture and support the movement for political and economic independence. He produced plays throughout west Africa between 1945-76 and made his roots in traditional festival drama quite clear:

I was playing drums with the masquerades in home town when I was young and these Egungun people gave me the arch inside me to start a company of actors

Ogunde's Yoruba folk opera, uses all the resources of a drumming orchestra, flutes and drums, dancing, mime, and it is sung in Yoruba by role actors. It used a variety of subjects: tribal myth, biblical story, social and political satire, entertainment. He dramatized his stories in a such a way that they all appear very appropriate for the times. The Yoruba audiences admired them because they reflected the desire for a creation
for a modern state free from colonial power.

A year later Ogunde changed the name of his company to **Ogunde Theatre company** but the themes were moralistic. Colonialism was shown to be immoral. In 1947 Ogunde established the **Ogunde Record company** which recorded and marketed his songs. He also extended his theatre company into a regularly travelling troupe between 1945-47. Thus Ogunde consolidated his role as entertainer and as the voice of the new nationalism.

After Nigerian independence Ogunde formed the **Ogunde Dance company** and toured overseas. In this period he wrote his famous play *Yoruba Ronu* which was about political quarrel in the western region of Nigeria. The play was very critical of politicians and for this reason Ogunde and his entire company was banned. The **Ogunde's concert Party** was declared unlawful which was revoked later in 1966.

In 1972 Ogunde started **Ogunde Theatre Company**. He revamped his earlier hope in opera: and *Half and Half* was greatly appreciated by Yoruba audiences.
His later play Murtala was a blind play free from political reference and cultural nationalism. Ogunde's contribution to the Development of African Drama is best summed up by Etherton thus:

Ogunde's theatre company is Hubert Ogunde. His theatre is a Yoruba theatre, performed in Yoruba which embraces wit and poetry. The fans come to see and hear him: and to an outsider it appears that no member of his cast can steal the focus of the audience for him. This is the essence, it seems, of the most successful of the travelling theatres: the creation of 'personality' a unique person, through whom Yoruba of all walks of life can find a central image of their contemporary world. Ogunde is the entertainer, the successful business man, the cherished head of the family. He is now frequently described as the father of Nigerian theatre. It is probably more accurate to describe him more generally as a father-figure, an embodiment of success,
and his art as a popular expression of Yoruba sensibility. ³

Next in importance after Ogunde is Cola-Ogun mola whose contribution to the development of African theatre is considerable. His plays Palm Wine Drinkard, Love of Money and Conscience are moralistic in the manner of Ogunde. It is often pointed out that his plays are superficial. By contrast Duro Ladipo's plays have a fine structure and they are an imaginative dramatization of key Yoruba myths. His play Oba Ko So combines symbolism, both in the dialogue and spectacle on the stage. He establishes characterisation through the play's formal rhythm. Although Ladipo toured with his company performing his plays he was not so popular as other theatre personalities because his plays were consciously artistic/ Nevertheless he is likely to be remembered for the written text Every Man Eda.

The most recent theatre personality who has started a travelling theatre is Moses Olaiya Adejumo popularly known as Baba Sala. Like Ogunde he established a number of successful enterprises besides his main
theatre company. His theatre is more eclectic than Ogunde's. He has brought in number of popular elements into the theatre. He established his particular style and the important contribution of Baba Sala is the transformation of Yoruba theatre into an Urban theatre.

The 1960's saw establishment department of theatre arts, of the school of music and drama in the universities. A number of universities in Nigeria started courses in drama and theatre studies aimed at re-discovering African personality after long years of colonial domination through a revival of African culture. Thanks to the influence of classical and European drama African plays have been modelled after Greek plays. Sophocles's King Oedipus was transposed as The Gods are not to Blame. The Nigerian playwright used King Oedipus as the basis but gave it a Yoruba setting. This is the beginning of the change drama as performance to drama as literature. The plays of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark afford less scope for traditional performances although they have not totally abandoned Yoruba performance traditions. This is due to the fact that both Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark had
been educated in missionary schools and government colleges where English literature was taught. Soyinka and Clark were contemporaries and though they belong to different regions, and sects. They were exposed to nearly similar academic courses.

