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John Conteh-Morgan

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## *Introduction*

This book is mainly about African literary drama in French, the dominant but by no means the only form of modern theatrical expression in Francophone Africa. Although I began my research in the late 1980s, the need for an up-to-date book on the subject had fleetingly occurred to me much earlier when I was preparing a list of critical readings for a course I was to teach at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. I was then struck by the paucity of recent critical material on the subject, even allowing for the modesty of our library holdings.

There was, of course, Bakary Traoré's pioneering *Le Théâtre Négro-Africain et ses fonctions sociales* and Robert Cornevin's *Le Théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar*. But by the 1980s the value of these books was clearly limited. Traoré's was published in 1958 when not one major play had been written and it is really a history and sociology of early Francophone school drama – the drama of the Ecole William Ponty, the training college in Senegal, where modern Francophone theatre developed in the early 1930s. Cornevin's, on the other hand, for all its wealth of useful information still only takes the story to 1970 in a descriptive, sometimes compilatory but seldom interpretive manner. A collection of useful conference papers, *Actes du colloque sur le Théâtre Négro-Africain*, was also available. But that was as much as had been devoted in French to Francophone African drama around this time.

In English, helpful historical and critical sections on the subject exist in Martin Banham's and Clive Wake's *African Theatre Today* and Dorothy Blair's *African Literature in French*. A. Graham-White's *The Drama of Black Africa* also contains a few pages on the traditional roots of modern Francophone drama and on the region's early school theatre.

This dearth of critical material contrasted surprisingly with the

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vitality of the work that was being done on the other genres of Francophone literature, notably the novel and especially on Anglophone drama. This was all the more surprising because, as far back as the early 1970s, Francophone drama had emerged as one of the fastest-growing areas in African literature, with a significant corpus of published plays that today stands at more than 300 (Waters 1988). And this does not include the several hundreds, in countries like Burkina Faso (Guingané 1990: 67), or literally thousands, in places like Cameroon (Bjornson 1991: 430), that exist only in manuscript form but are regularly staged to live and enthusiastic audiences.

Many of the published plays (by older-generation dramatists) like Bernard Dadié's *Béatrice du Congo*, Cheik Ndao's *L'Exil d'Albouri*, Jean Pliya's *Kondo le requin*, Guillaume Oyono-Mbia's *Trois prétendants ... un mari*, Aimé Césaire's *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* and so on are of the highest standard and are frequently performed in Francophone Africa. They are widely studied in schools and universities there and have achieved something of the status of canonical texts, of founding texts of modern national theatrical cultures.

During the past decade, a younger generation of playwright-directors and some older ones too have been trying to steer Francophone drama from Western stage conventions and to create a new form of drama that is rooted in traditional or modern popular performance styles. Plays in this vein, like Zadi Zaourou's *L'Œil*, Tchicaya U'Tamsi's *Le Bal de N'Dinga*, Sony Labou Tansi's *Qui a mangé Madame d'Avoine Bergotha*, Werewere Liking's *La Puissance d'Um*, Sénouvo Zinsou's *On joue la comédie*, have not only been very successful in Africa like their 1960s and 1970s predecessors but, also like them, in France where some have been performed at the Avignon Festival and at the Limoges Festival des Francophonies, begun in 1983 to promote world theatre in the French language.

The Théâtre International de Langue Française, a troupe founded in 1985 by the French director, Gabriel Garran, has produced plays by the Congolese playwrights Tchicaya U'Tamsi and Sony Labou Tansi in theatres in Paris and its districts (Pont-Hubert 1990: 103–9), while Franoise Kourilsky's Ubu Repertory Theatre has been promoting Francophone African theatre in New York since 1987, by organising staged readings and performances of plays by Zaourou, Zinsou and Maxime Ndébéka, and by translating some of them into English (Hourantier 1990: 131–9).

Over the past thirty-five years, Francophone Africa has also

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produced actors of talent like the Paris-based Senegalese Bachir Touré and Douta Seck, the Cameroonian Lydia Ewandé and more recently the Malian Bakary Sangaré. In the 1960s, the first three held roles in productions mostly by Jean-Marie Serreau but also by Roger Blin of plays by Jean Genet, Kateb Yacine, Aimé Césaire, Brecht and Shakespeare (see Cornevin 1970: 94–8), while Sangaré appeared between 1987 and 1990 in plays by the Senegalese Abdou Anta Ka, Césaire and in a production by Peter Brook of the South African play *Woza Albert* and of the dramatised Indian epic the *Mahabharata* (Pont-Hubert 1990: 114–19).

