



AFRICAN DRAMA AND PERFORMANCE

EDITED BY

JOHN CONTEH-MORGAN | TEJUMOLA OLANIYAN

African Drama and Performance

A RESEARCH IN AFRICAN LITERATURES BOOK

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African Drama and Performance

Introduction

*Tejumola Olaniyan and
John Conteh-Morgan*

The growth of critical interest in African theatre has been one of the exciting developments in African cultural criticism over the past decade. Valuable book-length studies have been published on the subject during this period,¹ not to mention reference books wholly or partly devoted to it—*The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre* (1994) and *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (1995), both edited by Martin Banham; *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, volume 3 (1997), edited by Don Rubin; and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (2003), edited by Dennis Kennedy—or the founding in 1999 at the University of Leeds of *African Theatre*, a journal which has already firmly established itself at the forefront of African theatre studies. Equally significant are the growing number of pedagogical tools that are being produced and made available to the teacher and student of African theatre alike: anthologies² and film and video versions of some notable plays.³

This expanding academic interest in African theatre has focused attention on, and contributed to a greater understanding of, a medium of cultural expression which (compared to the novel) has suffered relative critical neglect—a neglect that is at odds with theatre’s vitality in Africa and its importance, both in the colonial and postcolonial periods, as a site of cultural self-definition, political and social critique, and resistance, among other roles. Not only do plays continue to be written, performed, and published (see Dunton’s *Nigerian Theatre in English*, 1998; see also Zimmer 1992; Schérer 1995; and Wurtz and Thfoin 1996), African social life never fails to impress with its own theatricality and its rich variety of constantly evolving nonliterary performance genres (sacred and secular, “traditional” and “popular”) whose functions range, with varying degrees of overlap, from the instrumental to the purely aesthetic. It is with a view to exploring aspects of this diverse performance activity, of which “drama” is only a subset, and to drawing further critical attention to it that *Research in African Literatures* originally decided to devote a special number to it; we pursue that objective further in this book-length expansion of the sold-out special issue.

One of our primary concerns as editors has been to avoid what we see as a major pitfall of current African theatre criticism, namely its inordinate attention to literary drama and its stage realization at the expense of the many non-

scripted performative genres and events for which the continent is justly noted, many of which are now receiving sustained attention. (See, for example, Fabian 1990; Nkashama 1993; Barber 1994; Gunner 1994; Kerr 1995; Barber, Ricard, and Collins 1997; Cole 2001; and Harding 2002. For some notable earlier works, see Jeyifo 1984; Bame 1985; Coplan 1985; and Ricard 1986.) Although a minority art form in strictly numerical terms, this drama, mediated through writing even when it sometimes aspires to the condition of orality and inspired by European stage conventions even when these are contested, has established itself as the hegemonic performance practice in Africa. Perhaps this goes without saying, for literary drama is the art form of the hegemonic group itself, the Western-educated elite, and Westernization is still the most potent marker of class hierarchy, whether of bodies, cultural forms, or discourses, on the continent.

No such hierarchy of performance idioms informs *Drama and Performance*. Our aim is not to privilege any single sub-class of performance that is then held up as a model in relation to which all others are judged. It is rather to present an expanded view of performance that includes but is not limited to dramatic literature, to align critical discourse on the theatre with the cultural reality on the ground, which is one of constant interpenetration of performance modes. The most innovative literary drama, for instance, seeks creative inspiration in oral idioms of performance, as can be seen in Isidore Okpewho's chapter in this volume, and oral forms in turn aspire to the "condition of writing, and [are] deeply internally configured by this aspiration," as Karin Barber demonstrates in her chapter on Yoruba popular theatre. The chapters in our volume, in other words, provide not just creative interpretations of major playwrights (Sylvain Bemba, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, or Sony Labou Tansi), they also examine and demonstrate new ways of studying popular expressive forms such as the Yoruba traveling theatre and its relatively recent incarnation in video drama, South African soap operas, and Congolese popular music.

We have divided *Drama and Performance* into five overlapping sections based on thematic affinities. The large spectrum of subtending conditions of African theatre and performance—old and new traditions of forms, historical, political, and sociocultural—are addressed by Wole Soyinka, Joachim Fiebach, Johannes Fabian, and Ato Quayson in Part One. For instance, the relation of the African creative imagination to its sociopolitical reality has always been one of vigorous, oftentimes polemical, critical engagement. There is no better demonstration of this observation than Wole Soyinka's wide-ranging assessment of postcolonial African leadership using as conceptual handle the title character in one of his recent plays, *King Baabu* (2002a). African leaders have of late been open converts to the idea, if not exactly the practice, of democracy and the rule of law. It is a small step in itself but a large one in context. The end of apartheid and the commencement of democratic rule in South Africa was a significant catalyst. The optimism in the air was not entirely untamed, but it gathered enough force to lead to proclamations of an "African Renaissance" by leading African heads of state in 1998.⁴ But the most perspicacious watchers of African politics

2 Introduction

are African writers and artists, and what Soyinka has done in his chapter as well as in the play *King Baabu* is to grate against the optimism of an African renaissance a countervailing African history that has yet to be laid to rest: the history of African dictators, tyrants, and presidents-for-life—the history of King Baabus. The goal of the jarring juxtaposition is not a cynicism about an African social and political renaissance—which has in fact been too long in coming—but a call for vigilance before the rebirth, which is still less a reality and more an expression of optimistic will, becomes stillborn. It will be simply impossible to understand major traditions of African drama and performance, especially contemporary scripted traditions, without adequate attention to this self-reflexive concern for their own conditions of existence.

Adaptations and cultural translations are as old as the theatre itself, in addition to the epistemological fact that *every* performance is a new translation, a new recontextualization. But it takes a particularly self-conscious dramatic tradition, shaped by a peculiar accident of history in which the moment of birth is also one of a deep subjection to the “external eye” (Soyinka 1996, 56), to produce what is by now a notable corpus of texts in which dramatists borrow theatrical idioms across traditions in space and time to simultaneously read their historical present and critically reread history—of theatre and of sociopolitics. The impulse behind the extensive riffing on traditions far and wide, especially traditions of the West, goes beyond the imperative of “writing back” to empire but is conceived as part and parcel of an expansive self-apprehension of one’s place in the world. It is for this reason that the autochthonous traditions of the continent have themselves been sources of inspiration for dramatists in the African diaspora. The chapters by Isidore Okpewho, John Conteh-Morgan, Marie-Jose Hourantier, and Sandra L. Richards, gathered together in Part Two, devote extended attention to this robust problematic of intercultural negotiations in African theatre and of its diaspora.

In “Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire,” Okpewho analyzes Soyinka’s *The Bacchae of Euripides*. His interest is in the play as “a translation of culture and not of text,” as an attempt by Soyinka to adapt the preoccupations of the Greek play to the political, social, and cultural circumstances of post-independence Nigeria. *The Bacchae of Euripides* is a play about sacrifice and regeneration, wisdom and ignorance, but Okpewho also sees it as dramatizing the “aspirations of those who desire a world free of the constraints and repression that leaders like Pentheus represent.” In his chapter on Sylvain Bemba’s *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone*, Conteh-Morgan argues that the Congolese dramatist’s use of the Antigone legend to frame the dramatic political events of 1983 in Burkina Faso—themselves a metaphor of life in the post-colony—transcends the problematic of local relevance or canonical counter-discursivity that is often given for the reworking of European classics by post-colonial writers. “If [Bemba’s] play is an attempt to appropriate a ‘European’ legend for local ends, which it is,” Conteh-Morgan writes in conclusion to his chapter, “it is no less an attempt to use that legend (a powerful cultural megaphone, as it were) . . . to give global resonance to local concerns.”

Sandra Richards's chapter on August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Marie-Jose Hourantier's chapter on her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are of particular interest to our collection; unlike the previous two chapters, which deal with African reworkings of foreign theatre myths, they deal with foreign adaptations (African-American in the case of one and French in the other) of African indigenous belief structures and performance practices. Richards boldly explores the "deep forms"—African transformed by the Middle Passage—subtending African-American theatre and performance. She suggests that the prevailing critical and theoretical tools, which are mostly Western in origin and inspiration and excessively rational and positivistic in orientation, very often cannot access those forms and therefore do poor explicatory justice to the plays. Using Wilson's appropriation of Yoruba deities in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as an example, Richards argues for an imaginative critical procedure that is "diaspora literate" as a way of listening sensitively to the multivoiced nature of African-American, and indeed African diasporan, cultural production. In "Gestural Interpretation of the Occult in the Bin Kadi-So Adaptation of *Macbeth*," Marie-Jose Hourantier, the Ivory Coast-based French academic and theatre practitioner, describes her use of African techniques of ritual performance (a gestural acting style, masks, colors, trance, and scents) in her company's production of *Macbeth* (*Macbet*, in her version). It is only through such techniques, especially trance, Hourantier is convinced, that a "number of sequences [in *Macbeth* can be] understood" and that actors in the drama can establish contact with, and express the inner world of, dark forces, destructive desires, and troubled emotions inhabited by the play's characters.

Evident in the exertions of cultural translation is part of the large conceptual claim we made earlier: the dominance of a socially critical attitude in much of African drama and performance, especially scripted and "literate" traditions, and therefore their broadly reformist, progressive orientation. We could say that this orientation evinces a certain anxiety to be relevant, but we would be saying only the obvious. After all, that anxiety also afflicts all of postcolonial African literary production in other genres such as the novel and poetry, and the reason, as we argue above, is little other than the unusual moment of birth of these cultural forms in which the imperative of a counterdiscursive angst precedes that of self-exploration and apprehension. But this point takes little away from the significance of the elite-scripted tradition—after all, who would argue against an anxiety to be progressive in a context that needs a surfeit of that? The anxiety deserves mention—and indeed, description as "anxiety"—only because of our stated determination to relativize this tradition and properly place it as one of many no less worthy of attention on the continent. Having done that, we can now affirm with less guilt the enormous productivity of that anxiety as seen in many texts of the tradition, especially at the level of formal inventiveness.

The chapters in Part Three critically engage the politics and aesthetics of that radical anxiety. In a suggestive reading of Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, especially the songs that bring its action to a close, Nicholas Brown argues that, contrary to received critical opinion, the play is not just about a rebellion

against the colonial state. It is, additionally, an allegory of contemporary Kenyan history, an allegory not unconnected with the then-recent murder of J. M. Kariuki and the growing feelings of betrayal of the ideals of independence that many Kenyans harbored against their government. Brown examines Ngugi's Kamiriithu theatre and the vital significance of Brecht's notion of the "learning play" in it. In "Femi Osofisan: The Form of Uncommon Sense," Tejumola Olaniyan surveys the oeuvre of the radical Nigerian playwright and suggests "uncommon sense" as its ruling principle, its underlying "social-psychological form." He demonstrates this claim both in the critically favored plays—the epics and the parables—as well as in the often-ignored naturalistic "minor" plays, thereby undoing an entrenched hierarchy in Osofisan criticism. In an extended discussion of *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*, Olaniyan critically evaluates the writer's aesthetics of uncommon sense in relation to the peculiarities of the sociopolitical context to which it is designed to respond. In the "Politics and Theatre of Sony Labou Tansi," Dominic Thomas analyzes two plays by the Congolese dramatist, *Antoine m'a vendu son destin* and *Qui a mangé Madame d'Avoine Bergotha?* His focus is not so much on the external physical dimension of dictatorial power as embodied in Antoine and President Walante—those plays' principal "baabuesque" characters—as it is on "the processes that inform its reproduction," "the psychology of political authoritarianism."

Popular traditions do not always share or exhibit this kind of all-consuming radical anxiety, as the chapters in Part Four eloquently make clear. In Africa, as in most other places, the investments of popular performance genres are much more dispersed, more intimate and local in their choice of themes, and embrace contradictions with little of the self-flagellations, high-mindedness, or loftiness of elite forms. Aesthetically less self-conscious, these genres are constantly ransacking the ambient national cultural environment—indigenous, modern, or even globalized cultural forms and symbols—in a search for new techniques and procedures, unmindful of the latter's cultural/ideological freight. And they are also constantly adapting to new media—film, video, television. Their aim in all this is to entertain and make money, even if in the process they also explore such serious issues as urban poverty or elite corruption, or indeed indulge, more conservatively, in supernaturalism and escapist fantasies.

The chapters that we have grouped in Part Four explore these issues. Loren Kruger's "Theatre for Development and TV Nation" examines critically the most popular locally produced program on post-anti-apartheid South African radio and television: *Soul City*. Kruger's study centers on the contradictions of a serial that is both theatre for development and soap opera and that promotes a nation-building consciousness, all the while using globalized commercial forms. Her interest, in short, is on the ways in which the program's development-oriented "form, content and mode of address" have been affected by the state and by the commercial interests that sponsor and promote it. In "Literacy, Improvisation, and the Virtual Script in Yoruba Popular Theatre," Karin Barber focuses on an interesting aspect of Yoruba popular theatre—its consuming will to modernity symbolized not just by its "use of space and

equipment,” among other elements, but above all by its aspiration to “the condition of writing.” But the use of writing, Barber concludes after a close examination of the working methods of the Oyin Adéjobí Theatre Company, is more decorative than substantive. For although the troupe leader put together written versions of his plays, some of which were published, “these texts existed in parallel with the performed play [contrary to the practice in the tradition of playmaking to which he aspired], rather than being antecedent to it.” In “‘How They See It’: The Politics and Aesthetics of Nigerian Video Films,” Akin Adesokan discusses a fascinating development in Yoruba traveling theatre: its migration in the 1990s from the stage to the video film studio. Analyzing specific video films, Adesokan focuses not just on the thematics of the new art form but also on its artistic relationship to the traveling theatre (in terms of techniques, characters, motifs, and so on), the determining socioeconomic conditions of its emergence, and, and this is important given that it is a business venture, the economics of its production and marketing. In a rich and provocative chapter, “Modernity’s Trickster: ‘Dipping’ and ‘Throwing’ in Congolese Popular Dance Music,” Bob White focuses on one of the most influential forms of popular performance in Central and East Africa (incorporated in such Congolese plays as Tchicaya U’Tamsi’s *Le bal de Ndinga* [1987] and Sony Labou Tansi’s *Qui a mangé Madame Avoine Bergotha?*). Of particular interest to him in this genre is the enigmatic figure of the *atalaku*. An important influence on “the structure and style” of this type of musical performance, a figure admired and yet stigmatized, an agent of moral decay to some, the *atalaku*, White contends, seems to be a latter-day embodiment of the trickster figure.

If all the chapters in the previous sections have been devoted to aesthetic performance (stage or video drama or dance performance), those in Part Five, the last and final section of *Drama and Performance*, focus on what the theatre anthropologist Victor Turner calls “social drama,” that is, staged forms of social action whose function is instrumental—to redress breaches in the tissue of social relations—and whose effect, as Johan Huizinga writes in *Homo Ludens* (1955, 14) does not end with the activity, as is the case with aesthetic performances, but “continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community.” In her chapter “Theatres of Truth, Acts of Reconciliation: The TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] in South Africa,” Catherine Cole sees the TRC as having precisely performed this ritual, methectic function in post-apartheid South Africa: that of “an instrument of psychological healing, a tribunal of public reckoning, a juridical mechanism for granting amnesty, a symbol of the need for reparation.” But while she is alive to the unmistakable theatrical dimensions of the commission, calling it a “show,” using dramaturgical models to analyze its proceedings, and pointing (in an interesting example of the interpenetration of performance idioms) to the stage dramas to which it has given rise, her chapter also engages the ethical dilemmas—such as the trivialization of suffering—involved in conceptualizing the traumatic testimonies of the victims as theatre and, worse still, in converting these testimonies into

play form. In his chapter “The Turner-Schechner Model of Performance as Social Drama: A Reexamination in Light of Anlo-Ewe *Haló*,” Daniel Avorgbedor provides a detailed examination of a performance practice that is proscribed in present-day Ghana. He pays keen attention not only to the function of the *haló* as social drama but also to its poetics. He discusses the structure of the performance, its artistic resources in dance and music, and the compositional techniques of its song-insults. In the final contribution to this section and volume, “Theatricality and Social Mimodrama,” Pius Ngandu Nkashama examines theatrical performance using the examples of the *buhamba* and the *bena mambala* of Congo, ex-Zaire, as a socially sanctioned “site of transgression” (*un espace de rupture*) of the dominant values of a community. He explores this transgression not just at the thematic level but also through a semiotic analysis of the performances (in which he includes stage forms such as the Togolese concert-party), examining in particular such issues as “stage geography,” “the morphology of the theatrical narrative,” “theatrical space,” and “the median character.” Shifting from the theatrical stage proper to the stage of life (“social scenography”), the chapter concludes with some tantalizing remarks on the theatrical or spectacular nature of the various anti-one-political-party mass rallies and sovereign national conferences that were organized in several francophone African countries in the late 1980s.⁵

This volume contains all the articles in the *Research in African Literatures* special number except Soyinka’s, which has since been committed elsewhere. It has, however, gained immensely in both depth and breadth by the addition of seven new contributions: by Soyinka, Karin Barber, John Conteh-Morgan, Ato Quayson, Catherine Cole, Dominic Thomas, and Akin Adesokan. Judging from the enthusiastic public response to the journal volume, we hope this expanded book version would be an even more invaluable teaching and scholarly resource for both students—undergraduate and graduate—and instructors.

Notes

1. See, for example, Sandra Richards (1996); Olu Obafemi (1996); Chris Dunton (1998); Tejumola Olaniyan (1995); John Conteh-Morgan (1994); Temple Hauptfleisch (1997); Christopher B. Balme (1999); Jacques Schérer (1992); Jane Plastow (1996); Loren Kruger (1999); Roger Fiangor (2002); Claude Brodeur (1997), Alain Ricard (1998), Yvette Hutchinson and Eckhard Breitingner (2002); and Sylvie Chalaye (2001).
2. See, for example, Karin Barber, ed. (1994); Abiodun Jeyifo, ed. (2002); Helen Gilbert, ed. (2001); *Afrique I: New Plays from Congo, Ivory Coast, Senegal, Zaire* (1987); *Afrique II: New Plays from Togo, Madagascar, Mauritania* (1991); Martin Banham and Jane Plastow, eds. (1999); Stephen Gray, ed. (1993); David Graver, ed. (1999); Kathy Perkins, ed. (1997); and Temple Hauptfleisch and Ian Steadman, ed. (1984)
3. For examples of such videos, see Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers*, dir.

Norman Florence (Phoenix Films and Video, 1999); Kwame Braun, *Stage Shakers: Ghana's Concert Party*, narrated by Catherine Cole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Margaret Drewal's *Yoruba Ritual: A Companion Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Athol Fugard's *Master Harold . . . and the Boys*, dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg, perf. Matthew Broderick, Zakes Mokae, and John Kani (Karl-Lorimar Home Video, 1986); *Blood Knot*, dir. James Earl Jones, perf. J. D. Cannon and James Earl Jones (Creative Arts Television, 1996); *Boesman & Lena*, adapted and dir. John Berry, perf. Danny Glover, Angela Bassett, and Willie Jonah (Kino International, 2001); *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, dir. Andrew Martin, perf. Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, and José Ferrer (Insight Media, 1992); Mbogeni Ngema's *Woza Albert*, dir. Barney Simon, perf. Percy Mtwa and Mbongeni Ngema (California Newsreel, 1982); and Stéphane Wislin's *Théâtre noir francophone* (PICS/The University of Iowa, 1992).

4. President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa is the greatest popularizer of the concept; the august occasion of his articulation of the idea was as deputy president in September 1998 at the African Renaissance Conference of African heads of state held in South Africa (see Mbeki 1998).
5. For useful studies on the theatricalization of politics in Zaire, see Fabian 1990, 274, 279–287; Kapalanga 1989; and, in Togo, Toulabor 1986.

Part One:

General Contexts

1 King Baabu and the Renaissance Vision

Wole Soyinka

Renaissance is today's *mot courant* trickling down the throat of most African leaders. Some of them—a handful, of course—are genuine visionaries. They are frustrated by the negation of what they recognize as the potential of a much-abused continent and see themselves as children of a unique history and agents of change. For the most, however, what is renaissance but just another word, except that they are vaguely conscious of the fact that it has a portly, historical texture to it, almost something you can chew—not savor—simply chew in the manner in which cows ruminate, giving off that air of profound contemplation as they lie recumbent in the village shade with a mouthful of grass. For millions below that leadership, however, renaissance is a genuine yearning. Even though they do not understand the word, they are convinced that it means some kind of ameliorating change, some form of social transformation that will lift them out of their accustomed condition of social torpor and the bitter rounds of survival desperation. But what, really, does a renaissance entail? We know what it means—in the literal sense, that is—but what it entails is far more important, because then it implicates some level of awareness, a sense of planning, and a precision of direction, a willingness to embrace and endure the pains of possible convulsion that ultimately make palpable the mere meaning of the word, which is simply—a rebirth.

When we speak of a renaissance within a slab of real estate, a piece of landed property that is not simply a void but one that is inhabited by palpable beings—in short, a nation, a people, or a society—we must think for a start of such mundane issues as the structure that, in effect, defines the occupants of the terrain either as a series of microcommunities or as a single entity. This must be one of the reasons, I imagine, why the structure that politically promotes the singular entity of the African peoples, or at least its projection—the Organization of African Unity—is being given a face-lift. That, right now, is the current scaffolding of the African renaissance. We have killed off the OAU and now flaunt, in its place, the banner of the African Union. Now, the African Union is made up of what? Of independent nations, of course. And what are those nations?