The work and achievement of Wole Soyinka is larger than any Nigerian writer including J.P. Clark. His work shows a marked contrast in terms of themes and techniques. He was a poet, a playwright and a novelist besides being a political activist. Some his plays like *Lion and Jewel*, *The Swamp Dwellers*, *The Road*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *The Dance of Forests*, *Maden and Specialists* *The Death and the King's Horseman* have a native Yoruba flavour but plays like *Bachchae of Euripides* demonstrate his transposition of classical plays into Nigerian context. Some of his plays are social and political satires while some are metaphysical. Though Yoruba mythology and history provide the material for his themes they are difficult to understand. An interesting aspect of Soyinka's vision is that he does not divide time into the past, present and the future. They coexist, and merge to suggest
that there is a continuity. The relevance of the past is suggested by making the mythological characters appear in a modern setting.

As a political activist Soyinka satirised the colonial rule in a number of plays. He was equally opposed to the post-independence regimes which were tyrannical and corrupt. His revolt against political authoritarianism often made him face hardships including imprisonment. He sympathised with black people's movement against white racial discrimination but he was not champion of negritude. The award of the Nobel Prize in 1986 was a result of recognition which he compelled by a sheer genius of his work.

J.P. Clark's work is not as large as Soyinka's but it is nearer to African life. He started writing poetry while he was an undergraduate at University College, Ibadan. Some of his early poems made liberal use of imagery from his childhood and they show the basic pattern of his early poetry: structure based upon occasion, imagery drawn from the river or from mythology, and heightened fear or dissatisfaction.
"Within grief, chaos, insecurity, and irredeemable loss are the hall marks of Clark's early poetry". Poems such as "Abiku Fulani Cattle", "Agbor Dancer", "The Imprisonment Obatala", show Clark's enduring merit. He tried a wonderful variety of styles with success. His early poems were followed by the publication of the one act **Song of a Goat**. In his last years in the Ibadan University Clark had seen the performances of plays by J.M. Synge and W.B. Yeats. He had also read the playwrights as a part of his course. Synge's interest in the tragic and comic aspects of Irish folk, Yeats' interest in Irish folklore influenced Clark that he was inspired to write **The Song of a Goat**.

During his stay at Princeton university in the United States he wrote a book **America, Their America** in 1962. About the same time Clark resumed the writing of plays, **The Masquerade** and **The Raft**. **The Masquerade** is a sequel to **The Song of a Goat** and has something of the Greek tragic pattern. In must be noted that it is not imitative and the action depends on Ijo belief and is firmly rooted in the Niger Delta.
Another play that Clark wrote in America is *The Raft*. It is totally different from its predecessors. It has contemporary setting. The characters are labourers rather than people of significance to their communities. They are neither cursed nor responsible for their predicament. The play involved no celebration of traditional life but is instead pessimistic, unheroic and negative.

In 1965 Clark published *A Reed in the Tide*. It was the first collection of poems in English by a West African poet published in book form by major international publishing house. To the West African fiction and drama was added an other literary form, poetry. Most of the poems are political and are Clark's response to events occurring in Nigeria. After his return from America in 1963 he resumed his interest in drama and poetry. Clark's interest in Negritude took him to a study of Ijo tradition. During the one year when he was a research fellow at the Institute for African Studies at the University of Ibadan he began to work on the traditional literature of the Ijaw people. One of his discoveries was as follows:
The Azudu story is one that Ijaws of the western Niger Delta have heard told with great reverence and enjoyment among their nine clans for several generations. It is the story of a hero born to avenge the death of a famous father at the hands of treacherous rivals and friends ranging from men to monsters.\(^5\)

This initial note he prepared west through a series of transformations and finally was published as the Ozidi Clark's imagination related the story to his own situation, the loss of his grandmother whom he had loved as a child made him take to Oreame, Ozidi's grand mother. Here is a play in which Clark provided an authentic artistic and dramatic experience to the national and international reading public. In "The Legacy of Caliban" and "Aspects of Nigerian Drama" Clark has indicated some of the factors he took into account in order to preserve the authenticity of the work.

**Causalties: Poems 1966-68** was published in 1970. The subject of these poems is the Nigerian crisis
and civil war. Clark narrates the political history of Nigeria's early years as an independent nation and his own story in relation to his friends. After his retirement as professor in 1980 he wrote a collection of poems *State of the Union* and a play *The Boat*. With his abiding concern for the traditions and life of the delta and with freedom from university routine Clark might become more prolific and give the world immortal work.

**References**

3. Etherton, p.48