The supporting facilities for theatrical activity have also grown. Since 1980, in addition to national theatre companies like the Kotéba National of Mali, the Théâtre National of Senegal, the Ballets Africains of Guinea, and so on, important experimental and privately sponsored theatre companies like Zaourou's 'Didiga', Labou Tansi's 'Rocado Zulu Theatre', Werewere Liking's 'Ki-Yi' and Souleymane Koly's 'Kotéba Ensemble' have also been founded with a view to promoting new performance styles.

Arts festivals at regional and national levels that provide for the theatre, and school and radio drama competitions are also regular features of the artistic calendar in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea and Niger where, probably because of a 'marxisant' orientation of earlier governments, the importance of the theatre as a medium of mass communication of developmental or party political values was very quickly grasped.

All these developments, then, clearly call for more current critical attention. Of course this has not been altogether absent. Some books of African literary criticism written since the mid-eighties contain sections on French-language drama (Chévrier 1984; R. Schérer 1992; Schipper 1984b). Others like Kotchy (1984) and Owusu-Sarpong (1987) concentrate on individual dramatists. Still others are either about specific plays (Antoine 1984; Deberre 1984) or national cultural, political and/or dramatic traditions (Beik 1987; Bjornson 1991; D'Aby 1988).

While all these contributions have enhanced our understanding of Francophone African drama, they remain either too narrow – concentrating on a single play, playwright or country – or too general, contained as they are in books that attempt to study *all* of Francophone literature or, worse still, of modern African drama or literature.

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What is needed is a work that focusses on Francophone African drama not just as a genre, a cultural phenomenon with a history and a development, but also (lest this fact be forgotten) as a series of playtexts, from several countries, many of which are memorable both as literature and theatre. This is what this book sets out to do. The book is in two parts. Part I, which is historical and theoretical, has three chapters. The first deals with the traditional roots of Francophone drama in ritual and secular performances. Beyond the usual vague assertion of a relationship between these roots and modern scripted plays, I undertake a consideration of the precise nature of that relationship. In this respect, the often posited ritual/drama continuum comes in for extended examination as it applies to Francophone drama. I establish contrasts with Western and Anglophone African forms of drama to better highlight the issues. The second chapter traces the emergence and development of a literary drama in the Francophone region, and the third deals with its themes. Although my emphasis in chapter 3 is *on* scripted plays, that is *on* Francophone theatre, I also briefly consider other forms of modern theatrical expression *in* Francophone Africa: the modern popular theatre of urban agglomerations and the 'Development Theatre' of rural areas. This first section will perforce be expository and generalising. In Part II, however, I attempt to illustrate some of my general statements in the context of the analyses of specific plays.

The plays I have chosen for study in this section, eleven in all from nine playwrights, quite apart from being to my mind among the more substantial in the corpus, also reflect either individually or between them the main trends, concerns and styles of the African dramatist of French expression. If there is a slight imbalance in favour of history plays, it is only because most of the published plays by French-speaking Africans, even those written today, do in fact belong to that category.

Because the original texts are not easily available and only a handful of them exist in English, I have tried to combine a careful presentation of the material of those I study with an analysis of it. I approach the plays both as literature and theatre. In other words I consider their themes, dramatic techniques, characterisation and so on, but also their performance potential; the non-verbal resources of costume, music and movement which both contribute to their meaning and enhance their status as spectacles conceived for a stage.

My inclusion of Aimé Césaire in a book on African dramatists

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perhaps also deserves a comment. I have done this for three reasons. First because of his largely common experience and inspiration with African writers, having been, with Senghor, one of the founders of modern French-language African literature. Second because of his important role in the development of African drama in French. The success of his *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* at the Salzburg Festival in 1964 brought the importance of this medium powerfully to Francophone writers. And third because of the type of plays he wrote. *Une Saison au Congo* and *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* do not only deal with issues that are of interest to Africa, as Hale has pointed out: decolonisation, nation-building, ethnicity and so on (Hale 1987: 196). They also refer to or are based on African events and characters when, like *Une Saison au Congo*, they are not actually set in Africa. They also feature prominently elements of traditional theatrical performances, secular as well as religious (Bailey 1987: 239).