Paper delivered at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, on the occasion of the performance of *King Baabu* at the Baxter Theatre in September 2002.

How did they come into being? Are they viable entities? Are they expressions of external commercial and industrial needs whose origins are now the plaything of amnesia? Or of internal power surrogates specially emplaced by the departing colonial powers, entities that need to be sustained under any circumstances so that they sometimes even constitute nothing but expressions of individual egos, some of which endure as such for decades—Congo-Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko, Guinea Conakry under Sékou Touré, Central African Republic under Emperor Bokassa, yes, even Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, etc., etc. There are enormous differences, of course, even among these cited instances. The exceptions—I need not point them out—were recognized by their leaders as potential manifestations of humane, self-regulating spaces. All others remained cynical expressions or resource pools of a past imperial dispensation, upheld with ideological rhetoric, or simply murderous passion by individual leaders within the continent.

And so the new body, the African Union, is as good a place as any to commence this self-interrogation. Does the Union intend, for instance, to beam its searchlight on the urgent task of terminating, as rapidly as possible, the cycle of wars that are waged so murderously over colonially awarded national boundaries—such as the recent Ethiopian-Eritrean bloodbath? If it does, it will have proved that the continent has indeed reached maturity and resolved not to perpetuate, as a mindless agent, the callous disregard, indeed contempt, for African peoples that motivated the cavalier manner in which the continent was carved up in the first place. It would mean that it recognizes, as a necessary credo of the would-be renaissance, that the primary wealth of a nation is its people. That it accepts that neither nation nor society is abstract, but concretely defined by the palpable existence of the humanity that animates and regenerates those swathes of developed or even pristine environment. Africa has an opportunity to radicalize her existence by embarking on a policy of resolving its internal boundary disputes through the humanistic test: ascertaining the wishes of the people who actually inhabit, develop, and produce their existence from such disputed areas. It would mean that the renaissance gospels are truly transformed in the cause of African humanity to the extent that they accept that no piece of mere territorial holding, including its natural resources, is worth the life of one of our fellow men, women, or children. If the ultimate goal of the African continent is to create some form of rational—as supposed to merely sentimental—political union, the present boundaries, imposed on the continent by imperial powers, must be designated as negotiable wherever they remain costly sources of friction. In any case, they prove more and more meaningless every day to the people they enclose, and the loss of lives in their defense continues to indict a lack of visionary thinking and planning on the part of political leadership.

Now we come close to the sobering currency of the King Baabu archetype as the most enduring obstacle to the dreamt-up resumption of the renaissance march, one that appears to have eluded us since the independence of African nations. Try offering any of those foregoing propositions to a reigning King Baabu and his silent partners in power and a wall of resistance goes up imme-

diately. Why should this be surprising, since they recognize only too well that it may lead to a questioning of the very validity of that territorial space that defines their being, indeed, validates their very existence? Ask yourselves, why was it that one of the very first articles of understanding at the inception of the Organization of African Unity was the sacrosanctity of the colonial boundaries that had been imposed on the African peoples? That, more than any other protocol of the OAU charter—including even the clause that imposes on each member a policy of noninterference in the affairs of other nations—has been responsible for the proliferation of the personalization of political spaces since the era of African independence and the succession of one King Baabu after another on the political landscape of the continent.

But the matter goes beyond the palpable space over which King Baabu presides. It implicates the very form of governance, since we know that very often the questioning of the national space and the threat of, or agitations toward, a rearrangement of those spaces often takes its roots from a feeling of rejection or exclusion, stemming from the marginalization of a part by the entirety or the internal domination of a part by another part. The worst scenario is encountered when the phenomenon of domination is not even a collective but a personalized one, a brutal manifestation of power that we call, very simply, tyranny. The African renaissance remains a chimera as long as one King Baabu remains among us, his existence rationalized, indeed condoned and consolidated through silence—thus enshrining the cynicism of power either in the management of resources or of political alienation.

What are the remedies most readily applied by King Baabu whenever he feels threatened? We are all familiar with them. He resorts to religious, ethnic, or racial incitement, mouthing a rhetorical commitment to the goals of social transformation. I invite you to look closely at where we find ourselves today in the dismal scenario that is being played out in Zimbabwe, led by our once-revered liberation fighter and national leader, now the latest aspirant to the crown of King Baabu. Do you sometimes feel, as I do, that we appear to be especially cursed? Is it really difficult to insist that the elected leader of a nation must be seen as the principal custodian of its laws? Regard this spectacle, then, where a leader, sworn to uphold the law of the nation, evokes racial animosities simply in order to incite his followers to take the law into their own hands over any issues, especially such emotive ones as land ownership. Let us pause awhile and take a keen look at the claims of the Zimbabwean renaissance and the reality that it obscures.

To begin with, let us be careful that Mugabe's opportunism does not cause us to lose sight of some fundamental issues that must be held pertinent to a once-settler-colony like Zimbabwe, where a grossly disproportionate few own and exploit the largest and richest swathes of farmland in the nation. Abdul Nasser in his time was compelled to tackle such a situation head on, dispossessing the feudal oligarchy and reinvesting the land among the *fellahin*. The struggle of the Sandinista in Nicaragua against a landowning monopoly composed of a few select families is equally pertinent. Some of the greatest uprisings and con-

sequent civil wars in Mexico have centered squarely on the ownership of land, even right down to contemporary times, with the revolt of the neo-Zapatistas of that land, a revolt that was rooted in the history that goes back all the way to the Mexican experience of the ruthless appropriation of indigenous land by foreigners. There is therefore nothing extraordinary or blameworthy in any moves to execute a policy that aims for a more egalitarian apportionment of land and its resources. Indeed, any true leader must remain permanently aware of the need to redress any glaring imbalance in the ownership of such a resource as land, since human population, despite even the most radical national policies in birth control, remains infinite while land is finite.

The question that must be put to Robert Mugabe, however, is this: Just what have you been doing as head of a virtual one-party government for nearly a quarter of a century? Is there no orderly, structured alternative to the unleashing of so-called war veterans on farm owners, their families, and—a majority of the affected who are, however, mostly neglected in Western and so-called radical reporting on this continent—African managers, farmhands, and other employees? Those last especially, the farm workers and ancillary population that earns a livelihood from the industry of the land. In the history of takeover of factories, I have yet to learn of armies of peasants or university lecturers being instigated to take over the ownership and operations of such factories—no, it is logically the workers themselves. They may be expected to lock out the owners and turn the factory into a cooperative, sometimes retaining the former operatives in management or technical positions in order to ensure continuity in efficiency and productivity. Even Stalin in his mad race to collectivize land and eliminate all those conveniently designated kulaks did not send veterans of Russia's revolutionary wars to take over the land. Not that his results were much better, but he appeared at least to have given some thought to structural transfers, which is something totally absent from Mugabe's methodology—if one could call it that, being a violent, chaotic process in response to an ancient history of dispossession and for the declared intent for the restoration land justice.

Stung and humiliated by the clear knowledge that the elections a year ago in Zimbabwe constituted a victory for the opposition—never mind that a vicious campaign of intimidation, murders, and other dismal forms of state terror, identical with the present campaign of land retrieval, had succeeded in providing his party a numerical majority—the ageing lion has resorted to the most blatant, time-dishonored methods of African dictators who fail to understand that a people must be led in dignity, not dragged on their knees and bellies on the pathway to social transformation. Resignations and dismissals of judges have been manipulated at a speed unprecedented in the history of Zimbabwe's judiciary, so that that institution is now packed with Mugabe's creatures, guaranteed to do his bidding and overturn constitutional modes of redress. Free expression has become hazardous, as writers and journalists skitter around increasingly ill-defined parameters of toleration that recall the darkest days of Idi Amin's Uganda. In vain his own peers, his brother heads of states in neighboring countries and with similar revolutionary credentials—including South Africa's

at the early stages—attempt to call Führer Mugabe to order—no, he is far too gone on the route to self-apotheosis, indifferent to the price that African nations and peoples continue to pay when forced into one cul-de-sac after another. A messy endgame is in store for that unlucky nation—the enthronement of brute force as the force of law and even the possibility of a civil war.

Let us not delude ourselves; let us not allow our rational faculties to be so cheaply occluded by cheap racial emotionalism. We have been here before, and it would be to our eternal shame if we allowed ourselves to be led down this primrose path yet again by cheap appeal to African historical injustices, identity, or culture. We have been here before, not once, not twice, but several times over. Mobutu Sese Seko, the couturier of leopard-skin machismo in his heyday, flung the cult of the African *authenticité* in the face of his opponents whenever he ran out of productive ideas—which was all the time. Every act of Mobutu was trumpeted as being undertaken in the cause of the restoration of the African past, of the African value, in face of European negation, of an African authentic being and the dignity of the black race. Virtually single-handedly, however, Mobutu, while mouthing these laudable goals, methodically looted his nation's resources, pauperized the inordinately endowed nation of Congo/Zaire while turning himself into a multibillionaire with holdings in Switzerland and Belgium that beggared even the insatiable rapacity of his erstwhile colonial master, King Leopold of Belgium, whose private holdings in Africa were obscenely named the Congo Free State.

Have we forgotten so soon the manic antics of the erstwhile ruler of Uganda, the one and only Alhaji Dr. Field-Marshal Professor Emeritus Life-President etc., etc. Idi Amin Dada? Well, he was also committed to restoring Africa to Africa, and more specifically, Uganda to Ugandans. In the cause of that laudable ideal, he seized every opportunity to insult and humiliate any representative of the imperialist or colonial order that was unfortunate enough to come within his orbit—over which, let it be understood, no one shed any tears. The question is, just what benefits did this project bring to the Ugandans? Was the quality of existence for Ugandans noticeably enhanced by the antics of the genial, revolutionary, anti-imperialist giant? Well, the answer is best provided by Ugandans—we shall simply let it hang for now. My personal contribution to that forum is to reveal that I was myself in Uganda, my first ever visit to Eastern Africa, shortly after the completion of my studies abroad and return to my own piece of the African real estate. It was the first ever meeting on African soil of the sixties generation of writers, artistes, intellectuals, etc., and it took place in Makerere College, Uganda. That was where we first encountered our colleagues such as Okot p'Bitek; David Rubadiri; Rajat Neogy, founder of the magazine *Transition*; and the francophones such as Tamsir Niane, Mongo Beti, etc. I recall most distinctly—and we were very vocal about it—our astonishment at the monopoly of businesses by the Asian minority—from the middle to even lower economic levels of the Ugandan society. Virtually every shop—I repeat, every shop, hotel, restaurant, factory, etc.—was owned by Asians. The plantations belonged of course to the European settlers. When we were driven to the hillside

residences, the choicest parts of Kampala, we found that the mansions that straddled some of the most lushly serene parts belonged to Asians. This struck us as downright anomalous, and we decried this second-tier internal colonialism that virtually cast the native Ugandans in the role of third-class citizens.

Well then, what happened to Uganda after Idi Amin seized power? Illegitimate power seizure ever seeks justification, if not for the actual act of seizing power, then for its legitimization. The Asians provided the perfect scapegoat. Before Idi Amin came into power, they did not come into the political equation. Indeed, it is often forgotten today that Idi Amin was about to be cashiered and tried by Milton Obote for diamond smuggling when he struck first and booted Obote out of office. That scene has recurred again and again in the history of coups d'état on this continent—the thieving military officer is about to get his just deserts but he preempts justice by taking over an entire nation, then proceeds to justify his action by other means. The Asians provided the perfect alibi after Idi Amin had taken over power and found himself obliged to look around for what to do with it.

Yes indeed, we had felt that some kind of equity was required in the lopsided attribution of resources in Uganda; what we had not envisaged, nor could ever condone, was the sheer opportunism of stolen power and the brutality that now accompanied it. The Asians were hounded out of East Africa under some of the most atrocious circumstances. Often, even on the way out, they were robbed of the very possessions that they had managed to salvage in order to begin a new life elsewhere, having had their properties arbitrarily seized—not even for structured redistribution among the Ugandan peoples, but among Idi Amin's family members, lieutenants, and cronies. I recall that period with painful clarity. Change was clearly inevitable. But is change forbidden in a productive, systematic manner, one that does not further heap deprivations on the already deprived of society? The economy of Uganda, up till this moment, has yet to recover from that phase of East Africa's economic "renaissance."

What then, I ask you, is the difference between Idi Amin's appropriation of Asian-owned businesses and our revolutionary Mugabe's opportunistic occupation of minority-owned farms and homes in today's Zimbabwe? Can anyone top the shameless spectacle of the First Lady of the Realm, surrounded both by state enforcers and the so-called war veterans—let us give them their proper names, state-assisted and state-promoted thugs—blithely announcing to the septuagenarian owners that she is now the new occupant of their home and farms. Mind you, she was obviously most anxious to place herself a notch above the so-called war veterans in her style of eviction—she actually gave the aged couple forty-eight hours to abandon their home. Please, leaders of this continent and self-declared Paracletes of the renaissance, let this be clearly understood by one and all: You will manifest yourselves as men and women of straw, mere verbalizers, if you permit renegades within your select fold to continue to put our continent to ridicule, if you fail to denounce, in the strongest terms possible, this betrayal of your renaissance vision. It is sufficiently sad that you continue to pretend that the last elections in Zimbabwe were indeed the expression

of the will of the Zimbabwean people—none of us is exempt from the stain of conceding a semblance of acceptance to a blatant robbery—however, the shabby charade that is being played out at the moment in the name of our impoverished masses is unworthy of our leadership and demands your stringent censure. There is worse, however. You may find that your compliance, in the name of peace and stability, proves to have watered the seed of violent upheaval in a land where the imperatives of genuine social justice are being sacrificed for a mess of revolutionary pottage. King Baabu, alas, is not the annunciator of the long-awaited African renaissance, and he is further diminished as an agent of change by the conduct of his consort, Lady MacZim, the vanquisher of septuagenarians.

Do the dreams of a renaissance thus sometimes appear misplaced, misdirected, or unattainable? No. We merely thrust certain realities to the fore so that we do not float in the clouds of cuckoo-land, refusing to address even the very anomalies that militate against a desired transformation. Just how many leaders, for instance, concern themselves with the theocratic menace that currently nibbles at the foundations of a number of African nations that wait to be rejuvenated at the renaissance fountain? How many confront this project of negativity squarely, without the anodyne of compromises on which it feeds? Is this form of religious retrogression simply a minor glitch along the route, or is it fundamental to the very existence even of such nurturing structures as the African Union? When you have a geographical polity peopled by over a hundred and twenty million people being dragged backward into an atavistic age where women are sentenced to be stoned to death for giving their bodies to whomsoever they please, you cannot begin to speak of a renaissance but implicitly acknowledge in its place a retrogression into sheer atavism. But is the situation of Nigeria isolated, or is it a merely notorious eruption of a theocratic virus that has been deliberately ignored, even cosseted in many parts of the African continent? The decades-old war in Sudan, for instance, how long are we going to continue to pretend that it does not owe part cause to the determination of a part to impose a theocratic mandate, and of a spectacularly backward version, on the entirety of a nation? These contradictions will not go away. They will continue to hemorrhage our continent, as they did in Kaduna, Kano, Jos, Ilorin in Nigeria where thousands of innocents were slaughtered like rams in the name of religious fervor. Is it really possible that the same organism can accommodate the theocratic rigidities of some nations at the same time as the progressive, secular dispensations that exist in countries like Ghana, Senegal—which incidentally is predominantly Islamic—Uganda, and right here, in South Africa? Are these really possible bedfellows? It is time that we insisted on direct answers to these hard questions, time that we asked ourselves just how much human sacrifice is acceptable in order to accommodate the insane parameters of nationhood in order to proceed one step farther in the consolidation of a union of incompatibles.

Take a look at the European Union. You do not join that Union simply because you are geographically located in Europe. The founding members of that Union decided on a principle of common grounds, common values. To be a

part of that union, you must accept its founding principles or negotiate your way in. I do not believe in this mentality of a saline solution, that we belong together simply because our shores are lapped by the same salty expanse of water. Propinquity is not synonymous with consanguinity, and some very stringent defining principles must be set down and adhered to by all who wish to be part of a modern, forward-looking organism that must frankly analyze its past, critique its present, and only then program its future.

Of course, a union can also come into being as a process of conquest—or some other degree of *force majeure*. The Soviet Union is an obvious example but then, of course, who really wishes today to follow that path? At this very moment, that ideologically driven behemoth of a specific era, perhaps an inevitable product of those very historic circumstances, is itself seeking its own path of salvation. It does not exactly bandy the word “renaissance,” but who can doubt that, at the heart of its many floundering motions, its awkward and uncertain steps, is the real goal of rediscovering and reinventing itself after a heroic but deeply flawed and humanly costly experiment? At the core of the strategy of its rebirth is the principle of liberalism; the enthronement of freedom of expression; freedom of beliefs and of worship, of experimentation; the surfacing of artistic forms that were once decried as decadent, prurient, reactionary, and even bourgeois. That truncated Union is, let us readily admit, in desperate straits, and who knows but what it may yet end up as yet another basket case of a failed modernism? What matters is that those orphans of an ideological Eden are seeking a new definition of themselves, and that process is identical to what we easily identify as the birth pangs of a renaissance.

We know what the word renaissance means. More important, we know what it demands that we do and what it demands that we do not. Here is an incredible but true story. Some of you may be aware of it; certainly it has been narrated in a book by one of our colleagues, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, but his collection of essays was published quite a while ago and it may have slipped into the backyard of your memory, lumbered down by the baggage of far more urgent atrocities that have overtaken the African peoples. However, atrocities do not really assist us in homing in on the true mandates of a renaissance: Intellectual distortions such as the following story connotes do. Here now is the story: A university lecturer in forestry in an East African country, researching into the woodlands of his own nation, found himself in serious trouble with his government. He was condemned to several years of prison detention for his pains. Of course he deserved it. Everyone knows that no Western-educated man has any business in the forests of his own land unless he had some subversive purpose in mind, such as linking up with rebels against an unpopular government or making nocturnal pacts with evil spirits for the same end. The president of that country was quite emphatic: “Why,” he demanded, “should anyone go into the bushes to collect samples and make an inventory of trees unless he had some sinister, ulterior motive. We would have been quite happy to provide him a scholarship to Canada, which is quite famous for its forests—anyone knows that is where to go if you are really serious about forestry!”

The paranoia of that president—a much-resented dictator, needless to say—who ruled his nation with an iron fist under the pretence of a one-party democracy, is self-evident. In the same vein, he attempted to suppress theatre and literature in the minority languages of the nation, fearful that this was only a ploy for spreading subversive messages. The consequences for such a policy are obvious: It forecloses authentic culture, a vast area of retention, enquiry, and adaptations, one that could possibly hold the key to many problems—including health problems—confronting not only one’s own nation and region but the entire humanity. The irony of course is that this ruler in a former colonized nation chose to prolong the pattern of arrogant invaders who exhibited a contempt for the hidden largesse of nature and experience in a locality with its own unique character and properties, although these imperators acted from a different motivation. Their priorities were geared to products that ministered immediately to their industrial or commercial needs.

And here is another, even more current, one that took place in my own country, Nigeria, about a decade ago. We all acknowledge that just as there can be no meaningful development in the face of capital flight from any nation, so can there be no talk of a renaissance in the face of intellectual flight, otherwise known as a brain drain, from any developing nation. Indeed, I would presume to lump the two together and insist that since economic development is dependent on all arms of productivity in any nation, including the intellectual, the phenomenon of the brain drain virtually excludes all prospects of economic recovery in any nation. Perhaps this was the reasoning that stirred a former military regime in my nation to undertake a serious-minded investigation into the brain-drain syndrome in the nation called Nigeria. Not that he was original in his concerns, not at all. Before him, yet another military duo had tackled this negativism by highly sophisticated advertisements which featured a certain character named “Andrew.” The word “Andrew” became quite current for the expression of abandonment of the home front. It was targeted at the young to lower-middle-aged frustrated intellectual or businessman who had had enough and only lived for the day when he would seek greener pastures in other lands. In that video, Andrew is seen packing his luggage—usually affecting an already foreign accent just to indicate the resolve of his alienation—*Man, I had enough. This damned country ain’t getting me nowhere so, man you stay here if you want, I’m checking out.* Then follows a jingle of the most insolent banality, exhorting Nigerians to love their country and stay put. A catchy tune it was, but it only earned the ridicule of Nigerians for one simple reason—it painted the picture of a nation that did not exist, then urged patriotism—defined as staying put—toward a nonexistent entity.

Well, perhaps the military regime that followed had learned its lesson, so how did it improve on the agenda of stemming the flight of brain capital from the nation? It set up a commission—we are very fond of commissions, I don’t have to tell you. Next to days of national prayers for every affliction that is the handiwork of nature or mortals, our national leaders most readily invoke the mechanism of national days of prayers. So the commission went to work, traveled all

over the world to enquire—on the spot—why Nigerians chose to be where they were encountered by the commission rather than being where the commission felt that they should be—at home. They spent millions investigating a tendency to which a ten-year-old schoolboy could have provided an answer. And finally, no wonder, the answer being so simple, so obvious, and they, lacking the will to provide the remedial answer, pronounced the most incredible answer to their monumental quest. And that answer was: There was no problem of a brain drain. Nigeria, they announced, should be most content, even proud of the disappearance of her best minds because, they argued, we were providing a service to the rest of the world by sending them the best of our minds. I hope you understand. Europe, America, China, Japan—all these nations had need, it seemed, of our involuntary version of the American Peace Corps, so we need not worry about the outward flow of Nigerian gray matter to these fully developed societies.

Could it really be that those leaders could not understand that Africa cannot develop without its brain power? Surely they could not fail to have noted that many of our displaced professionals only await the congenial conditions—either politically or economically or both—to return to their original homes and contribute to the development and welfare of their peoples. What we had hoped, naively it seemed, was that after such a costly effort, a commission such as that would come up with some idea—even if utopian—to lure these minds back to their nations. They could easily, for instance, have recommended the setting up of special preferential conditions for the repatriation of trained manpower, using whatever incentives can be mustered, including tax breaks and soft resettlement loans, something that could be undertaken in association with banks whose loans will be guaranteed in turn by either state or the federal government. Instead, they came to the well-considered conclusion that all was well with the one-way flow of intellect.

A renaissance implicates a humanistic ethic. Now why should this not be enshrined as a founding condition of membership to any African Union? I am willing to concede that, perhaps, just perhaps, in unity does lie strength, but neither logic nor history proves that other aphorism, that there is strength in numbers. There is strength, however, in an identity of purpose and a concert of wills toward the attainment of that purpose. A renaissance can only be a child of enlightenment—never mind what appears to be the historic order of those defining phases (as named) in the development of Europe—enlightenment precedes renaissance, and when we speak of enlightenment, we move toward the eradication of superstitions, a phase of understanding where it is not mythology that rules our lives but is respected as a geography of sensibilities, a space of enhancement of our imagination and our arts. An enlightened society understands that it must create space where all religions are given free and equal rein, but only on the clear understanding that religious faith is a private compact between each individual and his or her concept of godhead and can have no place whatever in the governance of the totality of community.

And the choice of governance that may usher in a renaissance? There is of

course a tendency to glamorize or mystify the word—democracy—but the practical question cannot be evaded: Within what other system of governance is the individual most likely to realize his or her being? Democracy confers, even in its most imperfect forms, the attributes of self-respect, self-worth, choice, and thus—dignity. We will not speak of purely nominal democracy, the blasphemously named democracy of the one-party state, or rule through state terror that commences with a mockery of the election process, then asserts itself as a clique of predators—such are obviously not democracies. Of the many governance systems that have been evolved by man, however, a system that promotes freedom from arbitrary arrest, equality under the law, a voice in the election of representatives whose function is to make and uphold such laws and the transparent accountability of such representatives, freedom from degradation of the individual personality, and the exercise of moral choices. Such a system, generally known as democracy, provides a social framework under which the dignity of the citizen is pursued as a right, not a concession. What would be wrong in making such conditions of social regulation a founding principle of the reborn union of African nations? Why should the African Union not define itself as a union of secular democracies—now that has meaning, purpose, and definition? Those who wish to mystify leadership by attributing it to appointment in perpetuity, who understand law only as their private *diktat* and the disposition of a people's resources as a private privilege, should be left to form their own union. Similarly, those who believe that governance is only by divine election and see the laws of society as emanations of the Divine Will, subject only to interpretation only a mystically endowed set, whose ethical purity can be manifested only in the stoning to death of independent-minded women, should be encouraged to form their own ethereal union. Maybe the two groups should come together and form a very special union of nations of the Divine Ego. When the moment for secular reckoning comes—and it will, it arrives sooner or later—they should not look to the other union for understanding.

At the heart of every sociopolitical change—conceded or exacted in violent upheavals—are entrenched provisions that pay, at the very least, lip service to the upliftment of the human species, and the motivation of this constant is not far to seek: It comes from an awareness of the need to eliminate strife within society and to provide a level of stability that enables society to fulfill itself productively and guarantee its survival, just as with the animal species.

Parallel to the material provisions that form the basis of such a quest for ideal internal relations within the community are those protocols that, at some level or the other, provide for the individual's role in contributing to and developing a common pool of wealth and thus entitlement to a share in the resources of that society—that is, the material conditions of existence. To watch human beings scabble in garbage heaps for a living—be it in the barrios of Brazil, the *bidonville* of Paris, in Johannesburg, or in the disposal dumps along the dual carriageways of Lagos—is a reduction in the apprehension of our own dignified self-perception as we drive past such sights in our air-conditioned vehicles. There are, however, also the immaterial, the crucial intangibles: Among these,

we identify the right of each constituent entity to a voice in the management of society, in the definition of, establishment of, and access to structures of arbitration between individuals and groups, between groups and the total society, and, finally, the articulation of rights, in a way that ensures that the rights and dignity of one do not infringe on the rights of another or on the rights of the overall society—in short, the rule of law. These are the attributes of freedom. They need no mystification, and they are already encoded even in the Charter of Human Rights of the former OAU. A condition for membership of the new union should demand absolute and unqualified adherence to these protocols that guarantee our humanity, and penalties—including expulsion—for governance in contempt of them.

Ultimately, therefore, we revert squarely to the issue of leadership. That, let us face it, has been the greatest obstacle to the renaissance dream. From whatever perspective we choose to address the issue of the progress of any nation—economics, human rights, planning, ideology, religious tolerance, intellectual development, etc., etc.—the commitment of leadership plays a critical role. And thus it must be understood that when we assail leadership, we do not do so for lack of any imaginative ideas—in any case, who in his right mind wants to sound like a permanently cracked record? No. Leadership is constantly assailed only because leadership has proved so treacherous to the led. We are not alone in this understanding. When the chimes of this new renaissance rang out two or three years ago, rung by none other than the president of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, with whom we acknowledge a tie that dates back to the struggle for South African liberation from the apartheid monstrosity when he was both refugee and representative of the ANC in Nigeria, we were cheered to a degree unimaginable for many listeners here today. For what he said, in effect, was a summons to the people of this continent to repudiate and—in effect—rise up and overthrow the alienated, despotic leadership of their various nations. The history of South African liberation struggle made this all the more credible, indeed, inevitable. The most recent test of such a summons now challenges the collective will of the continent, in the shape of the increasingly fascistic eruption of King Baabu of Zimbabwe, and all that is left to us is a sad bewilderment at the lackadaisical approach to the death throes of the black führer playing the race card that South Africa herself has recognized is no answer to the internal dichotomies that lie within the class structuring of society and the perpetuation of indignities against the African peoples.

Yes, we must indict the leadership. But this is not to ignore the oppressive factor of external interventions that have indeed grown exponentially since the so-called independence of African nations. To touch very quickly upon corruption, for example: The culture of corruption in our societies is the handiwork of leadership, but of course such a level could never have been attained without the collaboration of foreign investors, banking services, and even, in some cases, governments. Let these foreign collaborators therefore clean up their own houses by reforming their business habits and exposing to the world our leadership malefactors. They have a responsibility to open up access to in-

formation that will lead to the repatriation of ill-gotten wealth of staggering dimensions. We applaud those leaders whose guiding principles have been nothing but leadership and service rather than self-aggrandizement and urge others to follow their examples.

This is only a partial overview of the contradictions of society that tacitly, or overtly, spawn the Baabu obscenities in our midst. Let no one imagine that I have touched upon one hundredth of the multifarious causes that subject us, time and time again, to this phenomenon that has been responsible for so much anguish, so much social retardation and debilitation of the creative and productive potential of this continent. We are no politicians, even though we recognize now that we are trapped within that political arena that has been so thoroughly polluted by those who call themselves politicians and arrogate to themselves an omniscience that appears to be a condition of their existence. We are content merely to raise the banner that reads: Down with all these King Baabus. Down with their increasingly shameless consorts, the Queen MacZims. Let the trampled will of the people triumph and survive beyond cant, rhetoric, cynicism, and murderous opportunism.

2 Dimensions of Theatricality in Africa

Joachim Fiebach

Human behavior (presentation of the self) and social interrelationships (acting out roles) have been quite often understood in Western cultures, at least since the sixteenth century, as theatrically structured. Given the prevalent assumption that there was a rigid line of demarcation between society as the objective reality and theatre as a subjective, constructed, fictional representation (mimesis), the two realms were mostly compared and interrelated on a metaphorical level. This has changed in the twentieth century. Scholars and artists themselves have come to conceive of social realities as more or less made up by the very components, structural relations, and “techniques” that constitute the phenomenon of theatre art. In the 1920s, the German anthropologist Helmuth Plessner took an actor’s activity on stage as the paradigm for human attitudes and interaction with others in real life and in the sociopolitical world. Humans, Plessner argued, act and interact in “real life” the same way as a performer does in theatre arts (1982a, 109–129; 1982b, 399–418). In the 1930s to early 1940s, Bertolt Brecht described the acting out of social roles and, implicitly, the display of the self in “real life” as “natural theatre” and “everyday theatre” (1964b, 74–106; 1977, 131–132, 300). In 1959, Erving Goffman summed up this line of thinking: theatrical techniques, he wrote, were constituents of the individual’s interaction in real life (1959, 254–255). Since the 1960s, larger groups have been rethinking societal realities as “theatrical,” or forms of performance. This, for instance, has resulted in the establishment of special academic institutions for performance studies in North America and in a joint research project called “Theatralität/Theatricality” conducted by several universities in Germany. Different strands of postmodernist theorists focus in particular on developments in highly industrialized societies. They claim that the exponentially accelerating production and circulation of commodities and audiovisually mediated images have created an entirely new historic situation. Some hold that it has been only since the 1950s that performance and theatricality have become decisive agencies (constituents) of reality. Most tend to assume that the distinction between “reality” and “image circulation” is being blurred to such an extent that reality (realities) appear to be lost or dissolve altogether (W. Anderson 1990, 3–6).

This chapter's general interest is to provide an outline demonstrating that African cultures do bear out what Western anthropologists, sociologists, and artists such as Brecht have advanced about theatricality and performance. Its goals are twofold. First, it attempts to contribute to further research into the vast range of African "theatrical phenomena" that may exist beside the already widely discussed performance formats. It seeks to indicate that theatricality has been a major dimension for upholding and contesting power structures and social (general) difference. Second, elaborating on preindustrial African cultures, the chapter argues that performance as symbolic action was a decisive agency in constituting societal realities well before the advent of the "age of television," as Martin Esslin (1981) calls it.

I will start by considering four examples of acts of performance described by foreign visitors to Africa from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. I will then proceed to comment on each of those performances. The first is by Ibn Battuta. Looking back at his travels in the Mali empire of the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta described the audiences the sultan (king) held in the palace courtyard on certain days. There was a platform under a tree with three steps, silk carpeting, and cushions placed on it and a huge umbrella protecting it from the sun. The king made his appearances from a door in a corner of the palace with a bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. He was preceded by musicians who carried two-stringed guitars; behind him came hundreds of armed slaves. He walked in a leisurely fashion, affecting a very slow movement, and even stopped from time to time. On reaching the platform, he halted and looked round the assembly, then ascended it "in the sedate manner of a preacher ascending a mosque-pulpit." As he took his seat, drums, trumpets, and bugles were sounded. Three slaves went running out to summon the king's deputy and military commanders, who then came and sat down. When the king summoned any of his subjects, the person called would take off his clothes and put on worn garments, remove his turban and don a dirty skullcap, then approach the king with his garments and trousers raised knee-high. He went forward in an "attitude of humility and dejection," according to Ibn Battuta, and knocked the ground hard with his elbows. Then that person would stand with bowed head and bent back listening to what the king said. If he addressed the king and received a reply from him, he uncovered his back and threw dust over his head and back, "like a bather splashing himself with water." When the sultan delivered remarks, all those present at his audience would take off their turbans and set them down, listening in silence to what he said. Sometimes one of them stood up and recalled his deeds in the sultan's service, saying, "I did such-and-such on such a day" or "I killed so-and-so on such a day." Others who knew of his deeds would confirm his words by plucking the cord of their bow and releasing it with a twang, just as an archer did when shooting an arrow. If the sultan said "truly spoken," the man would remove his clothes and "dust" (Ibn Battuta 1964, 89-90).

The second example is drawn from eighteenth-century Benin, where chiefs were described as presenting their selves/social roles in the following manner:

when they went to the king's palace or other places, they dressed themselves like the women of Spain. From the waist down they wore clothes resembling sheets and farthingales. Two men who remained beside them served as attendants so that they could rest their arms on the attendants' shoulders. Thus they moved about with great solemnity. When on horseback, they struck similar poses that conveyed solemnity, especially when they were going to the king's palace for festivals or sacrifices. Each chief had a large following and his own band, some playing ivory flutes, others small guitars, others calabashes with small stones inside, and still others drums. An observer remarked that those who cut the most fearsome figure were accounted the finest (Ryder 1969, 314).

In the nineteenth century, a French general received a grand reception by a paramount chief who apparently had authority over quite a few West African villages. The chief descended from his horse and, according to the general's description, prostrated himself and then sat down beside the high-ranking, powerful European. The chief's relations, friends, and virtually all villagers formed a circle around him. Three griots were playing on their music instruments. All of a sudden, a warrior stormed into the circle with a sword in his hand. He moved to the general, stretched his arm toward the earth, and then started to jump and yell, as the general put it, moving his sword about as if he were attacking and then defending himself. Other warriors stood up and followed suit. Their movements (presentations) developed into a wild dance accompanied by music and illuminated by a big fire. The griots came and challenged the chief, who then took his rifle and began to dance. The relatives, who had stood up together with the chief, joined in, keeping their distance respectfully. When the chief ended his dance, everyone saluted and praised him profusely. He resumed dancing, then after some time stopped, apparently exhausted, according to the general's observation (Cornevin 1970, 16–17).

The fourth and last example is about storytelling in South Africa. After characterizing, in the beginning of his study undertaken in the 1950s, the *ntsomi* of the South African Xhosa as a traditional form of oral literature, Harold Scheub ended up considering the accompanying oral performance of those stories as an essentially theatrical phenomenon, a type of theatre. The narrative—that is to say, the performance of Xhosa storytelling—often moves with breathtaking speed from image to image, from one signifying action and signified event to the other. The performances depend heavily on gesture:

The body is actively involved in creating the actions expressed in the *ntsomi*. Thought and stream of consciousness may be indicated by a lowering of the voice, a sinking of the head. To indicate dialogue, the performer often tilts her head to the left, then to the right, to differentiate between the two characters who are speaking; this may be coupled with vocal dramatics, to distinguish them further. . . . At times, gesture is utilized purely for rhythmic purposes, the hands and body in harmony with the movement of the words rather than their content, the body thus becoming an echo of the sound of language rather than its meaning. . . . The audience provides . . . accompaniment and commentary, or total involvement as actors. In accompanying and commenting, it simply reflects the

rhythmic movement and action of the narrative as it is being developed by the artist. (Scheub 1975, 71-73)¹

The first three cases could be considered highly demonstrative symbolic actions, or “cultural performances” of different significance that were at the same time the actual communicative practices of the respective societal entities. They were activities to conduct public life, to mediate characteristic attitudes of individuals (self-presentation), and to act out the actual positions and interrelationships of different social strata and groups in the given society or, so to speak, to construct its “real fabric.” The performance of sociocultural power and the ostentatious display of pertinent individual (social) attitudes constituted the very realities of court life and of interrelationships between ruling strata in ancient African states. This comes out even more graphically in the third example of a paramount chieftainship that was receiving the mighty representative of the new colonial power. The presentations of *ntsomi*-stories (narratives) are clearly separated out from normal, everyday life, let alone from political activities. They could be categorized as aesthetically dominated communicative events, as a distinct artistic/aesthetic production called theatre. In the West, the concept derives from a specific cultural phenomenon that originated in ancient Greece. Since then, the term “theatre” has mostly been used to describe events that resemble or are almost identical to those separated-out (compartmentalized) cultural productions that developed in Europe, corresponding to similar types in Asia. However, components (techniques) of that specific phenomenon called “theatre” made up the symbolic actions at the court in Mali, the public appearance of the Benin chiefs, and the encounter between the Senegalese chief and his followers. Those techniques consisted of ostended gestures and facial expressions, the positioning and grouping of persons and objects in ways that define social space, rank, and interrelationships. Rhythmical or ostended physical movements, ranging from gesturing to dancing, constituted the very reality of the given societal entities and at the same time signified social allegiances, disparities, and antagonistic cleavages. “Real” social attitudes and political relations unfolded in a theatrical way, or for that matter as the expressive presentation of (social) selves and/or the acting out of (social) roles. Thus, theatricality not only appears as a defining characteristic of artistic (aesthetically dominated) productions markedly set apart from other practices but as an essential dimension of sociocultural and political praxis, at least to a large extent. In any case, it is a defining characteristic of the wide range of cultural performances that are often constituents of sociopolitical processes. Tracing ways in which India was modernizing in the 1940s to 1950s, Milton Singer called cultural events such as weddings, temple rituals, festivals, recitations, plays, dramas, and musical concerts “cultural performance” (1959, xii-xiii). Extending the notion of performance to audiovisual productions in 1972, he claimed that performances were “the elementary constituents of the culture” (1972, 71). They elucidate processes of social and cultural change to a large extent (77).²

My understanding of theatricality in this all-encompassing, expansive sense

(see Fiebach 1996, 9–54 and 1998, 35–53) is similar to views and notions that have been advanced mainly by Western theatre people, social and cultural historians, anthropologists, sociologists. A few examples of these notions will illustrate the point. Analyzing the power struggle between the gentry and plebeian strata in England in the eighteenth century, Edward P. Thompson elaborated on the theatricality of their respective stances and interaction and generalized that many forms of public political activities were theatre (1980, 176–202, 299–301). In his studies on “performance,” Richard Schechner describes activities and events that are not specifically framed as “theatre art” as theatre and drama (1977, 86–87, 124, 145–146)—activities such as “social dramas, personal experience, public displays, political and economic interaction” (Schechner 1985, 150). Discussing reality as a “highly contestable notion,” David Parkin claimed that a false distinction is made by asking the “usual question “of the extent to which reality is an “objective condition that can be represented.” If power, for instance, is “immanent in all social interaction,” then we need to ask what is special about power “emanating from cultural events.” Thus, Parkin pointed to the “transformative qualities” of the symbolic or of the cultural becoming “the political and vice versa” (1996, xx, xvi). He believed, according to Edward L. Schieffelin in his 1998 study problematizing “performance,” that there was something fundamentally performative “about human being-in-the-world.” He posited cautiously there would be no culture and no society without “living human body expressivity” (Schieffelin 1998, 195).³

Victor Turner and Georges Balandier should be mentioned in particular. Their respective ideas derived primarily from encounters with African realities, rites of passages of various types, African attitudes toward death and practices dealing with the dead, healing processes, and complex cultural performances inextricably intertwined with possession or mediumship. Turner, claiming that the self was “presented through the performance of roles” (1986, 81–82), referred to Goffman’s question of the “critical ways” in which the world would not be theatre (72).

Balandier delineated historical trajectories along which the theatrical construction of social and political structures (realities) moved in different and changing historical processes. On the one hand, he outlined how and why social interrelationships, specific mechanisms for upholding power structures, and hierarchical (class, caste, gender) disparities between the ruling and the ruled have been structured and thus bolstered and cemented by theatrical activities. On the other hand, he sketched the extent to and manner in which groups have always tried to subvert, resist, or even change those realities through what I would like to call symbolic actions. His book *Le pouvoir sur scènes* (1980) traces relevant phenomena from stateless and oral societies to what he calls the “thele” societies of today, also touching on African sociopolitical and cultural performances such as those described by the above-cited Arab and French observers. In the 1960s, Balandier had already pointed to the decisive role that symbolic actions played in the construction of everyday life in the old Congo kingdom

(1965, 174, 201). In *Le pouvoir sur scènes*, he begins by dealing with the role of symbolic actions or, for that matter, theatrically constructed practices in the consolidation or contestation of various types of power structures and social hierarchies in oral and stateless societies. This does not mean, according to his emphasis, that such activities, as performances, are reduced to “mere appearances” and “illusory play.” A society is not “held together” as an entity (only) by means of coercion and relations of legitimate forces but also by the whole set of transfigurations. They function as agencies to constitute a society and to make it work. That ensemble has a rather vulnerable structure. It is even a factor in threatening existing structures and can generate forms of dramatization that show power as a negative phenomenon (1980, 50–51).

I cautiously take the view that symbolic action and the theatrical performance of social and political realities are essential characteristics of oral societies or predominantly oral societies before the communications (and thus cultural) revolution ushered in by the invention and spread of the printing press. They unfold(ed) in essential ways as symbolically fraught praxis, as a “signifying practice” (Williams 1981, 208–209), or for that matter signifying performances, or vice versa.⁴

There is a rich body of material (e.g., descriptions of travelers, analyses of anthropologists) to support my contention that large portions of public communication (sociopolitical interaction) in many African societies, before and during the period of full-scale colonization that began in the nineteenth century, were structured in similar theatrical ways (see Fiebach 1986). François N’Sougan Agblemanon thus considered the “theatrical approach” (*stratagème théâtral*) a fundamental feature of African oral societies. With regard to storytelling performances as a “school for education” (*école d’éducation*), he claimed that the “theatrical approach” not only played a role in reducing the tensions between the individual and society but created an environment conducive to the cohesion of a given group and enhanced the individual’s receptiveness of community values. Music and dance as essential components of performance were essential factors in molding almost all domains of society. Public life was a “permanent scene” (*scène ininterrompue*) in which “attitudes and stances became roles in a theatrical sense” (*les comportements deviennent des rôles, au sens théâtral*) (Agbelamnon 1969, 149, 114).