The involvement of Césaire's theatre with Africa and his keen awareness in the 1960s of its catalytic role there is further highlighted by his attentiveness to the suggestions of his African actors and the reactions of his public in that continent. Thus he told Rodney Harris that it was on a suggestion of Doua Seck, the Senegalese who played the title role in the 1966 Dakar production of *La Tragédie du roi Christophe* that he attempted to present Christophe as Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder (R. Harris 1973: 112). Similarly the successive faces of Mokutu as inconsequential sergeant in the pay of the Belgians, nationalist politician and brutal tyrant in the 1966, 1967 and 1973 versions of *Une Saison au Congo* were the result not only of his perceptions of the evolution of the real-life character but also of those of his Zairian readers and spectators (Hale 1987: 198–9).

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PART I

*Theoretical and historical studies*

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## CHAPTER I

*The traditional context of Francophone drama*

## IN SOCIAL RITUAL

That modern drama and theatre should prove such an attraction to Francophone Africans, as has been observed in the Introduction, and become an important cultural nexus in their region is neither surprising nor fortuitous. Such a potential had always existed for at least two possible reasons. The first of these is linked to the theatricality that attaches to the performance of social roles in these traditional societies. The Francophone region, it should be recalled, encompasses a tapestry of ancient societies with highly stratified and normative social structures stretching back to the period of centralised state-formation. This began in the Middle Ages, and saw the emergence of the Mali, Macina, Segu-Tukolor, Wolof and Kongolese kingdoms, to take just these examples from West and Central Francophone Africa.

In these societies, the individual is defined essentially in terms of his role, status, age or lineage group – a feature that is the subject of several books on the history and sociology of the region (Balandier 1955; Lombard 1965; N'Diayé 1970). It is also clearly reflected in literary works such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*, where the characters are quite simply known as the Master, the Chief, the Most Royal Lady, the *Mbare* (slave) and so on. In these societies, individual conduct and inter-group relations are codified into symbolic movements and actions, stylised gestures and patterned dances, while even speech is formalised into various fixed forms, formulaic expressions and tropes.

The result of this expressivity in behaviour is that relations between individuals assume the character of relations between role-players (social personae) and social life becomes an elaborately choreographed play, characterised by play-acting (as in stage drama)

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rather than by spontaneous and natural interaction (see Melone 1971: 143–54 on the theatricality of an aspect of traditional African social life).

In the traditional societies of Francophone Africa, as indeed in many others in Africa, even the expression of personal emotions of grief, distress or joy are subject to rules and set formats which transform them from the private to the public realm, from personal experience to public spectacle, complete with chants, laments and dances. Camara Laye (1971) captures this aspect of traditional social reality in *The Dark Child*, where the narrator's father does not savour his gold-smithing success alone in the quiet recesses of his workshop. His joy at an item of jewellery well crafted, the narrator tells us, always finds expression in a piece of exhibited behaviour, the *douga* dance:

At the first notes of the *douga*, my father would arise and emit a cry in which happiness and triumph were equally mingled; and brandishing in his right hand the hammer that was the symbol of his profession and in his left a ram's horn filled with magic substances, he would dance the glorious dance. (*The Dark Child*, p. 39)

Similarly, the smith's female client does not walk up to him prosaically (especially as she is pressed for time) to ask that a trinket be made for her. She hires the services of a *griot* who, in turn, as mediator between client and smith, uses the fixed format of the praise-song to convey her message. Mediation, like the crafting of gold (an activity described by the narrator as a 'festival'), as indeed the expression of joy, become forms of ritualised performance with prescribed rules, steps and operations that must be observed if the right outcome is to be achieved.

It is easy to see, with the above in mind, how Francophone Africans born into cultures possessed of such a pronounced sense of the hieratic, of spectacle and social role-play can be attracted to the theatre as an art form.