François N’Sougan Agbelamnon emphasized the power of the “theatrical approach” to enable individuals to open up more easily to collective values and thus to become integrated into cohesive social units. He highlighted the role it could play in forming and stabilizing social structures and communal solidarity. It appears, however, that this was not the main or only trajectory or set of functions of theatricality in conducting essential parts of public life in many African oral societies. The first three cases presented above are examples of what could be called “representative theatricality,” or performances that demonstrate the distinct social status of different ruling groups and their most powerful individuals. The public behavior of the latter signified and thus underscored social

cleavage and difference rather than fostering communal cohesion and solidarity, which Agbelamnon seems to highlight as the main function of social theatre.

Many cases of “representative theatricality” point to the basic (social, gender) contradictions, conflicts, and worldviews that have been marked features of African societies since well before colonization. And it is mostly cultural performances such as rituals, festivals, and so forth that have been called upon to lay bare, negotiate, and resolve those crises. They are often bewilderingly ambivalent events in terms of the potential of their mental and emotional and thus ideological efficacy. The same obtains for virtually all types of social formations, for more or less nonhierarchical structured entities (communities, households, villages) as well as for highly complex societies based on social disparities and cleavages (kingdoms, empires).

Affirmative “representative theatricality” has often been highly contradictory itself. As forms of symbolic action, the respective performances affirm and uphold the actual, existing power structure. They display, and thus emphasize, the eternal, “natural” legitimacy of social hierarchy in empires and above all the indisputable power of their leading functionaries (kings) by relating them to legendary history, creation myths, and kingly ancestors. Kings and paramount chiefs are presented or present themselves as the supreme or only agency (or individuals) who can effectively communicate with powerful gods and thus ensure the welfare of a given community. Cultural performances celebrating achievements such as successful harvests are intended to signify that any prosperity of and security for the people result from the very power embodied by the ruler, who is considered to be the living successor of the (mythical) founding hero of the society in question. In his analyses of “representative theatricality” primarily in Central Africa, Pius Ngandu Nkashama comes to the conclusion that in any circumstance, the “play of the stage” (*le jeu de la scène*) becomes a most attractive factor that determines the “very existence of the social formation” (1993, 219–229). Everything is structured as if the despots seek to be exclusively both creators of the world and its dramaturges and as if since its origin they had wanted to dominate the cosmos by images and the example of the stage (33). Just as symbolic actions signified that kings and chief were the privileged or the only agencies (groups, individuals) that could secure the prosperity and stability of society, the very performance implied, and thus connoted, that the respective society is based on essential differences and antagonistic disparities.

The performance honoring Ogun that John Pemberton III describes is a specific example of that ambivalence (1989, 107–132). The main actors are the king and the most powerful chiefs. Their movements and attitudes (for example, parading to Ogun’s shrine) define and dominate space, time (seven days), and the public activities of the festivities. Thus, the symbolic actions demonstrate the actual unquestionable power of ruling (royal) lineages and in particular the dominant agency, the king. On the other hand, significant parts of those performances consist of threatening confrontations between the king and the chiefs.

The king and the leading warrior chief face each other with drawn swords: this signifies that there are discrepancies, conflicts, and tensions among the ruling groups themselves.

Other types of complex cultural performances that act out the real power structures and social hierarchies in order to demonstrate their legitimacy include components of symbolic actions that directly contest this legitimizing effort. They may throw the hierarchical structure into critical relief by constructing in performance an entirely different, inverted reality. Social cleavages, conflicts, and tensions can thus be brought to the open and illuminated. A few examples of such inversion performances will be in place. The *odwira* Yam Festival of the ancient Ashanti Empire is one such case. It was meant to perform the unquestionable legitimacy of the given social and political structure. It showed that the ancestors, the dead and their everlasting presence, embodied by the incumbent rulers and, above all, by the current king as their rightful representative, guaranteed prosperity for all subjects. The performance was designed to literally impress in the minds of all individuals the notion that only the existing hierarchical system safeguarded their lives and, in particular, that their supreme ruler, the king himself, was the father, the Old Leader of all lineages, social groups, strata, families, and individuals—an indispensable, oversized being. The third day was most interesting. Slaves and lowly subjects were given the freedom to act as they wished and to behave as rulers of the city of Kumasi. According to T. Edward Bowdich, reporting on the activities in one such festival, the king had ordered “a large quantity of rum to be poured into brass pans, in various parts of the town.” In less than an hour, “excepting the principal men” not a sober person was to be seen. The “commonest mechanics and slaves, furiously declaiming on state palavers; the most discordant music, the most obscene songs. . . . [A]ll wore their handsomest cloths, which they trailed after them to a great length.” Bowdich called it a “drunken emulation of extravagance and dirtiness” (1966, 278). Toward the evening, however, the license ended. A very different symbolic action then took place. Tributary chiefs “displayed their equipages in every direction,” and there was a procession from the palace to the south end of the town and back with the king and dignitaries “carried in their hammocks,” passing “through continued blaze of musketry” (279).

The Apo of Tekiman described by R. S. Rattray, and apparently hinted at by Willem Bosman already in the early eighteenth century (1967, 158), is a second example of an inversion performance meant to invert power structures and, basically, contradictory social relations for a well-defined (circumscribed) period of time. On Tuesday, Rattray relates, the great local god, Ta Kese or Ta Mensa, and several other gods were carried upon the heads of their respective priests under gorgeous umbrellas of plush and velvet. The following day, however, the deferential attitude toward the existing social structure and dominating values was inverted: “That afternoon bands composed entirely of women ran up and down the long, wide streets, with a curious lolloping, skipping steps, singing apo

songs.” Later Rattray was able to record them into his phonograph. The English translation of some parts shows that they were mocking or even scathingly attacking him: “O King, you are a fool. / We are taking the victory from out your hands. / O King, you are impotent.” The Ashanti people, they went on, may be children of slaves. The King of Ashanti might have bought them, but “he did not buy us.” They knew that a Brong man ate rats but they maintained that they “never knew that one of royal blood eats rats.” Today they had seen their master “eating rats” (1975, 156–157).

At least since Max Gluckman’s first probings into inversion rituals in Zulu villages in the 1930s, attention has been directed to structural contradictions and tensions in stateless, apparently egalitarian communities. To overcome grave crises (scarcity, agricultural disaster, looming famine) that threaten the very existence of respective communities, Zulu village women, who normally occupied a disadvantaged, subordinate social and thus power position (patriarchal society), took over authority and could do things and “act out” social roles that normally were the prerogatives of men. For a limited period of time, they had the right, virtually the undisputed power, to mock scathingly and ridicule the males (1963, 114–118). P. Rigby describes and analyzes a similar inversion ritual of the Gogo in Tanzania. In an existential crisis (cattle disease) that could wipe out the entire livestock, a basic means of subsistence, women took over the herding of cows and the “regimenting” not only of the households but of public life at large. Both functions were male prerogatives in “normal life.” Taking action to avert disaster and end the crises, women dressed and behaved as men. They attacked the males, who were powerless for the period of the role-inverting practice and could only retaliate by verbally jeering at the women (1968, 160–167). The intrinsic gender differences and tensions of Gogo reality could thus be brought to the open.

Seemingly indisputable moral and social norms have often been contested by the performance of a pair of masks that oppose and contradict each other. The “ugly masks” accompany and ridicule the beautiful, refined ones that embody the community’s dominant concepts of beauty, moral behavior, and attitudes. They debunk or comment critically on governing values and norms by inverting the costumes and gestures of the beautiful, norm-setting ones. Latent conflicts, social rifts, differing views can be brought to the open. The *jowei*-mask is used as the embodiment of the highest moral and social values and of the most secret forms of knowledge and dominant values of the female Sande Society of the Mendes of Sierra Leone. The beautiful Sande masker bears a variant of the name of the highest-ranking member in the Society, *sowei*. Dances of the *jowei* constitute the apex of initiation activities and important sociopolitical events such as the enthronement of a king or paramount chief. The *jowei*, or *sowei*, and the social value system or social structure they represent, have been, however, in most cases opposed, contradicted, and contested by the accompanying *gonde*-mask. The costume, makeup, shape, gestures, and movements of the *gonde*-mask are the very opposite of the solemnity, the gracious and idealized behavior, the refined costume, and facial mask of *j(s)owei*. According to Ruth B.

Philipps, *gonde* is “a clown-like figure which overturns all the conventions and decorum.” Her costume

is a pastiche of rags and tatters, and she is hung about with all sorts of junk—rusty tin cans, shells, and other discarded fragments. . . . *Gonde* is also shameless in going right up to people and asking for money despite her utter unworthiness, rather than waiting in a dignified manner for people to present whatever gifts they might want to give her. This angers *ndoli jowei* (who, people explain, wants all the money for herself) and, to the amusement of the crowd, she will try to chase the *gonde* away.⁵

The extent to which initiation rites can act out complex, contradictory social positions and conceptions of the world may be best outlined by a cursory glance at a main component of the Bambara initiation cycle; that is, at the masks or performers *koré dugaw*. They are tricksters or clowns representing the inextricable intertwining of both viciousness and destructiveness, critical intelligence and creativity. According to Dominique Laban’s detailed description, the *koré dugaw* are, to their village spectators, the most appealing performers in initiation procedures that transform children into adults and train them for leadership. *Kore* is the last or highest stage in the initiation cycle during which the initiated gain insight into the core values and secrets of their community. It is at this stage of the initiation that the *koré dugaw* intervene. Their function is to parody, satirize, mock, and ridicule everybody and everything held in highest esteem in society (Zahan 1960, 155–158). On the other hand, the clowns appear to embody the truly wise human being, the possessor of deepest knowledge (138–194). Additionally, their costume, speech, body movements, their whole appearance, seem to criticize authority openly. Apparently “taking sides” with the dominated peasants, they scathingly ridicule in particular the dominant values and deeds of the rulers—values praised by other types of performers.⁶ The clowns fight the dreadful hyena-masks that signify the king’s instruments of control of the peasants. Engaging the dangerous, much-feared hyenas, the clowns appear to perform the underdogs’ critical attitude toward the oppressive power structure and its hegemonic value system. The *koré dugaw* wear a wooden sword, a parody of the iron swords of the warriors and their policing guard (the hyenas). Grotesquely inverting the political and cultural hegemony of the rulers, they call themselves “war chiefs” and claim to possess an artillery called “tucking-in-the-cake.”

Two related characteristics of perceiving and thinking and thus of dealing with the world seem to have been at the basis of the performing or theatrical constructing of many domains of African societies before and even during colonization. First, it is a noncompartmentalizing conception that recognizes no rigid boundaries between different classes of phenomena, between the visible and the invisible, between earthly practices and supernatural forces. Taking the (imagined) communication with supernatural forces (worlds) as a constituent of real life requires visualization (presentation, representation) of the invisible agents. Intercourse with them must be rendered as a practice or, in other words,

it must be performed. Symbolic action thus becomes a major component (constituent) of social, political, and cultural life. Cultural performance as signifying practice appears to be essential for dealing with public matters in general and thus for constructing social realities (Fiebach 1986, 42–78).

Second, an all-encompassing pragmatism (Chernoff 1979, 155–165; Fiebach 1986, 80–81, 167–174)—that is, pragmatic worldviews and their corresponding attitudes—seem to have made many African (oral) societies conduct “real life” as theatrical, even as playful performing practices. Relating the performance of an inverted reality, as described by Gluckman, as a practice for dealing with existential crises in Zulu villages to what Axel-Ivor Berglund writes on the Zulu may indicate the extent to which there may be a causal relationship, or at least a significant correspondence between, African worldviews and pragmatic attitudes. Berglund emphasizes the complexity of pragmatic thought patterns and symbolism: the Zulu think of oppositions as different sides of the same coin, and they handle practical problems of everyday life accordingly. He avoids the term “ancestor,” for instance, because “ancestor” suggests thinking along the lines of Western dichotomies and treating the dead as if they were totally separated from the living. Quoting an informant—“Father is departed, but he is”—he claims that this expression should suggest the idea that the father is present and active although he is no longer living as the speaker is. Referring to a case in a customary court, Berglund points to the pragmatic flexibility of handling difficult-to-judge legal matters and other problems. Thus, Zulu thought patterns do not have a fixed code of laws that stipulate boundaries between the moral and immoral use of anger. Although the divisions are clear in theory, in practice there is room for manipulating the boundaries (Berglund 1976, 265). Focusing on Yoruba rituals and especially on Egungun/Apidan performances, Margaret Thompson Drewal stressed that ritual spectacles were plays but at the same time operated “as another mode of being,” into and out of which people shifted, like other modes of being. Spectacle dwells, she claims, conceptually at the juncture of “two planes of existence—the world and the other world, at the nexus of the physical and the spiritual” and the “visible and invisible” (1992, 103–104).

Since the early twentieth century, African societies have undergone a fundamental transformation. New societal structures have been developing, determined and shaped by colonization, the emergence of peripheral capitalism, and the encroachment of modern consumerism. This process has been in particular propelled by a specific communication revolution that rests on the rapidly growing role of printed material and at the same time on a fast-expanding network of audiovisual media, from phonograph, radio, and film to television and video. Research must be done to determine to what extent, and how, these changes have remolded conceptions of theatricality as a factor in constructing realities, how they have altered performing practices, what new possibilities of “performing realities” they facilitate, and what different “theatrical practices” they have and are generating. I can only hint at what should be more closely studied. There is the major role television has begun to play in Africa. So far, it has been the

most powerful new “dramatic form” of this age, as Esslin put it. The frame of the television screens turns everything that happens on it into a stage (Esslin 1981, 27), not only or even primarily for the vast amount of fictional presentations (drama, film, series, music videos) but, above all, for the specific constructions (Fiske 1989, 296–298; Heath 1990, 291–293) or, for that matter, the performative (theatrical) character of its entire program—in particular for news, documentaries, commercials. Concentrating on dramaturgies and gestural arts in francophone countries, Nkashama touches on television’s power, on its almost violent all-pervasive impact on society. There are new types of theatricality to be found, particularly in Congo-Kinshasa. Novel types of theatre and theatricality have been transferred from former well-circumscribed performing places—for instance, educational institutions of the colonial period—to communal entertainment spaces, to amphitheatres in colleges, to sports arenas, and to radio stations and television. He regards this process as an enormous extension of “the theatrical practice,” whose essential function is to probe into and thus interpret “social story” (*la fable sociale*). One could observe that “public life in this country” changes along with the mode of permanent theatricalization (Nkashama 1993, 257–258).

Further intensive comparative research is necessary into the history and the sociocultural mechanisms that have led to a comparatively new “mode of permanent theatricalization,” which is essentially determined by the role of audiovisual media. At first glance it appears to be just another case of uncreative emulation of new trends in Western cultures resulting from the technological communications revolution. One should, however, approach those processes from a different angle. Here I can only hint at one line that future research could take. Turning to modern modes of theatricalization, such as those described by Nkashama, seems to be just another instance of the use of “traditional” African pragmatism to cope with fundamentally new (modern) realities.

A case in point may be the complex, discrete history of the *egungun* phenomenon and its close relationship with the emergence of the traditional, professional, itinerant Yoruba theatre as a specific art form and then, at least indirectly, with the development of the modern popular Yoruba traveling theatre. The *egungun*-story, as I would like to call it, speaks of the astounding (pragmatic) mobility, the openness, the almost avid interest in new things and thus in innovation as essential characteristics of many African “traditional” cultures.⁷

Dancing the *egungun*, a kind of spirit of the dead, the performer’s body is entirely disguised. The flesh of the performer’s body—that is, a defining quality of the living—must be concealed. The reason is to present the *egungun* as a deadly, awe-inspiring force. It is, however, from the *egungun* masquerade that a professional, mostly comic, fun-making theatre originated. Death, or more precisely the dancing spirit of the dead, is a sensuous phenomenon and a source of sensuous pleasure as well. Even those *egungun* who dance at funerals, awesome and dreadful guards of the deceased, terrifying manifestations of death (and the most powerful ancestors), are fun-makers. *Egungun* are very much open to

change. They are curious about new things and embrace fragments from foreign cultures rapidly and avidly without giving up their original essential characteristics. Around the turn of the twentieth century, during the first stage of colonial penetration of Yorubaland, R. E. Dennett met an *egungun* who had performed at the funeral of an important chief. Men and boys following the *egungun* were impressed when he cried out, “I am from heaven, therefore you must respect me.” The *egungun* presented himself before Dennett’s tent, saying that he was the father—that is, the deceased come from heaven—and at the same time he asked what Dennett was going to give him for his entertaining performance. The *egungun* not only wore proper Yoruba clothes but had top boots made by the Hausa and European pants (Dennett 1910, 29–30).

In Nigeria’s much-commodified cultural scene of the 1970s, *egungun* carried calling cards with them, always ready to serve spectators as paying customers. Cards would advertise the enjoyable play the respective *egungun* provided. Performances at funerals could be concluded with Sonny Ade’s latest hit delivered “in the rough, guttural” voice meant to simulate that of the monkey with whom the *egungun* have been closely connected in Yoruba tradition. “Change has always been present in Yoruba cultural systems,” says Marilyn Houlberg, “and those are just a few examples of how the more contemporary aspects of Yoruba life have been merged with the more traditional patterns in a mode consistent with Yoruba values” (1978, 26–27).

This (pragmatic) flexibility and openness to change seems also to have led to the Yoruba theatre, the *alarinjo* or *apidan* that grew out from the complex of ritual *egungun* performances as a distinct art form. *Alarinjo* itself has been in some respects a forerunner of the modern traveling Yoruba theatre that arose in the 1940s. Emphasizing *alarinjo*’s “innate dynamism” and “capability of infinite change,” Joel Adedeji related the old traditional to the new modern form of a traveling popular theatre. *Alarinjo*’s “undying influence,” he claimed, was visible in the 1970s in the organizational and operational practice of the contemporary traveling theatre led by Ogunde (1978, 78, 48–49). The modern Yoruba traveling theatre’s move into the home video business beginning in the late 1980s appears to be just another manifestation of this “innate dynamism,” although it seems to have led to a virtual self-effacement as a major form of contemporary live performances. In early 1994, I found it almost dead as live theatre. The actors and directors/producers, however, were much alive and active in doing home videos, at that time at an estimated production of some dozen video films a year. Since then the output has risen dramatically, up to more than 300 in 1997 (Haynes and Okome 1997, 22–29). Abandoning live performance almost altogether, the practitioners have nevertheless not given up their identity as popular Nigerian artists. They have appropriated a new (technologized) medium to create their specific works of art and to communicate with their audience in the most suitable and probably only feasible way left to them, thus considerably broadening the range of specific African cultural performances.⁸

Notes

1. Isidore Okpewho emphasized the “the mimetic principle” governing “oral performances” (1979, 14–19). Paul Zumthor devoted a whole chapter to “The Performance” and a paragraph to “Théâtralité”/Theatricality in his book on oral poetry (1983, 147–208). In 1986, still taking oral epic and poetry as “oral literature” (“*littérature orale*”), Jacques Chevrier nevertheless pointed to the interrelationship between the narrator and the recitation on the one hand and the audiences on the other as an essential element of oral performances. The theatrical ability of the narrator would be essential (1986, 17).
2. Publishing conference papers on “cultural performance” in 1984, John J. MacAloon claimed that the conferees were in agreement that “performance is constitutive of social experience and not something merely added or instrumental” (1984, 2).
3. For a classic example of the study of politics as theatre in a preindustrial state, see Geertz 1980.
4. As to the European Middle Ages and their mainly orally communicating societies, I refer to LeGoff who, explaining why an autonomous, clearly separated-out theatre art seemed to have fully developed only since the seventeenth century, claimed that the “whole mediaeval society stages itself” (qtd. in de Certeau 1988, 202).
5. Phillips 1978, 273–274. Compare John Nunley (1987) on Soweh, or the female leader of the Western Area Bundu Society in Freetown after the 1930s. Warren L. d’Azevedo (1973) touched on similar performances among the Gola.
6. The villagers’ approach to and their respective performing of war and warriors appears to be the direct opposite of the presentations (“representative theatricality”) of royal warriors and war in general in various versions of the Sunjata epic as, for instance, documented and interpreted by Gordon Innes (1974, 1–33).
7. Pondering over specific qualities and essential features of African religion(s), Wole Soyinka and Ulli Beier emphasized the openness and thus creativeness of received cultures. Beier claimed that both Christianity and Islam were conservative forces that actually retarded Nigeria’s ability “to cope with the modern world,” whereas traditional religions, Yoruba religion at least, were “much more open, and much capable of adaptation.” Soyinka added succinctly: “Yes, and for that very reason liberating!” (Soyinka 1992, 4).
8. The history(ies) of *beni-ngoma*, of masks such as the central Malawian *nyau*, which originally represented the dead, and praise poems in Eastern and Southern Africa reveal similar or pertinent features. They corroborate “traditional” African societies’ openness and flexibility. Their cultural performances permanently and eagerly integrate new components, thus creatively changing structures and functions in changing historical contexts (Ranger 1975, 7; Vail and White 1991, 198–230; Kaspin 1993, 35–55; Probst 1995, 5–9). Those movements have not (yet) transformed into audiovisually

mediated theatrical practices. The practice of videotaping traditional performances such as weddings in Tanzania since the early 1990s shows, however, that the integration of modern state-of-the-art technologies into received cultural productions and their innovative use are progressing on a rather large scale. The traditional *nanga* epics in Northern Tanzania are, for instance, presented today in modern performing modes. The performers began to do recordings on audiocassettes in the 1990s, altering their art without abandoning it altogether. Technological mediation facilitates reaching a much broader audience.

3 Theatre and Anthropology, Theatricality and Culture

Johannes Fabian

One: A Confession

I am not a theatregoer. There are years between the plays I occasionally take in because friends take me along. In 1997, during a stay in New York, I did have what was for me a busy season: in Brooklyn, I saw a Peter Brooks play based on Sacks's "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat." Then I went to a triple header, including a Woody Allen piece, in the Village, and finally there was a Shakespeare play, with free admission, by a group of young actors in the basement of the Dean & DeLuca coffeeshop. I left after the first act. The actors were unable or unwilling to adjust to the intimacy of the room and made a shouting match of the occasion. It was embarrassing. In fact, embarrassment may be the main reason for my apparent lack of interest. I am embarrassed by most institutionalized theatre in my own society as I am embarrassed by church services I must attend for a confirmation, a wedding, or a funeral. In German, I would translate embarrassing as *peinlich*, a cognate of painful, something that hurts.

A few years ago, I was thrilled to see my seven-year-old daughter share my feelings. She and her mother had decided to attend at least one of three lectures I was invited to present in the Jefferson Rotunda at the University of Virginia. She appeared to enjoy the crowd in this strange, solemn environment until I approached the lectern. When I began to speak she tried to hide under her mother's skirts.

I am not going to analyze this response, but I should make my confession more complete and perhaps more intriguing. I have never known this feeling of embarrassment when, as an ethnographer of contemporary African culture in Zaire/Congo, I attended scores of improvised plays performed by a troupe of popular actors or when I spent countless hours with members of religious movements engaged in teaching, prayer, and ecstatic experiences. The question of why this is so I shall leave unanswered. I remain unconvinced by the obvious explanation: as an anthropologist, I can maintain a kind of distance I do not have from my own culture. Such a response would run against everything I have tried to accomplish in my field.

Two: A Trajectory

It is safe to assume that something that becomes a consuming interest in one's later professional life had its origin in early dreams and experiences. As to dreams, I don't recall ever wanting to be an actor or even pretending to be one in the games we played as children. I do have vivid memories of a circus show we once put on in an arena built from the rubble that, three years after the bombs had fallen, still covered much of the street where we lived. I had no act, though; I was the impresario and announcer, or rather, one of several who claimed that role.

As to early experiences, my memories of acting and pretending go deeper. They are tied to learning to speak a foreign language. My parents were bilingual, but I grew up at first speaking German only. We lived in a region that eventually became a part of Poland, a process that had not yet become a fact when I was eight years old. Within what must have been weeks, I spoke Polish. Perhaps I was prepared, having heard from early childhood the sound of another Slavic language, a Moravian dialect spoken by the adults in my family; and there must have been some gradual acquisition of linguistic competence. But my memory tells me nothing about acquiring anything and a lot about joining something; hanging out, playing along in an ongoing piece, pretending that there was nothing strange about mustachioed men kissing ladies' hands and young mothers openly nursing their children. I felt proud and excited about being talked to in Polish and being able to respond. (My accomplishment lasted for about a year; then we moved to the West and Polish became the only one of many languages I had to learn during my life of which I retained nothing but fragments—most of them, incidentally, performative bits and pieces such as swear words, proverbs, lines of songs. . . .)

Thus, some of my earliest experiences with theatricality in the sense of pretending, putting on an act, playing a role, I made in extraordinary situations where cultures came in contact, if that describes the political upheavals of the time, and where mastering contact was a matter of survival. Intercultural relations, I must have learned then, however unknowingly, happen in a tension between pride (or "honesty," "identity") and vanity ("make-believe," "showing off"). A lateral thought: What does it mean when Christian traditions in our Western culture declare pride and vanity sinful? Is righteousness worth the price of missed opportunities to learn?

In the trajectory I am trying to trace, I took the next step as a student of sociology and social anthropology when I encountered the concepts of actor and role, both of which are central to structuralist-functionalist theory. True, the sociological concept "actor" was derived from action, not from acting; still, a role was a role, to be learned, assumed, and played by actors. I never liked these concepts and terms. At best, they are dead metaphors; at worst, they make a routine of the theatricality of social life. . . . I have been equally distrustful of drama as a root metaphor for society or history. In sociological theory, I felt

then, and understand better now, that these concepts are most of the time used in a flat, positive, undialectical manner. They deny what they appear to affirm: that social and cultural relations are better understood when tensions, even contradictions, between action and acting, life and theatre, are acknowledged.

By the time Victor Turner became known for doing just that (acknowledging tensions), I had decided to avoid theatrical metaphors. Eventually, it was trying to understand matters such as timing and shared time in communicative events that made me discover that much of cultural knowledge is performative rather than informative and that this has consequences for the way we think of ethnography. In the end, I rejoined Turner when I realized that the ethnographer, as he put it, really is an ethnodramaturg. In our fieldwork, we are occasions for, sometimes producers of, cultural performances that may range from reciting a set of kinship terms to putting on a full-blown ritual spectacle. It was by fortunate accident rather than design that a troupe of actors helped me to gain and formulate these insights into the performative nature of much of culture.¹

Three: Culture, Theatricality, and Anthropology

The significance of theatre in multicultural situations would seem to depend on the theatricality of the culture. I would like to address this issue as an anthropologist (rather than as someone claiming special expertise in multicultural theatre). I will do this with a recent *trouvaille* from readings on the history of exploration and early ethnography of Central Africa. My source is *Sur le Haut-Congo*, by Camille Coquilhat, published in 1888. The author was an officer of the Congo Free State. He took part in campaigns of “pacification” along the Congo River preparatory to occupation. As an observer and student of the populations that were to be colonized, he was more than equal to travelers and writers whom we now count as early anthropologists; as a writer he had moments that make one think of Joseph Conrad. At one point, Coquilhat recounts the visit of two explorers and missionary pioneers, George Grenfell and Thomas Comber, to the station he commanded. They claimed to have seen among the “natives”

la preuve d'un certain art dramatique. Ils racontent comme suit une “présentation” qu'ils déclarent fort agréable et qui dura plusieurs heures.

proof of a certain dramatic art. They [the missionaries] then tell of a “presentation” that, they declare, was quite pleasant and lasted for several hours. (1888, 156)

This is how, according to Coquilhat, the missionaries described the event:

Le spectacle commença par des danses agiles auxquelles succéda un acte évoquant dans le style grec; le “choeur” était gracieusement représenté par des petites filles de huit à douze ans. Un brancard d'étrange aspect était porté sur les épaules de quatre hommes. Il supportait, caché sous une couverture en flanelle rouge, un corps ou un objet invisible. Assise à l'une de ses extrémités, une gentille fillette regardait grave et triste. Ce brancard, qui était fait de bambous, fut déposé à terre et entouré par le choeur. Un air plaintif fut chanté, par une femme qui se plaça sur le côté de la civière.

Nous ne pûmes comprendre grand' chose à ses paroles, mais nous saisîmes ce fréquent refrain: Kawa-Ka, "Il n'est pas mort." Au bout d'un certain temps, les charmes de l'incantation furent considérés comme ayant opéré et le drap rouge se prit à onduler. On le releva et l'on mit à jour une jeune fille toute tremblante, comme si elle se trouvait dans un état aigu d'épilepsie. Deux personnes s'approchèrent et, la prenant par le bras, ils remirent sur ses pieds. [The missionaries add:] Cette représentation avait été donnée pour être agréable aux blancs.

To which Coquilhat adds:

Je suis un peu tenté de croire que, dans cette occurrence, les indigènes ont simplement imité une de leurs nombreuses cérémonies de superstition.

The spectacle began with some agile dances followed by an act evocative of the Greek style; the "chorus" was graciously represented by small girls between eight and twelve years. Four men carried a strange looking stretcher on their shoulders. On it was, hidden under a red flannel blanket, a body or some invisible object. A gentle little girl sat at one end of the bier, looking serious and sad. This stretcher, which was made of bamboo, was put down on the ground and the chorus placed itself around it. A woman took her position alongside the litter and sang a plaintive tune. We did not understand much of what she said but caught an often repeated refrain: *Kawa-Ka*, "He is not dead." After a certain time, the incantation was considered to have had its effect, and the red cover began to undulate. It was removed and revealed a young girl shaking all over, as if she were in the midst of an epileptic seizure. Two persons approached, took the girl by her arms, and put her on her feet. [The missionaries add:] This representation had been made to please the whites.

To which Coquilhat adds:

I'm a bit tempted to believe that, in this case, the natives simply imitated one of their numerous superstitious ceremonies. (1888, 156)

Event classified and put aside. What happened? The missionary explorers reported on what they experienced as a theatrical performance. They suspected the intention behind it: what they saw was a self-presentation by this culture, put on to "please" them—to make them feel welcome, to entertain and perhaps enlighten them. When they compared what they saw to Greek tragedy, they built an intercultural bridge. Coquilhat, our protoanthropologist, manages, in one sentence, to shore up cultural distance by labeling the event superstitious and to deny the Africans creativity when he qualifies the performance as merely imitative of some ritual.

Briefly, I suggest that the text tells us two important things about theatricality and encounters between cultures:² 1) If allowed, people will let us get to know them by performing (parts of) their culture. Such knowledge—let us call it performative—demands participation (at least as an audience) and therefore some degree of mutual recognition. 2) In a frame of mind I called "informative," that is, one that admits as knowledge only what is based on data first gathered and then controlled by the collector, performances need to be dismissed because they are threatening to any enterprise, project, or institution that de-

pend on its existence on maintaining distance and control. Most nation-states, many religions, and academic disciplines are of that kind.

It follows, then, that admitting theatre as a source of intercultural knowledge involves recognition, not only of performative next to informative knowledge, but also of anarchic versus hierarchic conceptions of knowledge. Only then can we begin to gain knowledge of other cultures through participative play and playful mimesis. Given the state of the world, it is safe to expect that such performative commingling would be regarded as subversive by most of the institutions on which our societies are built.

Four: Theatre and Intercultural Relations

Can theatricality (performativeness in communication, skills of representation, invention of forms of presentation, actual performances) be a means to achieve the aim of better intercultural relations? Again, it is hard to imagine how the answer to this could be negative. Still, there is a danger that must be avoided, which is to instrumentalize theatricality. That it can be instrumentalized we know from the uses to which it has been put—for instance, by fascist and other totalitarian regimes.

Perhaps the real question—and this was what the preceding scene should have prepared us for—is to find out whether theatricality can be a source as well as a mode of knowledge. Dancers, musicians, and actors may have the answer and be able to perform it. We anthropologists are expected, or doomed, to produce a discourse about it—which I am not going to do here, except to suggest that events such as the one reported and commented on by Coquilhat may lead us to progress from a fairly well-understood issue—the role of theatricality and performance in gaining knowledge of other cultures—to pondering the possibility and reality of truly intercultural knowledge. This is a problem that will force us to question the very concept of culture as defining identity. Taking theatricality seriously may lead us to doubt the equation of social existence with cultural identity. We should ponder a thesis that can be put as follows:

If “to be or not to be” is the question, then “to be and not to be”—to me the most succinct conception of performance—might be the answer.³

Five: An Afterthought on Anthropology and Theatre

That anthropologists have been fascinated by drama as a form of social action, as reflecting the nature of rituals, as illuminating the structure of societal processes is well known. But what about tragedy and comedy? The history of our discipline suggests that tragedy (drama that ends badly) preceded drama (which never really ends) as the key trope of encounter between Us and Them: early reports of encounters with so-called savages, even many later inquiries of “natives” convey a sense of doom. Cultures and societies we Westerners study are destined to disappear, a belief supported by many texts. My current favorite

quotation comes from Leo Frobenius, who concluded his dirge for *Das sterbende Africa: Die Seele eines Erdteils* (*Dying Africa: The Soul of a Continent*) with this appeal to students of Africa's past:

Grabt!
Aber achtet darauf, daß die Scherben nicht euch begraben.
Erlebt!
Unter jenen, die durch uns sterben.
Sterben müssen.
Erlebt es vor ihrem Tode.
Damit ihr die Wiederaufstehung verstehen lernt!

Keep digging!
But see to it that the shards don't bury *you*.
Experience life!
Among those who die through us.
Must die.
Experience it before they die.
So that you learn to understand resurrection. (1928, 503)

Though it would take more than one striking text to prove this, I think that anthropological discourse in general, and many accounts specifically, lean to a tragic mode of emplotment. Where is comedy in anthropology? Not in the funny stories anthropologists sometimes tell or in a growing number of ethnographies of humor, clowning, and such; as a trope helping us to understand the nature of our discipline, comedy must probably be sought as a comedy of intercultural errors, of mistaken identities, that confuse and complicate relations. . . . Any decent fieldworker knows how funny culture can be when it bungles because it has lost its certainties, its territory; pidgins and similar transcultural languages often are hilarious. But comedy in "relations between cultures is something we are just beginning to explore. It is not a subject that is likely to flourish under conditions of political correctness. Laughter is my final cue here:

Sie lachen über meinen Enthusiasmus für die Wilden beinahe so wie Voltaire über Rousseau, daß ihm das Gehen auf Vieren so wohl gefiele; glauben Sie nicht, daß ich deswegen unsre sittlichen und gesitteten Vorzüge, worin es auch sei, verachte. Das menschliche Geschlecht ist zu einem Fortgange von Szenen, von Bildung, von Sitten bestimmt; wehe dem Menschen, dem die Scene misfällt, in der er auftreten, handeln und sich verleben soll. Wehe aber auch dem Philosophen über Menschheit und Sitten, dem seine Scene die einzige ist, und der die erste immer auch als die schlechteste verkennet! Wenn alle mit zum Ganzen des fortgehenden Schauspiel's gehören, so zeigt sich in jeder eine neue, sehr merkwürdige Seite der Menschheit. . . .

You laugh about my enthusiasm for the savage, almost like Voltaire ridiculed Rousseau [saying that] he must like walking on all fours; don't believe that I therefore despise our moral and well-behaved advantages, wherever they may be found. Humanity is destined to a progression of scenes, of education, of custom; pity on the person who dislikes the scene in which he must appear, act, and live out his life! Pity also on the philosopher of humanity and customs who has no scene but his

own and who mistakes the first one always for the worst. If all of them belong to the whole of the ongoing spectacle, then, in every one of them there reveals itself a new and quite remarkable side of mankind. . . . (Herder n.d., 15)

This is not, as some might argue, a plea for cultural relativism. Here Herder asks for a kind of understanding that is based on tolerating oneself as well as others, and he envisages the need for tolerance with the help of a theatrical notion: being part of humanity means acting in a scene that is part of a larger play.

Going beyond what Herder states, but trying to be faithful to the spirit of his thought, let me conclude with another thesis: the greatest challenge for intercultural tolerance is not to accept, on some philosophical or political principle, those deep values and beliefs that are presumed to keep a culture together. That is easy, at least for the liberal-minded. Moral and political multiculturalism are the privilege of the powerful and the protected. Courage, imagination, and practice are needed to meet otherness in its everyday theatrical forms of self-presentation with all its tricks and props, postures and poses, masks and costumes, whiteface and blackface. I am not about to argue for an either- or position, but I think that Enlightenment ideals of refinement, rational simplicity and clarity, and the temptation to equate truth and value with purity and honesty need to be countered by a Romantic appreciation of *Verkleidung*, disguise and dressing up for many roles. If, as a result of such universalized yet practical theatricality, theatre “runs the risk of losing its characteristics and essence,”⁴ so be it. I already confessed I am not much of a theatregoer.

Notes

This chapter was first presented as a contribution to a symposium on “Theatre in a Multicultural Society,” organized by the International School of Theatre Anthropology, 3–5 May 1996, Copenhagen. I wish to thank Eugenio Barba and Kirsten Hastrup for inviting me to this memorable event.

1. Documented and analyzed in my *Power and Performance* (1990).
2. Explored in greater detail in my *Out of Our Minds* (2000).
3. I later learned that this thesis has been attributed by some to the painter Francis Bacon.
4. This was a fear expressed in a programmatic statement prepared by the organizers of the Copenhagen symposium.

4 Pre-Texts and Intermedia: African Theatre and the Question of History

Ato Quayson

Theatre in Africa is demonstrably a place of greater vitality than other literary forms. It is the locus of dialogic variation. Its vitality derives not only from placing personages on stage but also from locating them in sharply recognizable scenarios that express the struggle for self-actualization and the lived vagaries of experience that breed disillusionment, fear, joy, and terror. And this applies in equal measure whether the scenarios are drawn from present-day life or from mythic times. The personages we see on stage are also often surrounded by the paraphernalia and accoutrements of everyday life: clocks, an *alari* or *kente* cloth, radios, mortars and pestles, shoe racks, handkerchiefs, even the detached back of a passenger lorry (with inscription of proverb and all), as well as all the stage props that demarcate the quotidian round. Additionally, theatre in Africa also reflects the varying rhythms of other spheres of African culture in terms of music, dance, and spectacle. The theatre, then, might be said to provide a minimal paraphrase of life on the continent, whether in its heroic and epic past or in terms of its contemporary realities.

Yet it is precisely when the theatre is accepted as a minimal paraphrase that two serious difficulties open up regarding its relocation within culture. Is it to be taken as an unmediated mimesis of the reality of social life or as an attenuated and indeed misrecognized form of it? Second, can its interpretation be completely separated from the discussion of other literary and not-so-literary forms evident everywhere on the continent or do we, as is done in other traditions, define an autonomous ambit for its discussion? Such literary and not-so-literary forms include the popular novels which are the subject of a fine study by Stephanie Newell (2000), proverbs on passenger lorries and kiosks of various sorts (barbershops, hairdressing salons, the local grocer, etc.), and the many stories that circulate in eating and drinking places (on the social life of alcohol, see Akyeampong 1996) as well as the more canonical forms of literary expression. In other words, how do we attempt to place theatre within a total interpretation of aesthetic and pragmatic expression on the continent while at the same time attempting to generate tools of analysis that are specific to it?

In Africa we are obliged to pose these questions with particular urgency because of attempts to simplify the genealogies of theatrical forms. Theatre is often discussed as deriving from uncomplicated indigenous traditions severed from due historical processes that led to genre blurring in the widest sense. Or it is merely seen as the condensed and irradiating point of the encounter between Africa and the West over several centuries and historical configurations from slavery through colonialism to globalization? And even when, as is the case outlined in the opening paragraph of this chapter, we try to establish the vital content of theatre, there is the danger of running together and therefore confusing two categories of experience: that of material objects (radios, shoe racks, etc.) and cultural phenomena (music, dance, and spectacle). For each of these groups provides different modalities by which theatre may be understood. Each of them has a particular relationship to the dramaturgical traditions evident in African theatre, and each discloses a different historicity. Even though this is not my main focus here, there is room to wonder what the effect of a full history of theatrical stage props and their uses might reveal about changing dramaturgical traditions on the continent. Though there are many advantages in tracing the state of theatre and of indigenous theatrical forms as having the same entangled roots and being affected by comparable historical processes, there is a sense in which this standpoint prevents theatre in Africa from being seen as a specifically constituted transformative domain continually responding to a variety of both internal and external influences in order to produce a theatrically mediated understanding of reality. Methodologically, the central issues in analyzing the history of African theatre seem to involve 1) how to describe change without necessarily being teleological; and 2) how to define the ambit of theatre practice so as to discern its lineaments as a form simultaneously *working on* history as well as being *worked by* it. It is necessary to perceive theatre in Africa as a form of *process* in dialectical relationship to a wide variety of forces of both an expressive and sociocultural kind.