Of course, it might be observed at this point that theatricality is not specific to the traditional societies of Francophone Africa or indeed of Africa; that all human social life involves performance, as role-theory sociologists have pointed out (Burns 1972; Duvignaud 1965; Goffman 1959). While this is true in general terms, the fact remains that the stage–drama metaphor is much more appropriate to non-literate and more homogeneous societies such as those in

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Francophone Africa. This is largely because of the existence in them of a greater degree of 'ascribed' (by tradition) rather than 'achieved' (through personal initiative) social roles, and of what Morris notes as a 'high ratio of absolute... [as distinct from urban society's] conditional norms' (Morris 1966: 112). The former he describes as norms that are strictly enforced and whose breach is greeted with severe sanctions, while the latter are of 'limited application and sporadic enforcement' (Morris 1966: 112). In traditional societies, in other words (and this includes pockets of such societies in predominantly modern nations) there is, more so than in the highly differentiated societies of the modern world, a more pronounced consciousness of a 'social script' at work (Biddle and Thomas 1966: 4), of a 'grammar of social conventions' (Burns 1972: 33) regulating individual behaviour in the way that a playscript determines the words, movements and gestures of the stage actor.

## IN RITUAL PERFORMANCES: SOME EXAMPLES

But there is a second possible reason for the popularity of modern dramatic activities in Francophone Africa. It is the widespread, stubborn survival, in this predominantly Islamic region, of a substratum of pre-Islamic cultural institutions and beliefs, initiation rites and ritual performances. It is therefore not just individual conduct and intergroup relations that are ritualised. Collective life itself in its very rhythms (agrarian and seasonal), social processes (birth, puberty, circumcision, nuptials, enthronement) and responses to life-crises (sickness, death, social conflict, misfortune or natural disaster – all seen as a threatening eruption of disorder) is subject to a never-ending cycle of 'social ceremonial' in which sacred or secular ritual performances are an important component (Kesteloot 1971a: 21–4; Memel-Fote 1971: 25–30; Pairault 1971: 15–20).

Two paradigm cases, one of an initiation rite and the other of a ritual performance, will follow. A documented instance of the first is the *do* of the Bambara people of Mali. Described as 'sacred theatre' by Diawara (1981: 13), the *do* takes place every seven years and marks the end of the initiation ceremony of young Bambara males into the secret society of the same name. It takes a little over three and a half months to perform and is open only to initiates (the *dodem*), a category that excludes casted men, considered indiscreet, women and

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children. Its performers are masked men and their language is esoteric. During their period of seclusion from routine existence, the young *do* recruits are initiated into the sacred and secular sources of Bambara civilisation: its martial arts mainly, but also its history, its cultural and social values (through the enactment of historical legends and cosmogonic myths), its pharmacopeia, divination techniques and even its theatrical arts.

Theatre is both a medium and an important object of instruction dispensed in the *do*, where four types of complementary performers are trained, with the express mission of organising, on graduation, secular theatrical entertainment in the community. Diawara classifies these performers into the *n'togofa*, a kind of buffoon dressed in old clothes who specialises in comic and female roles and in improvising dramatic sketches on scenes of daily life; the *joburu*, a musician-instrumentalist whose songs emphasise the liberating value of human suffering; the *kanian*, who executes dance-dramas and the *fama-sotigi*, dancer but also conjurer whose tricks and entry on stage on a small wooden horse are always a source of intense theatrical excitement (Diawara 1981: 8–9, 13–17).

Marie-José Hourantier, Werewere Liking and Jacques Schérer (1979) have also provided detailed descriptions of healing ritual performances among the Bassa of Cameroon. One of these, the *djingo*, a written version of which has been provided by Hourantier (Hourantier *et al.* 1979: 21–40) is described by her as a 'solidly structured therapeutic dance' (p. 13). Its opening is preceded by the purification of the acting space and the enactment of a battle between the opposing spirits of Evil, thought to be the cause of the illness, and of Good – with the successful outcome of the ceremony dependent on the victory, not always assured in advance, of the latter.

The performance itself unfolds through a number of stages. First there is the opening or warming-up phase during which, with the help of music and song, the patient's family and entire community congregate around him in an effort to create the right atmosphere of solidarity and psychological preparedness. Once this is achieved and the emotions are sufficiently charged, the healer-officiant enters the acting space, in the second phase of the action, followed by his aides, and executing symbolic dance steps and suggestive body movements. During the third phase, the healer, by now possessed by the *bessima*, the beneficent spirits of water and forest, and apparently only visible to the initiated, proceeds to hand out medicinal plant and magic