The analysis of the history of African theatre practice is constrained by a certain “tyranny of teleology.” As a paradigm of precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial sociopolitical realities is outlined, not only is the loss of the vitality of indigenous culture lamented but the role of contemporary theatre is read in terms of the re-production of the lost indigenous ethos. This has been termed “golden ageism” by David Kerr in his *African Popular Theatre* (1995). He sees this tendency as paralleling economic development theory generally, in which all social and cultural forms are analyzed within a teleological framework that has modernization and Westernization as the key motors of change. He himself sidesteps this form of analysis by tracing the various ways in which African precolonial indigenous genres, as they fed modern theatre forms, were often subtle mediations of indigenous economic and social systems and of class formation and historical change. Even when we take indigenous forms such as mime, dance, and masquerade as among the preeminent *pre-texts* of African theatre, the question still remains as to the degree to which these pre-texts are themselves representative of labile sociocultural sensibilities. Biodun Jeyifo sets

out preliminary markers for this debate in his discussion of Clapperton's interpretation of the *alarinjo* performance staged for him on his visit to the ancient city of Oyo in 1826 (Jeyifo 2002, vii ff.). To Clapperton, the burlesqued walk performed by one of the *alarinjo* actors was like "treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking barefooted for the first time over frozen ground" (qtd. in Jeyifo 2002, vii). Jeyifo points out that Clapperton's interpretation, though generally positive, misses an important dimension of the performance. Clapperton mainly misunderstands the logic of representational difference established between the mask of the white devil in which he saw himself and others that belong to the same category of foreigners caricatured but from within already existing social relations in Yorubaland, represented in "Tapa" and "Gambari" masks (representing figures from their northern neighbors). Thus, as Jeyifo goes on to note, as well as invoking differences between natives and foreigners, the *alarinjo* masks also encapsulate the processes of migration that fissure and engender flux and change within so-called indigenous societies. Taking the masks as *a semiotic of relational differentiation* that refracts socio-historical processes, we might then assert that it is precisely within the logic of this semiotic that a mark is set for the flux inherent within the indigenous dramaturgy of the local sphere itself. For it is also clear that the *alarinjo* traditions, even though historically starting as funerary rituals aligned to the validation of royal institutions and authority, sever themselves from these institutions and, as they become secularized, get transformed into the conduits by which shifting aesthetic, political, and social relations are represented and meditated upon. And this shift can be mapped out for most indigenous forms on the continent. As Soyinka puts it in another context:

We discover, for instance, that under certain conditions some art forms are transformed into others—simply to ensure the survival of the threatened forms. Drama may give way to poetry and song in order to disseminate dangerous sentiments under the watchful eye of the oppressor, the latter forms being more easily communicable. On the other hand, drama may become more manifestly invigorated in order to counteract the effect of an alienating environment. (2002, 421)

With the inception of colonialism, indigenous cultures subtly redefined their conceptual ambits so as to take account of the new cultural threat across a wide range of expressive forms. There were various forms of such redefinitions. For the Yorubas, one way in which the new cultural threat was negotiated was by figuring the Christian God as synonymous with the high god Olodumare. This allowed the *babaláwo*, the priests of the Ifa divination cult, to proceed with their interpretations of personal problems brought to them for resolution by both Christians and non-Christians alike in the light of the subtly redefined ambit of *orisha* worship (see Barber 1990 and Yai 1994). In a further extension of this, Nigerian popular videos have attempted to define a new idiom for describing relations to the spiritual realm by assimilating representations of Christian exorcism to the liminal position of the character of the *abiku* in the social imaginary. The *abiku* is now representative of the social outcast, the thug, and even

the witch and is accused of causing road accidents, poverty, and disease. It is a recalcitrant contingent fact that resists assimilation into the normative orders of social relations, law, and order and attempts to undo such normative orders in the first instance. Thus in the format of popular videos, the *abiku* becomes the focus for the translation of social tensions onto the domain of hybrid religious sensibilities, serving to reinterpret these religious ideas themselves as partially co-extensive to the indigenous realm of Ifa divination and Yoruba beliefs.¹ Indigenous traditions then participate in the history of their own formation and selectively syncretize with dimensions of Western culture in order to define a new mode of *worldliness*. As we can see, the semiotic logic of relational differentiation glimpsed within the *alarinjo* theatre is part of a wider process permeating the culture more generally.

Something of the complexity of the processes of transformation can also be seen in the area of popular theatre, especially in the West African concert party and traveling theatre traditions. Traveling theatre and concert parties are famous for their fluidity and their dependence on memory and improvisation for sustaining the spirit of their productions. As this theatre relates to a burgeoning urban sphere composed of an “intermediate” class—neither agrarian nor elite but mainly consisting of partially literate motor mechanics, drivers, tailors, petty traders, bricklayers, and primary-school teachers—the theatre itself began to be constituted as an amalgam of both oral and literary influences. Karin Barber describes this phenomenon as representing a central tendency in popular theatre more generally: “All addressed larger, more anonymous and often dispersed publics than older genres such as masquerade, festival drama, and oral poetry. Circulating between live performance, electronic media and print, themes and motifs gained wide dissemination in multiple forms. The popular theatre is a central site in these fields of mutating discourse, feeding on histories, novels, newspapers, street talk, oral anecdotes, sermons and tales for its sources, and supplying magazines, television, records, radio, films and video materials to re-circulate” (1995, 8). Clearly, the relationship that these popular theatres have with indigenous resources cannot be discussed in isolation from the ways in which they relate to other media or from their mode of aspiration or the modern-day context of production of their meanings.

The transfer of indigenous genres into the space of popular theatre obeys another process that can be termed the process of the commodification of indigenous culture (or of culture more generally). The process of commodification is tied inextricably to that of nation-state formation as well as to commercial impulses. At independence it was important for African countries to project a sense of unity that would cut across narrower tribal affiliations. It was crucial to dissociate certain indigenous symbols and genres from their specific local contexts and to project them as things that members of an emergent nation could seize upon both for self-apprehension and for the definition of a place in the world. Thus, in Ghana, for instance, the practice of speaking through an *okyeame* (a staff-bearing linguist or interpreter of the king’s word), which is an important feature of Akan courts, was transferred to a higher national arena.

To this day, Ghana has a state linguist who is always present at important state functions such as the swearing-in of the head of state or the opening of Parliament. The state linguist is paid by the state and is entitled to a state pension.

The complex links between the commercial and nationalistic impulses behind commodification of the indigenous sphere may also be seen in the creation of what could be termed “recreational identities.” Recreational identities may be defined as those identities created around sporting events and other forms of entertainment that depend heavily on spectators or the public. It is interesting to note in this respect how the current anthem for the South African Rugby team was derived from “Shosholoza,” a song initially sung by migrant Zimbabwean workers in a traditional imitation of the sound made by a moving train. For a long time it was a song associated with anti-apartheid sentiments. The song was given a multiracial and national dimension during the 1995 Rugby World Cup held in South Africa, when an excited mix of blacks, whites, and coloured South Africans sang “Shosholoza” for all they were worth in support of their national team. The “Shosholoza” tune does not strictly qualify as an indigenous genre, yet its journey into the form of a nationally rehearsed sports song offers a useful insight into the potentially commodified trajectories of any indigenous and, in this case, unofficial song or genre.

Theatre as Intermedium

As a general rule, and partly as a way of differentiating the nature of African theatre from Western forms, the sense of a smooth and participant relationship has frequently been suggested as appropriate for discussing theatre-actor-audience relations. But what precisely is the nature of the audience’s relationship to African theatre, considering that it is frequently mediating a variety of forces from both traditional and modern culture as well as from orality and literacy? A useful way of discussing this would be to consider African theatre as a form of “intermedium.” The term itself, which has a theoretical history in the writings of Dick Higgins (1984) and others, may be defined in terms of the ways in which certain forms of theatre bring together disparate genres and materials without necessarily subjecting them to a hierarchized system of signification, thus forcing the audience to participate in a *process* of deriving meaning from the performance. There is a playing through and across a variety of cultural texts and resources that ensures that the relationship between audience and the theatre is an active and negotiated one.²

Many African plays seem to propose organicist forms of closure that in turn suggest a commonly shared horizon of expectations with audiences. This seems to be especially the case in popular theatre, where there is often a discernible movement toward a moral conclusion. But considering what has already been noted about the various genres that come into play, it is evident that even popular theatre imposes a form of negotiation for the audience, if only because there is a problem of recognition inherent in the bringing together of a variety of disparate materials. The lineaments of African theatre as an intermedium be-

come even better clarified in the work of playwrights who seek a variety of alienating effects as a way of achieving a form of contemporary political and social critique.

Notorious examples of how plays *refuse* easy closure are provided in the work of Wole Soyinka. It must be said in passing that there is a tremendous amount of work yet to be done on Soyinka's contribution to African and world theatre. Both *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Road* have been noted as "difficult" plays that do not seem to make meaning in and of themselves. In fact, these two plays fully illustrate the notion of theatre as an intermedium. These plays rehearse the mode of their unresolved contradictions not only in conceptual terms but also in terms of the range of cultural materials brought in to play. Even though Soyinka's is obviously a special case, it provides us with the sense in which African theatre creates an intermediary space by which audiences are drawn into an active process of meaning-making. This occurs even in instances where the plays seem to be merely celebrating indigenous culture. Thus, the plays of Ghanaian Mohammed Ben Abdallah, such as *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* (1987), have a deliberate alienating effect with a recourse to strongly bawdy language while at the same time attempting to celebrate something of the wealth of indigenous Hausa culture within the postcolonial world marked by corruption and disenchantment. The point is that African playwrights are producing theatre as an intermedium precisely as a conduit for meditations on historical processes.

The notion of African theatre as an intermedium could also be useful for analyzing the fast-expanding TV and video industry in Africa. We have already noted how phenomena such as the *abiku* are being appropriated as loci for the mediation of sociocultural and spiritual beliefs. The possibilities made available by video in particular are evident in the wide popularity of amateur video film productions that seek to integrate the indigenous ideas with technologically sophisticated ways of expressing them. Thus, it is now possible to see "real" ghosts and spirits on screen along with talking animals and trees, where before these had to be suggested by a variety of means, with a lot depending on the audience's imagination. Another dimension has also been opened up in popular African TV soap operas, which often serve as important opinion-forming programs. The Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa reached thousands of homes weekly in the mid-80s through his *Basi and Company*, a TV series that dealt with the get-rich-quick mentality of urban youth and drew heavily on indigenous notions of justice.

It would, however, be facile to stop merely at discussing the form of African theatre without attempting to reintegrate the insights gained back into the wider context of African sociopolitical realities. To echo Guy Debord, the theatre spectacle is not "a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated through images" (1983, 4). The ways in which contemporary African theatre refracts social relations is an array of great complexity. What needs to be explored further to shed light on this is the framework of institutional support and patronage of the arts in Africa, the international networks of reviews

and critical commentaries, and the very modalities by which the meanings of the various theatres are disseminated in the public domain through tours, shows, advertisements, and broadcasts. All these form an ensemble of social effects of great, if mediated, power. Once again the questions need to be posed historically. When Hubert Ogunde's plays were banned by the colonial government in Nigeria, it was precisely because of the perception that it would arouse anti-colonial sentiments (see E. Clark 1979). The same tactics of containment were applied by the Kenyan government to Ngugi wa Thiong'o in the late 1970s when he sought to develop a peasant and popular basis for all stages of the production of *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*. He was arrested and detained for attempting to celebrate the fact that ordinary people were the makers of their own history.

It must be noted, however, that even as such initiatives are banned or frustrated by governments, the space voided by them is quickly occupied by forms of institutionally inspired theatres. The form of theatre for development and, in many parts of Africa, the phenomenon of theatre road shows for the advertisement of manufactured products are clearly attempts to redefine people's attitudes to developmental policies and to consumption by means of theatre. The place of contemporary theatre in Africa cannot be fully comprehended without account being taken of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways by which institutional forces attempt to impact upon the lives of ordinary people through theatre. We need to develop a rigorous critical idiom by which to analyze all these dimensions of African theatre if we are going to make any sense of its relationship to history.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter was published in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, vol. 3, edited by Don Rubin (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 41–44.

1. The varying shifts of the contemporary sociocultural position of the *abiku* is the subject of doctoral research of Douglas McCabe in the Faculty of English at Cambridge entitled "‘Born-to-Die’: The History and Politics of *Abiku* and *Ogbanje* in Nigerian Literature."
2. See Kaye 1996 for a particularly nuanced discussion of the history of the term and some of its contemporary applications in Western theatre.

Part Two:

*Intercultural
Negotiations*

5 Soyinka, Euripides, and the Anxiety of Empire

Isidore Okpewho

The old Aristotelian derivation of the word *tragedy* as a goat-song was given a graphic endorsement, at the dawn of postcolonial African dramatic history, by the Nigerian poet-playwright John Pepper Clark. Newly graduated from University College in Ibadan—a colonial institution where the old European classics were taken quite as seriously as in their home base—Clark produced and later published his first play, *Song of a Goat*, demonstrating “in title and action, that a tragic mode might be as indigenously African as it was Greek” (Wren 1981, 42; Ferguson 1972, 5).

Central to this drama, which explores the counterplay of impotence and fertility in a traditional family, is the role of a goat. The original Nigerian production of the play (Clark-Bekederemo 1962) called for the slaughter of a goat as a communal rite. When, however, the play was produced at the Commonwealth Festival of the Arts in London in 1965, cultural differences dictated the replacement of the Nigerian example with a milder but not much more successful alternative. “A rather lively goat, another practical mistake,” Wole Soyinka says in his critique of this production, “tended to punctuate passages of intended solemnity with bleats from one end and something else from the other” (1976, 45). Although Abiola Irele, in a recent discussion of the play, does not consider the theme of sexuality central to it (1991, xlii), the liaison between the wife (Ibiere) and her brother-in-law (Tonye), which drives her impotent husband (Zifa) to suicide, clearly suggests, as I have argued elsewhere (Okpewho 1987), that such subliminal drives may be even more central to the playwright’s purposes than the well-advertised dictates of traditional custom. At any rate, this convergence of the sexual and the sacrificial, in a play which openly advertises its ties with the European classics, neatly prefigures Wole Soyinka’s own exploration of the same themes in his adaptation of Euripides’s Dionysian play.

I have chosen to see Soyinka’s effort as a translation of culture, not of text: since he worked from previously published translations by Murray and Arrow-smith (as he tells us in a prefatory note), he has obviously given as much of his energy to reconstructing the ethnos (no less than the ethos) of the play as to manipulating the language of it. It would therefore make sense to see Soyinka’s effort within such contexts of understanding cultural translation as those ar-

ticated by scholars as diverse (in generational terms) as Reuben Brower and James Clifford.

In his examination of the successive fortunes of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Brower states: "Translation forcibly reminds us of the obvious fact that when we read, we read from a particular point in space and time" (1959, 173). In more recent times, Clifford has been concerned with the value of ethnographic works in terms of the claims they make about representing other cultures. His point that "the maker . . . of ethnographic texts cannot avoid expressive tropes, figures, and allegories that select and impose meaning as they translate it" (1986, 7) is just as valid for our understanding of literary as of anthropological "translations." Together with scholars such as Brower, he has played a key role in bringing us to recognize the historicist urges to which our interpretations of cultural text respond, whether we intend this consciously or not.

In Wole Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides's *Bacchae*, there can be no doubt in anyone's mind that the historicist response is a calculated review of the circumstances within which he and his people have been accustomed to look at the world in which they live: namely, the uncomfortable relations between their ancestral traditions and an imperial culture that continues to pose severe challenges to these traditions. Although the adaptation presents itself as an exercise in cultural exchange, Soyinka's effort is clearly grounded in an ideological review—against the background of relations between the denizens of Soyinka's own world—of the climate within which Euripides wrote his play.

Soyinka begins the introduction to his adaptation of Euripides's *The Bacchae* by citing a passage from his essay "The Fourth Stage" where "the Phrygian god and his twinhood with Ogun" are presented to us in quite positive terms. "*The Bacchae*," he tells us at the end of the citation, "belongs to that sparse body of plays which evoke awareness of a particular moment in a people's history, yet imbue that moment with a hovering, eternal presence" (1973a, v–vi). It was thus "inevitable" that he should do an adaptation which basically celebrated the play's "insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to match himself against Nature" (v, x–xi).

With this in mind, we begin our discussion of Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides's *Bacchae* by drawing attention to the comparable personal circumstances of the two playwrights. Throughout his career, Euripides pursued a creative agenda that may be considered bifocal. On the one hand, like the older Attic playwrights (Aeschylus, Sophocles, etc.) he showed considerable loyalty to the traditions of the land by exploiting its mythological storehouse in addressing the fortunes of various divine and heroic figures. On the other hand, as a child of the intellectual—or, shall we say, furiously analytical—world of fifth-century Athens, he was somewhat more inclined than the older playwrights were to question the social, political, and other choices made by his people. Unfortunately, this propensity caused him to be identified as a rebel and thus put in the company of some radical and unpopular figures of the time—men such as the thinker Protagoras (with whom Euripides was actually friendly) and the

intemperate statesman Alcibiades, whose lifestyle Euripides could hardly have endorsed.

Euripides's critique of his society took place in an era when Athens was progressively embroiled in social and political crises that led her to defeat in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) with Sparta and consequently to the control of her affairs by a militarized leadership (and populace) with little patience for the institutions of free speech and participatory democracy that had become the hallmarks of fifth-century Athenian culture. As Athens sought for scapegoats to assuage her defeat in the war, Euripides was forced into exile in the court of the tyrant (albeit a benevolent one) Archelaus of Macedonia—an ironical situation for our freethinking artist to be in. It was here that he composed *The Bacchae* and a few other last plays.

Soyinka has shown himself no less a radical freethinking artist than his idol. He served his apprenticeship in theatre in 1950s Britain, first as an English major at Leeds University (where he came under the direct influence of revisionist critic G. Wilson Knight) and later on the London stage. In 1959, on the eve of his country Nigeria's political independence from Britain, Soyinka took a research position at University College, Ibadan (Nigeria's premier institution of higher learning), where he threw himself into a concerted program of exploring indigenous African institutions, especially the religious and mythic traditions of his own ethnic group, the Yoruba.

Soyinka aided the celebration of Nigeria's independence in 1960 with the production of his first major play, *A Dance of the Forests*. It was indeed from this instance that his radical temper was to show itself. Surveying the prospects of indigenous leaders succeeding the departing colonial officials, he took care to warn his jubilant compatriots—in a play just as marked by celebration of native traditions—that, unless care was taken, the country might be plagued by the errors and excesses that characterized (black) leadership throughout history. A few years later, Nigeria was plunged into just the sort of scenario Soyinka had feared, culminating in a civil war (1967–1970) that nearly tore the country apart. In the various crises leading up to the war and following it, Soyinka spared no pains in castigating—both in his writings and his civic initiative—the deficit of good sense that marked the governance of Nigeria. For this he was not only thrown into jail by two successive governments but was eventually forced into exile (1971–1975), much of it spent in Britain.

There was to this exile an irony no less remarkable than in Euripides's case. On the one hand, leaving Britain for Nigeria in 1959 was convenient for Soyinka because—as some of his writings prior to the return show—he had grown rather impatient with the superior (racial and other) postures of his imperialist hosts. On the other hand, his cultivation of indigenous African traditions inevitably entailed a contestation of the prejudices with which European thinkers treated African cultures and outlooks. Hence, while Soyinka composed his adaptation of *The Bacchae* during his exile in Britain, it was during the same period that he delivered some key lectures (at Cambridge University) that were eventually

published in a book (*Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 1976) that argues basic polarities between African and European outlooks.

We may now proceed to explore the points of convergence between Soyinka and Euripides in the composition of their respective dramas. I believe Soyinka has made one of the best efforts I know to put *The Bacchae* within the wider social, political, and economic conditions of the Greek world in Euripides's day. His introduction proceeds to explore the ideological factors he felt the Greek playwright was responding to in composing the play. One of these factors is the rise of a more democratic structure with the dismantling of the old Attic phratries in which society was organized around a few privileged families in an essentially feudal agrarian economy. Coupled with this is the emergence of a new economy which dealt the final blow to the old social allegiances. The rise of Athens as an imperial power encouraged, on the one hand, an exploitation of the mineral resources of Attica for the manufacture of military weapons and, on the other, the massive influx of immigrants from Asia who were employed to work the mines.

The impact of the immigrants on Attic culture was felt in both the social and religious spheres. For a start, there emerged a much stronger communitarian sense among peoples who, although they came from a wide variety of more or less "tribal" origins in their Asian homelands, were nevertheless united in being marginal elements (bonded and liberated slaves, resident aliens, and the like) in large urban ghettos who felt little or no allegiance toward the traditions of old Attica. The potential for revolt among such elements was evidently enormous.

The situation was made more serious by the religious life of the new social formations. Old Attic religion, as many scholars have pointed out, was centered around the traditional Olympian aristocracy—which was quite vividly delineated in the Homeric epics—with temples and shrines dedicated both to the divinities and to those heroes and heroines to whom communities felt obligated for their protection in various local or national crises. The Eleusinian cult was one of those Attic cults especially favored by the old aristocracy. Although Dionysus was reckoned a son of Zeus in the traditional mythology, and although he enjoyed some notice in the religious traditions of the land, he was given a lower estimation by the aristocracy. Things changed, however, when Attic society became complicated by the influx of large numbers of proletarian elements from Asia. Many of these belonged to religious associations which were unaccustomed to the serenity with which the conventional Olympian theology had been practiced—extremes of rapture and ecstasy were among their most defining marks—and operated on egalitarian principles that were opposed to the old hierarchical order. Among the new immigrant religions, the vegetation cult of Dionysus, which originated in Asia, had a special appeal for elements of society who had long yearned for a system that liberated them from their constraints, one that permitted them, every once in a while, to release their pent-up tensions and indulge—to borrow Soyinka's more graphic phrase—"the periodic needs of humans to swill, gorge and copulate on a scale as huge as Nature's on her monstrous cycle of regeneration" (1973a, xi).

However pretentious all this may sound as an interpretation of Euripides's motives, a reading of Soyinka's adaptation soon reveals he is essentially a kindred spirit in setting Euripides's *Bacchae* within the charged climate of an Athens whose imperial agenda had engendered a class structure marked by a very uneasy proletariat. To explore the insights that might have influenced Soyinka's reading of his material is to have a better grasp of the postcolonial impetus undergirding his adaptation of *The Bacchae*.

Perhaps the most notable element of the adaptation is his inclusion of a group of slaves in the *dramatis personae*. The closest we get to a slave character in Euripides's play is the messenger who brings the terrible news of the dismemberment of Pentheus by his mother and her sisters on Mount Cithaeron; clearly, he has served the royalty so long and loyally that he shares none of the Asian Bacchantes' joyful acknowledgment of the power of Dionysus in the event (*Bacchae* 1027, 1032).¹ So what is Soyinka's point in stretching this subtext of social conflict to the extent that he has done in his adaptation?

The messenger's admission that, though a slave, he still mourns the luckless house of Cadmus no doubt recalls Euripides's well-known respect for the repressed elements of his society.² But despite his sympathies, Euripides does not problematize the servile condition of such figures in the play. What Soyinka has done in his own play—guided, no doubt, by the geopolitical environment of its composition—is to give such sentiments their widest sociological reading, considering that this a play about a god and a religion whose key attribute is a leveling of social classes. Soyinka asks himself who stood most to gain from the coming of the god and finds his answer in that social class for whom the imperial might of Athens brought no real gains though they were indispensable to the nation's achievement.

Soyinka's play opens to a road "lined by the bodies of crucified slaves," condemned to death for a variety of petty labor infractions on a grain farm evidently belonging to the royal household. In his introduction, Soyinka also points to the mining industry as a major employer of servile labor keeping alive the imperial war machine. The harsh conditions under which these slaves worked is evidenced by periodic incidences of revolt or desertion. The slaves in Soyinka's play recall the brutal suppression of the revolt of Spartan helots as a cautionary tale (1973a, 6).³

Such brutality puts in some perspective the dangers faced by the slaves in Soyinka's play, from among whom one must be chosen every year as scapegoat in the Eleusinian mysteries. The Old Slave originally slated for the Eleusinian rites would have died from the flogging had Tiresias (protected by the fawn skin under his garment) not offered to take his place; in the event, the Old Slave would have been just another statistic (like those lining the road to the grain fields) in the tally of horrors meted to slaves in the society of the play.

So far Soyinka has stayed close enough to the society of Euripides's day, as well as the Greek playwright's radical spirit, in his adaptation. But why does he make the Slave Leader a black ("negroid") character? In his Production Note, Soyinka advises: "The Slaves and the Bacchantes should be as mixed a cast as is

possible, testifying to their varied origins. Solely because of the ‘hollering’ style suggested for the Slave Leader’s solo in the play, it is recommended that this character be fully negroid” (1973a, xix). Soyinka is of course right about the “varied origins” of Greek servile society, and we should expect that Greek contacts with Mediterranean society as well as the northeastern parts of the continent (e.g., Ethiopia) would account for a certain proportion of foreign residents in Greek society generally.⁴

There really should be little doubt in anyone’s mind that the identification of the Slave Leader as a black man has something of a black nationalist impulse behind it, and this brings us back to the context within which this play was composed. James Gibbs ascribes this play to “Soyinka’s ‘Cambridge Period,’ a period of dialogue with the Western intellectual and artistic tradition, to which [belong] Myth, Literature and the African World, and, by sleight of hand, the adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides*” (1993, 63). This puts a counter-hegemonic slant to the representation of the Slave Leader, who is given the privilege of leading the combined multinational Chorus in singing praises to Dionysus with epithets and lines from the *oriki* of a black African god.⁵

Soyinka’s adaptation certainly takes seriously its claims to universal relevance, at least with regard to the aspirations of those who desire a world free of the constraints and repression that leaders such as Pentheus represent, and there is very little so far that Euripides would have taken serious exception to. The image of the Slave Leader, however, does indicate a gradual disengagement from Euripides’s discernible purposes, leading Soyinka, for a start, to a somewhat more parochial texturing of his referents.

A few instances of a more generalized African outlook in this play may be cited. The episode in which Pentheus slaps the Old Slave across the face has been entirely manufactured by Soyinka; the revulsion (and determination to rebel) which the act induces in the slaves clearly indicates the traditional African reverence for age (1973a, 36–37).⁶ But the African color of Soyinka’s play comes somewhat more strikingly in the despotism that characterizes the Theban establishment in both image and idiom. When Dionysus, in his very opening words, charges Thebes with “habitual tyranny” (1), we may be sure that Soyinka has in mind the entire record of African rulership—which he castigated in his very first play, *A Dance of the Forests*—as much as anything else. In the more recent record of post-independence governance, all sorts of criminal behavior have been indulged by the leadership, who have thought nothing of sacrificing their subjects “to that insatiable altar of nation-building” (1973a, 11). The gross arrogance and intolerance of Pentheus invites comparison with standard leadership figures in *Kongi’s Harvest* and *Madmen and Specialists*, and even more in Soyinka’s post-Euripidean plays such as *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants*. Generals—even retired ones such as Cadmus—feel an irrational urge to “stage a *coup d’état*” so long as “there are still soldiers loyal” to them (25). Once ensconced in power, they scarcely feel beholden to the nation at large, so long as they have secured the comforts of their immediate power base—says Soyinka’s

Pentheus: "I know so little of Thebes beyond the city" (71)—or of their ethnic constituencies.

The Nigerian slant to Soyinka's Africanization of Euripides's play is just as obvious. There is, for a start, a characteristic touch of local humor here and there. Nigeria's national airline (Nigeria Airways) originally had for its logo a winged elephant, apparently aimed at advertising the country as a colossus in the skyways. The logo was constantly ridiculed in the media for its gross lack of imagination, forcing the government to substitute it with a simple design of three bars representing the national colors—green, white, green. When Dionysus urges old Tiresias to dance for him and the latter jokes that "that's like asking the elephant to fly" (12), Soyinka no doubt has the above experience in mind. Even the garrulity of tragic messengers has familiar resonances in Nigerian fiction and the media. Soyinka makes the messenger who reports the dismemberment on Cithaeron even more tedious, embellishing his report with a proverb that describes how proudly ensconced Pentheus sat on the tree from which Dionysus delivered him to the maenads (85). Television sitcoms in Nigeria abound in characters who indulge a gross self-importance in adjusting messages and translations just to display their fund of words; Achebe's earlier novels also have characters who claim such self-importance, often mistranslating the message of the white man to their less "privileged" townsfolk.⁷

Essentially, these parochializing strategies should be seen in the light of counterhegemonic moves by which Soyinka endeavors to possess Euripides's play and to redirect its message in light of his people's interests and outlook. But it is in his handling of the mythic and ritual resources of *The Bacchae* that Soyinka decisively parts ways with Euripides even while openly urging the play's appeal to "the universal need of man."

It might be fair to begin by admitting that, despite the divergences Soyinka identifies in "The Fourth Stage," a chapter in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, between the African and foreign outlooks that form his points of reference, his adaptation rests on solid homologies that may be attested independently of his claims. What the Yoruba tradition tells us of Ogun's primordial service in effecting the union between the human and divine zones of existence recalls the role attributed to Dionysus as "the one who unites the normally separate heaven and earth and introduces the supernatural into the heart of nature" (Vernant 1988, 396) by way of the juices animating the earth and everything that sustains life. Ogun's mediation of the polar urges of destruction and creation could also be seen in various polar images traditionally accorded to Dionysus, not the least as a vegetation divinity who bridges the death of the old with the birth of the new, evidently signifying a "deeply rooted ancient recognition that nothing comes into being without the destruction of something else, without loss, sacrifice, violence" (Segal 1982, 17). For good measure, a review of traditional chants to Dionysus will reveal striking similarities with Yoruba salutes to Ogun that illustrate these polar images of benevolence and capricious temper.⁸

Soyinka has also been perceptive in subsuming the affinities between Ogun and Dionysus not only in terms of the benefits they bring to mankind but especially in terms of cultic circumstances and philosophy. We see part of this in parallels Soyinka draws in “The Fourth Stage” between cult articles and rites of worship of the two gods: Dionysus’s “thyrsus is physically and functionally paralleled by the *opa Ogun* borne by the male devotees of Ogun,” a phallic symbol borne across the community in a ritual dance; the dog “slaughtered in sacrifice” to Ogun and “literally torn limb from limb” in a “mock-struggle of the head priest and his acolytes” somewhat recalls “the dismemberment of Zagreus, son of Zeus”; and “[m]ost significant of all is the brotherhood of the palm and the ivy” (1976, 158–159).

Even more fundamental to these affinities is the basis of the confrontation in *The Bacchae* between Dionysus and Pentheus, which few critics have dwelt upon. Besides everything else, the play is about the enforced initiation of Thebes in the cult of Dionysus. The interplay between the themes of *sophia* and *amathia*—knowing and not-knowing—which the play persistently presents to us both in choral interludes and in dialogues between various characters (Dionysus and Pentheus, Tiresias and Pentheus, etc.) may justly be read as a metaphor for the stresses that frustrated the political and intellectual life of late fifth-century Athens. But the dichotomy really has its roots in cult idiom. Although Pentheus has been made to represent the intemperate wielders of the tricks (*to sophron*) of power, he is basically incapable of recognizing where true power resides and is being subtly coerced into attaining this deeper wisdom. This program clearly informs the episode of “supernatural invasion” of the king by the god-priest: there Dionysus, in the form of a cult officiant, is in essence doing the god’s central design in these initiation rites, which is to “enable his votaries to see the world as the world’s not” (Dodds 1956, 77).

Although he generally follows the logical structure of *The Bacchae*, the cult lexicon of this interplay between knowing and not-knowing is by no means lost to Soyinka, who has brought to his adaptation a firm knowledge of analogous traditions among the Yoruba. In the idiom of these cults, the admission of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom as well as the telos of initiation, in which the acolyte continues to profess he does not know the god no matter how long he has been a member of the cult. In various Nigerian communities, for example the West Niger Igbo, the formula for member recognition would go somewhat like this:

Qu. Do you know the god?

Ans. Can one ever know the god?

This is the special slant on the concept of *wisdom* that Soyinka brings to the play. Although the Asiatic Bacchantes celebrate, in their chants, the secrets into which they have been consecrated; although they excogitate the counterplay of wisdom and ignorance, somewhat in the spirit of fifth-century Athenian sophistry; and although Soyinka’s Tiresias, speaking no doubt from the vantage point of a purveyor of divine mysteries, educates Cadmus on the boon of “self-

knowledge” Dionysus grants and Pentheus’s abdication of this (1973a, 24, 33)—Soyinka clearly grasps the special cult sources of this discourse when he cites it mostly within those moments in which the Slave Leader, taking control of the expanded Chorus of acolytes, broaches the issue of “knowing” the god.

Soyinka guides us gently into the discourse in that scene where the Eleusinian ministrants, bowing to Dionysus’s order to join his “new order,” suddenly stop flogging Tiresias. The Slave Leader, embracing this moment of liberation, finds his fellow slaves a little unsure and chides them:

You hesitant fools! Don’t you understand?
Don’t you *know*? We are no longer alone—(Soyinka 1973a, 7)

The question becomes more urgent a little later. As the rest of the Theban society, starting with Tiresias and Cadmus, proceed to surrender themselves to the new religion, the Slave Leader seizes upon the opportunity that now offers itself to cement a coalition of the marginal and oppressed elements in pursuit of liberation. Soyinka here transmutes the parodos of *The Bacchae* into something of a conspiratorial ode to the liberating god, in which the Slave Leader and his “fellow strangers” (the Asian Bacchantes) indulge the coded concept of “knowing” in delicately nuanced diction:

SLAVE LEADER. Fellow aliens, let me ask you—do you know Bromius?
The women turn to one another; still in a haze of possession, but astonished at such a ridiculous question. One or two continue to moan, completely oblivious to the interruption.

FIRST BACCHANTE. Do we *know* Bromius?

SLAVE LEADER. Bromius. Zagreus. Offspring of Zeus as the legend goes.

FIRST BACCHANTE (over a general peal of laughter). Stranger, do *you* know Bromius?

SLAVE LEADER A god goes by many names. I have long been a spokesman for the god.

FIRST BACCHANTE. And yet you ask, do we know Bromius? Who led us down from the mountains of Asia, down holy Tmolus, through the rugged bandit-infested hills of the Afgans, the drugged Arabian sands, whose call have we followed through the great delta? Who opened our eyes to the freedom of desert sands? To the liberation of waters? Do we know Bromius? (1973a, 15–16)

Notice that none of these acolytes explicitly claims to *know* Dionysus; in the coded ethics of cult, that would be taboo. It is interesting that, in the next choral ode (Soyinka’s adjustment of the first stasimon), “various” slaves profess that though they are “a stranger,” they “think” they now “know Dionysos” (37). But at this point, the process of initiation is far from complete for them. The Slave Leader, who enjoys a privileged position as an African “brother,” could hardly have made such a claim. Truly *entheos*, he is already acting as the god’s mouthpiece well in advance of his fellow slaves: see especially his charged speech on pages 38–39, beginning with “the god in me” and ending with “I am Dionysos.”

His fellows, enjoying the first intimations of freedom, have only a limited grasp of the god's powers, hence they only "think" they know him. But as they come increasingly under the sway of their Leader ("Lead us," 39), as they experience directly the epiphany of the god (39–46) and participate in the well-orchestrated rites of his passion (46–54), it is clear they are quietly being taken through the road of initiation leading to the point where true wisdom consists in recognizing how little one really knows. Hence the Old Slave, who more than the others has continued to express his reservations about the new order and especially about the god who tricks them into false illusions of freedom (48), progresses from gentle intimations of the power of these nameless forces we call "spirits" or "gods" (77) until, finally throwing in his lot with his fellows (82: "*remaining with SLAVE CHORUS*"), he urges a humble acceptance of the "unfathomable" forces the "mind cannot grasp." He does not, of course, lose his humane view of the human condition nor his sobriety: he has seen far too many days. But as the house of Cadmus slides to its irredeemable doom, he plays no small part in leading everyone, not the least Agave, to recognize the hand of Dionysus—god of joy and the death-hunt—in hastening the doom (86–90). He now truly *knows*, but like a true initiate, he acknowledges only the unfathomable powers of the god.

All this may be well. But the moment the curtain lifts on Soyinka's stage, we begin to witness drastic adjustments to the ideology of *The Bacchae* and to discover that we are dealing with an essentially different god from the one presented by Euripides: put differently, Ogun begins to possess the premises of Dionysus in terms of image and essence. For a start, there are significant emphases in the setting of Soyinka's play that portend a crucial departure from Euripides's outlook on the god. "On the stage is a tomb from whose neighbourhood smoke rises (6); over the fence surrounding it vine-shoots may trail (11)": this is how Dodds describes the opening scene in his commentary (1960, 61) to Euripides's play—emphasizing, by his diction, that the tomb eminently overshadows the vine in the context and no doubt the implicature of the action. But, although he puts the tomb and the vine in his set, Soyinka expands it considerably to stress the bounty that becomes a vegetation god:

In the foreground, the main gate to the palace of Pentheus. Farther down and into the wings, a lean- to built against the wall, a threshing-floor. A cloud of chaff, and through it, dim figures of slaves flailing and treading. A smell and sweat of harvest. Ripeness. (1973a, 1)

In the resounding drop of that last word, Soyinka gives us ample notice of the celebrative agenda of his version of the play. The complementarity of death and life that equally characterizes Ogun and Dionysus may be adequately symbolized by the collocation of tomb and vine; but while Euripides's play is decidedly threnodic in its beginning and later in its ending, Soyinka in his opening set seems to invite us to witness the hard-earned but nonetheless plentiful blessings of his god of harvest "rust" and "ripeness." The play will be far less a tragedy than a "communion rite," as the subtitle says.

Enter Dionysus. In the Arrowsmith translation that was among the texts Soyinka consulted for his adaptation, we are told of the god: “*He is of soft, even effeminate appearance. . . . Throughout the play he wears a smiling mask*” (1959, 543). Soyinka describes him, instead, as “*a being of calm rugged strength, of a rugged beauty, not of effeminate prettiness. Relaxed, as becomes divine self-assurance but equally tensed as if for action, an arrow drawn in readiness for flight*” (1973a, 1). Soyinka deliberately distances himself from his sources, for good reasons. It is not simply that modern drama has abandoned the classical tradition whereby a character wears a mask as a formal stamp of his or her personality. Nor is it that Soyinka, in portraying Dionysus as a figure of “rugged” strength and beauty, necessarily means to project a sexist image of machismo. I rather think that, for Soyinka, the business of initiating Pentheus into the god’s rites and thereupon making him a scapegoat is a solemn one: the Officer who announces the arrest of Dionysus (1973a, 39) says nothing of the smile the god wears in Euripides’s text (Arrowsmith 1959, 439). Furthermore, for Dionysus to continually wear a smile on his face while methodically leading his cousin down the path of death is not only frightening but revolting to an African kinship sensibility.

This brings us to the opening speech of Dionysus, in which Soyinka programmatically signals his departures from Euripides. The theme of revenge, in which Dionysus states his grudge against Thebes for scandalizing both his mother Semele and himself, is so much more detailed and prominent in Euripides’s prologue than in Soyinka’s. Notice that although Soyinka’s Dionysus calls himself “vengeful and kind,” by the time he arrives in Thebes the revenge for the injury to his mother and himself has long been effected: the child resulting from the union of Zeus and “Semele my mother earth”—Soyinka steadily stresses the Phrygian backgrounds of the god—has already diffused through nature, organic and inorganic, as a divine necessity. Dionysus has made this “journey home” with his Asiatic acolytes both to reclaim his patrimony and to enforce his worship, without distinctions of class or gender, on Thebes; otherwise, the vibrant forces that pulse through nature, here as anywhere else, are already sufficient revenge “on all who deny my holy origin and call my mother slut” (1973a, 2).

As the agon proceeds apace, Soyinka makes increasingly clear his deviation from the course defined by Euripides. The crucial sequence here is the episode where Dionysus addles Pentheus’s wits and guides him steadily toward his dismemberment by the maenads on Mount Cithaeron. The influence of the god has been variously construed as hypnosis or some kind of “supernatural invasion,” in Dodds’s felicitous phrase. Soyinka does not entirely disavow this strategy. His Dionysus begins, in fact, by working hypnotic moves on Pentheus; but the process is completed after the second of two pageants, where Pentheus is led to view Christ’s turning of water into wine. Thereupon, Dionysus offers Pentheus a cup of wine (the same one he saw in the pageant). Ogun “enjoins the liberal joy of wine” on his initiates; if Pentheus is being readied to be the god’s surrogate and scapegoat for the coming rites, he must needs imbibe the

substance created by the god as “a challenge for the constant exercise of will and control” (1973a, v–vi)

We shall return to those pageants shortly. Meanwhile, it is important to observe carefully the behaviors of both Dionysus and Pentheus as the latter is being readied for his role. In Soyinka, as in Euripides, we have no doubt, of course, as to which of the agonists has the greater power. But because Euripides’s Dionysus seems bent on humiliating Pentheus before sending him to his death, there is an almost unrelieved comedy—which soon turns to revolting horror—in the king’s bumbling behavior throughout this whole episode. After he has put on feminine apparel and has come totally under the sway of his “armourer” Dionysus, he seems to have lost all the impudence he showed in earlier confrontations with the stranger-god: the one “manly” statement he now makes—that he is the only man in the land! bold enough to confront the women on the mountain (*Bacchae* 961–962)—is eminently laughable.

But Soyinka accords his Pentheus a little more dignity, as befits a man who bears a serious charge. Soyinka keeps Pentheus’s ritual role in clear focus as he commends the latter’s resolve:

Yes, you alone
Make sacrifices for your people, you alone.
The role belongs to a king. Like those gods, who yearly
Must be rent to spring anew, that also
Is the fate of heroes. (Soyinka 1973a, 78)

This is not meant to be ironical. The idea that those who bear the sacred charge of leadership (in ritual as in political life) should be men of combined probity and pluck is one that Soyinka has continued to press in his various writings: in drama, most pointedly in *The Strong Breed* (1966) and *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975). Whatever the weaknesses of the king, therefore, we can understand why Soyinka’s god “seems to be flattering Pentheus, offering him a manly temptation” as “the political leadership and the priestly, sacrificial leadership are once more united” (Senanu 1980, 111–112).

Pentheus’s manliness is certainly more durable in Soyinka, even if the playwright does not totally spare him the ridicule he usually brings on (especially) military heads of state. Nevertheless, that Dionysus is no less humane in his designs is borne out by his reactions to his victory in the contest. The contrast between the postures and the reality of Pentheus is, arguably, no more “pathetic” (Soyinka 1973a, 72) to anyone than to Dionysus, the architect of it all. But perhaps the most telling scene comes at the end of their confrontation. After the deluded king has marched off to his encounter with the women, and as Dionysus prepares to deliver him into their hands with his final words, we are told in the following stage direction:

DIONYSOS *stands and speaks with more than a suspicion of weariness from this now concluding conflict. It is not entirely a noble victory.* (1973a, 79)

The god's "weariness" comes from the fact that the duty he has just performed is a painful, not a pointless, one; it is the weariness of emotional, not of physical, exhaustion. And it has not been a "noble victory" because Dionysus knows that a contest between a god and a mortal is all too unequal. One other factor will help us understand Dionysus's feelings here: Dionysus and Pentheus are cousins, after all; this humane element, which remains absent from beginning to end of Euripides's *Bacchae*, is subtly reinscribed by Soyinka in this scene.

Soyinka's transformation of Dionysus, in terms of the Ogun myth, takes us to the limit of his departure from Euripides's agenda even as he argues the affinities between the two gods. Consider, for instance, the religious ideology within which this drama has been conceived. When, in his prologue, Euripides's Dionysus charges that Pentheus "challenges my divinity by excluding me from his offerings and completely ignoring me in his prayers" (*Bacc.* 45–46), he no doubt implies the marginalization of his godhead from the conventional Olympian theology cultivated by the establishment. The compromise whereby Dionysus was brought into some fellowship with the old Olympian order (Farnell 1971, 112–114) was intended primarily as a move to contain the popularity of the Asian-derived religion among the increasingly democratized masses of Greece; otherwise, the authorities continued to treat Dionysus with a certain benign neglect. Also, the Chorus of the play pays lip service to the aspirations of the common sort (430–433) and presents the bounties of Dionysus as available to both high and low in society (421–423). Yet, throughout the play, there is no real meeting between the theology upheld by the high, represented by Tiresias, and the one more suited to the aspirations of the low, represented by Dionysus—which makes the seer's submission to the god that much more suspect.

Soyinka's play, on the contrary, makes a more concrete case about Dionysus's availability to all and sundry. We see this from the very opening set, where Arrowsmith's two roads are fused into one: "*To one side, a road dips steeply into lower background, lined by the bodies of crucified slaves mostly in the skeletal stage. The procession that comes later along this road appears to rise almost from the bowels of earth*" (Soyinka 1973a, 1). This is indeed where the essence of Ogun begins to invade the godhead of Dionysus. More important, Dionysus comes into direct interaction with members of the officially recognized religious institutions. After Dionysus's prologue, the scene changes to the procession mentioned in the opening set. To the accompaniment of a mournful sound—"lead and refrain, a dull, thin monotone"—a group of functionaries (priests, ministrants, maidens) from the Eleusinian Mysteries are processing up the road and performing some rites, the most dramatic of which are the sprinkling and flagellation of Tiresias who, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, has offered to take the place of the statutory slave as scapegoat in the year's rites of purification (2–5). Dionysus finally steps in as old Tiresias is brought to his knees by the lashes. Dionysus's epiphany creates a charged scene, leading to the gradual but systematic embrace by the Eleusinian vestals and priests of the new faith.

The meeting between Dionysus and Tiresias puts a new color to the order of relations between the established theology and a religion suited to the changing demographic picture of Greece as understood by Soyinka. In Euripides's play, Tiresias has his brief moment of ecstasy and soon departs from the scene. Although he prophesies the union between Dionysus and Apollo at Delphi (*Bacc.* 306–309) and the popularity of Dionysus across Greece (272–274), his acknowledgment of the god smacks of any one or all of the following sentiments: a sense of the inevitable imminence of a force too strong to be excluded; a patronizing concession to a new element that will not, however, alter the status quo; a self-serving anticipation of growth in his professional and material standing. Having made his formal bow to the new god—that is, in the spirit if not structure of contemporary sophistry—the seer leaves the house of Cadmus to its own devices.

Not so Soyinka's Tiresias. After acknowledging Dionysus,⁹ whose appearance has saved him further blows from the Eleusinian stalwarts, Tiresias engages the god in an extensive dialogue that humanizes the seer in such a way that he comes across only in the more down-to-earth environment of comic drama. Coaxed by the god, Tiresias reveals a heartfelt understanding of the regenerative purposes served by those—humans and gods alike—who assume the burden of cleansing their communities of the impurities of one year as they approach the next. He has offered to take the place of the statutory slave this time, partly to save the land from an imminent slave uprising but especially because, all too tired of issuing prophesies of doom that only fall on deaf ears, he has “longed to know what flesh is made of. What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation after long organising its ritual.” An appreciative Dionysus promises him, “Thebes will have its full sacrifice. And Tiresias will know ecstasy” (1973a, 12). All through the dialogue, Tiresias's reputation for double-talk is not lost on the god, of course. But there is little doubt that Soyinka sees his seer in a considerably different light from the figure we find in Euripides: not so much a member of the religious establishment, removed by calling as well as standing from the gut level of life among his people, as one who, despite his hallowed place, desires to be very much part of the communal fabric of his society. It is no wonder, then, that he returns to participate in the “communion rite” that concludes the play.

The communal ethic of Soyinka's play is facilitated, to no small degree, by his transformation of the role of the Chorus. By uniting the Slaves with the Asian Bacchantes, he makes the Chorus more reflective of the aspirations of a repressed or marginalized people than Euripides has done. This has been achieved in terms of both form and content. On the one hand, although Euripides's choral odes allow for a pattern of counterthrusts (*strophe* and *antistrophe*, etc.) that creates a balance between facets of a concept or argument, they exist, on the whole, as a supernumerary entity beyond the network of voices and relationships that define the play. In imposing the Slaves on the Asian Bacchantes, Soyinka integrates the foreigners into the nexus of Theban life, thereby accentuating the tension between the center and the margins and forging a true dia-

logue of aspirations among the oppressed. This dialogue, between the Slave Leader and the rest of the oppressed voices, is structured more along the lines of African call-and-response chants than of the Euripidean model of tragic Choruses.

The second achievement of this strategy is in the content of the songs. It is in this that Ogun completes his invasion of the Dionysian essence of the play. The abstruseness that Aristophanes, in *The Frogs*, charges on Euripides's songs may not exactly be fair to *The Bacchae*, for the issues of wisdom and the simple life which feature so prominently therein do resonate the social and political realities of fifth-century Athens. But to the extent that these Bacchantes are strangers to Theban society, their songs are more or less glancing thrusts of an intellectual rather than an engaged quality; in their appeals to the idyllic haunts where they may safely worship their Dionysus, they simply pull us "across the frontier of civilized life, rather than back to the stable life of Greek society and Greek values" (Segal 1982, 247) with which their god is deeply embroiled.

Soyinka's slaves, however, transform the appeal to Dionysus into a determined summons to the battle for freedom, more in the spirit of Ogun than of his Phrygian twin, whatever the martial claims of the latter (*Bacc.* 302–305). Soyinka does not completely erase the themes that the Chorus, especially of Asian Bacchantes, explore in their songs. But he makes increasingly nuanced changes to the text of these songs, giving steady prominence to the theme of freedom (which is especially pertinent to the slaves' condition) and to the cultural and religious contexts within which this may be more vividly realized.

The cultural context is here represented by the personality of the Slave Leader. It is interesting what Soyinka does (1973a, 15–22) to the parodos of the Asian Bacchantes (*Bacc.* 164–167). Basically, it is a pious summons to the worship of a god whose backgrounds, origins, and attributes are saluted in a well-modulated exegesis. Here and there, however, Soyinka throws in ideas that accentuate the theme of liberation in the revolutionary consciousness of the Slave Leader. It is he, in fact, who "calls" the parodos first by trying to ascertain that the Bacchantes truly appreciate the god they are summoning (15–16), then by asking them to "make way" and "fall back" for his more assertive leadership (16), and finally inviting Thebes to "flatten your wall. / Raise your puny sights" in the urgent mission of liberation (20).

The performance aspect of this chant adds an interesting cultural edge to the personality of the Slave Leader. In an extensive stage direction (18), Soyinka presents him as a leader in a gospel chant, a forceful personality who nonetheless harnesses his "self-contained force" and "never 'loses his cool'" even as his "effect on his crowd is . . . the same—physically—as would be seen in a teenage pop audience." More important, he is a "preacher," and his performance "style is based on the lilt and energy of the black hot gospellers who themselves are often first to become physically possessed." At the conclusion of this call-and-response chant, the Slave Leader is practically mobbed, in a scene reminiscent of a pop concert, by Bacchantes screaming to go wherever he may lead in search of the liberating god.

Clearly, we are in the environment of a black revolutionary culture fitted out as a religious movement. The music of this movement is equally significant. Music—as well as dance—is an element that contemporary African dramatists have dutifully incorporated from indigenous theatre, and here in the gospel scene it is clear whose music is being foregrounded. Soyinka, of course, acknowledges the varied national (or ethnic) origins of the conjoint chorus by striking some balance between “oriental strings and timbrels” (17), “the theme-song of ‘Zorba the Greek’” and African-American gospel singing (18). But the commanding personality and performance style of the Slave Leader throughout this scene makes the other cultures largely ancillary in this celebration of the revolutionary spirit.

The cultural environment revealed by the gospel scene helps us further appreciate the play’s theological context and thus the textual adjustments imposed by the Slave Leader as mouthpiece of Ogun. When he invites the Bacchantes to join him in acknowledging the god, he begins by testing their familiarity with the idiom of initiation, as I argued earlier. It soon becomes clear to us that, although these women have followed Dionysus all the way from Asia, they have not been fully initiated into his rites until they have quite grasped the revolutionary imperative of his godhead. The gospel scene brings them increasingly closer to the right level of “knowing”: at the end of it, their appetite for the “new” god has been so keenly roused by the Slave Leader that they nearly tear him apart in a rush to embrace his lead.

Part of the Slave Leader’s magic is in his language, which progresses by subtly lacing the salute to Dionysus with phrases and ideas taken from the mythology of Ogun. When the Slave Leader unsettles the Bacchantes’ knowledge of Dionysus, they wonder what his qualifications might be as guide to the god. “Where shall we seek him, where find him?” they ask (16), in words taken exactly from Soyinka’s poem to Ogun (Soyinka 1967, 72). Slowly, therefore, these Bacchantes are being initiated into the Ogun consciousness. Other phrases creep in, just as subtly, across the chants. Euripides’s Chorus speaks of Zeus “tucking [the baby Dionysus] *with bands of gold*” (*chruseaisin . . . peronais, Bacc. 97–98*) into his thigh to conceal him from Hera’s ire: in the Slave Leader’s words, “Heaven” tells us instead, “I bind my seed in *hoops of iron* / And though all seek him, safe I hold him . . .” (Soyinka 1973a, 17), a subtle revision that brings the Dionysus image closer to that of Ogun, who fashioned *iron* from the bowels of the earth.

In the rest of this heavily revised parodos, Soyinka injects images saluting Ogun’s revolutionary initiative on his night of transition: the invitation “Oh Thebes, Thebes, flatten your wall” (20) recalls Ogun’s bold step in tearing down the primal jungle separating the worlds of divinity and mankind; and words such as “wombstone,” “creative flint,” “hammered,” “hearthstone” (21) as well as the line “He made an anvil of the mountainpeaks” (Soyinka 1967, 71) more fittingly invoke the mythology of Ogun than of Dionysus. The Bacchantes humbly intone “Bromius” in response to every one of these attributes, and their level of excitement rises until they can no longer contain themselves. “*A long scream from a BACCHANTE,*” Soyinka tells us in a stage direction (1973a, 22),

“snaps the last restraint on the women. They rush the SLAVE LEADER and engulf him.”

The urgent cries of slaves and Bacchantes for liberation resound through Soyinka’s revision (47–54) of Euripides’s second stasimon (*Bacc.* 519–575) leading up to the palace miracles, again with subtle references to Ogun (e.g., “the rockhills / Of his brow,” Soyinka 1973a, 49). But it is in the choral chants attending Dionysus’s dressing of Pentheus for the mountains that we attain the climax of Ogun’s invasion of Dionysus’s personality in the language of the Chorus. Although Dionysus performs the painful duty of breaking Pentheus’s resistance and delivering him up as scapegoat for dismemberment, the social elements who stand to benefit the most from the fall of their oppressor are all too glad to hail their deliverance by the god of restitutions. In passages located strategically across the rest of the play—“Night, night, set me free . . .” (75); “Come, god / Of seven paths . . .” (83); “Where do we seek him, where find him . . .” (84)—the slaves borrow phrases and ideas from Soyinka’s *Idanre* to summon Ogun’s powers in this urgent moment.

Having delivered Pentheus to the maenads on Mount Cithaeron, Dionysus disappears from the physical action of the play. It is in the denouement of *The Bacchae* that Soyinka registers his most radical revision of Euripides’s religious outlook. He once said he considered *The Bacchae* “a very uneven and, in many ways, rather a crude play. I come to it as a craftsman” (Morell 1975, 102). Soyinka may have been disappointed by the way Euripides has pursued a critical agenda that undercuts the promise of restoration and renewal that this vegetation deity brings to the society it has visited. Though somewhat muted, the promise of new life is nonetheless present in the green cluster of vine leaves visible around Semele’s smoldering tomb and in the sacramental logic of Pentheus’s dismemberment. Unfortunately, the promise hangs unfulfilled, because the scapegoat appears to have died a death that, contrary to the logic of the ritual, promises nothing whatsoever to his community.

Soyinka’s revision of the denouement consists essentially in fulfilling the promise of renewal, in bringing the sacrament of *life* that Dionysus stressed, in his prologue (1973a, 2), to its logical telos in the interest of communal harmony. This has been achieved in basically three ways. First is by a unification of the various segments of the social fabric toward the promised ritual moment. The Chorus of slaves already formed “a solid fanatic front with the followers of *Dionysos* [i.e., the Asian Bacchantes]” (Soyinka 1973a, 79) at the point where the god-priest delivered the king to the women on the mountain; now at the very end Tiresias, who disappeared from Euripides’s play when he joined Cadmus in dancing toward Cithaeron, returns, also with Cadmus, from the mountain where they have gone searching for the scattered pieces of Pentheus’s body. The entire society, high and low, is thus represented in the communion rite that rounds out the ritual agon. Second, in his role as ritual officiant, Tiresias provides an elaborate opening speech (96–97) that, contrary to the denunciation (in Euripides) of Dionysus as an insensitive daimon, justifies the dismemberment of Pentheus by his mother as the sort of “offering” that “our life-sustaining

earth” sometimes demands “for her own needful renewal”; far from being an act of madness, the scattering of Pentheus’s limbs and the spilling of his blood are simply ways of fertilizing the land for the needed growth and renewal. This is, evidently, Soyinka’s final stroke of denial of Dionysus’s mission of revenge.

The third, and clinching, move by which Soyinka restores the sacral logic of the play is in the final scene where all gathered together now partake of the showering of the sacrificial blood of the scapegoat as wine from the god. One element in that scene that critics often overlook is the phallic symbolism of the wine jets. It seems characteristic of rites of renewal in traditional societies that some sexual signifier of the desired rebirth is prominently displayed at some point or other of the ceremonies. The celebrations of Dionysus in Greece (as well as in Phrygia) were generally accompanied by the display of a phallus, often in an open procession.¹⁰ Soyinka, in “The Fourth Stage,” describes the *opa Ogun* carried by the god’s acolytes as a “phallus-head” that “pocks” the air as the acolytes dance through the town in a ritual procession (1976, 158–159); in the introduction to his adaptation, he sees *The Bacchae* as “a prodigious, barbaric banquet, an insightful manifestation of the universal need of man to match himself against Nature” and “to swill, gorge and copulate on a scale as huge as Nature’s on her monstrous cycle of regeneration” (1973a, x–xi). Is the picture of Agave hugging the ladder underneath the impaled head of Pentheus and allowing her mouth, her face, and her whole body to be flushed by the phallic jets of wine emanating from orifices in the head—is this picture, unnatural as the suggestion of incest may sound, inconceivable as Soyinka’s master-stroke of representation of the sort of “prodigious, barbaric banquet” befitting the “ecstasy” Dionysus promised Tiresias and Thebes (12)?

I say this because the picture of a crucified son and his grieving mother too easily tempts comparison with the image of Christ and the Mater Dolorosa. So many critics of Soyinka credit him with seeking to unify traditional African and Euro-Christian outlooks in this play¹¹ that I think we ought to look a little more closely at the evidence. First, let us return to an earlier moment which tests the theological relations between Dionysus and Ogun. It comes in the final segment of Soyinka’s revision of the fourth stasimon, just before the Second Messenger brings the news of Pentheus’s passion on Mount Cithaeron:

A steady beat of the chant of “Bromius Bromius” by the BACCHANTES commences as counter-point to the dog-howl of the remnant SLAVE CHORUS, gradually gaining ascendancy until the arrival of the messenger. (81)

This union of Slaves and Bacchantes in a climactic performance, beginning effectively from the point where Dionysus invites the daughters of Cadmus to receive Pentheus from the fir tree (79), does leave the impression here of a contest (“counter-point,” “ascendancy”) between the musics of Dionysus and Ogun (a dog is usually slaughtered in sacrifice to Ogun: Soyinka 1976, 159). The entry of the Slave Leader (1973a, 81) tilts the scales a little in this contest. Here, as in the gospel scene, we can see a subtle move by Soyinka to have Dionysus

yield some ground to Ogun as an essence more responsive to the imperatives of restitution.¹²

I believe this point will help us to better understand the relations between Dionysus/Ogun and other spiritual orders in the two pageants to which the god subjects Pentheus in Soyinka's play (1973a, 66–69). The first pageant is built upon the story of the wedding of Hippoclides to Agaristhe, daughter of Clisthenes of Sicyon (Herodotus 1973, vi, 128–129). In Soyinka's recasting of this event, the decorous behavior of the bridal aristocratic family is sharply contrasted with the boorishness of the bridegroom, who gets drunk and has no qualms about dancing with a serving-girl at the party, even leaping to the high table where the bride's party is seated. More important is a bust of Aphrodite close to the bridal table. "*The face is coming off,*" we are told. "*Underneath, the mocking face of DIONYSOS. He beams on the scene*" (Soyinka 1973a, 67). The bridegroom, we are also told, tears off his top garment, revealing under it the fawn skin of Dionysus as he begins his wild dance. Hippoclides's father-in-law is so outraged that he cancels his daughter's betrothal to the young man, who lets him know he "does not care." The scene ends with "[a] snap black-out, except on the altar of Aphronysos" (68). The second pageant is a variation on the wedding at Cana, where Jesus Christ transforms water into wine for the guests. The important element here is the picture of "*the traditional CHRIST-FIGURE, seated, but his halo is an ambiguous thorn-ivy-crown of Dionysos*" (68).

It would make sense to argue that in these two pageants, we are presented with the idea of the transcendence of the Dionysian element across time (the old Olympian order, here represented by Aphrodite) and place (Hellenic and Christian cultures). I would, nevertheless, like to return to the points I made above, not only about the relative positions of Ogun and Dionysus in Soyinka's revision of *The Bacchae* but especially the context within which the revision was done. True, in the image of "Aphronysos" we are supposed to understand that the Dionysian is everywhere we may look. But Dionysus here wears a mocking face, so it would be truer to see the image in the light of the conflict between the old (Olympian) and the new religious dispensations, which Soyinka indicates earlier in the play in the submission of the Eleusinian officiants to Dionysus. In the next pageant, the "traditional Christ-figure" wears a halo that is called "ambiguous," which to me suggests an uneasy union between the constituent units—the Christian "thorn" and the Dionysian "ivy." Something in this union is clearly being tolerated or *accommodated*. Now, to find out which it is, we should recall how Soyinka has rationalized the syncretism between African (Yoruba) and other outlooks:

[A]n attitude of philosophic accommodation is constantly demonstrated in the attributes accorded most African deities, attributes which deny the existence of impurities or "foreign" matter, in the god's digestive system. Experiences which, until the event, lie outside the tribe's cognition are absorbed through the god's agency, are converted into yet another piece of the social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter the lore of the tribe.

In a footnote on the same page, Soyinka tells us:

This accommodative nature, which does not, however, contradict or pollute [the gods'] true essences, is what makes Sango capable of extending his territory of lightning to embrace electricity in the affective consciousness of his followers. Ogun for his part becomes not merely the god of war but the god of revolution in the most contemporary context—and this is not merely in Africa, but in the Americas to where his worship has spread. As the Roman Catholic props of the Batista regime in Cuba discovered when it was too late, they should have worried less about Karl Marx than about Ogun, the re-discovered deity of revolution. (1976, 54)

Statements such as these convince me that while Soyinka may be a broad-based humanist who explores the common ties that bind the human race, he is primarily a nativist in the sense of seeing his indigenous culture as the starting point of any such universalist gestures. Invited to contribute a paper to a festschrift honoring his old drama professor at Leeds, he offered “The Fourth Stage” (1976), which explores parallelisms, despite a few discrepancies, between Greek and Yoruba traditions in the development of tragic drama, under the respective godheads of Dionysus and Ogun. That essay, written in the uneasy sociopolitical climate of Nigeria in the sixties, finds the nativist Soyinka reaching out to a wider world for some sense of order amid the disorder around him. A few years later, Soyinka was to find himself living in Britain as an exile—unavoidably, since things had deteriorated woefully in his own country. Exile brought him face to face once again, as during his student days in the fifties, with the imperial arrogance of the white/British world, a situation he responded to in a book of essays (*Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 1976) whose essential burden was to argue “a separate earth and reality” for Africa and its cultural traditions and achievements. A world-renowned writer by this time, he was also commissioned to do an adaptation of *The Bacchae* of Euripides for performance by the National Theatre in London. This adaptation was “predictable,” as Soyinka tells us in his introduction to the play, considering the parallels he had argued, in “The Fourth Stage,” between Dionysus and Ogun. But it was equally inevitable that, given the hegemonist climate within which he lived, Soyinka would seize the opportunity to assert his nativist instincts even while he appreciated the humanist gesture entailed in the National Theatre’s invitation.

In his adaptation of *The Bacchae*, Soyinka has given a more positive picture of Dionysus than he found in Euripides; he has, in other words, offered a more “real and heartfelt glorification” of the god than Gilbert Murray credited even to Euripides. That, again, is the nativist in Soyinka, acknowledging prime allegiance to the indigenous traditions amid the contingencies of time and space—a ritualist who would sooner look to the hallowed symbols of myth and ritual than to the more contested paradigms of ideology for explanations of our contemporary dilemmas. Thus, even while he argues a twinhood between Ogun and Dionysus, it is clear that in his adaptation of *The Bacchae* he has set out to

reverse the trend toward what he calls an “aesthetics of estrangement” (1976, 25) in European thought, whereby divinity is divested of its place in the dramas of social life.

Why should an African writer bother to make such an effort? In the final analysis, every African who has been brought by the accident of history to adopt a European medium in giving voice to his or her imagination must, some time or other, address squarely the cultural implications of that historical encounter for his or her sense of self. Soyinka’s choice of Euripides may be explained on two grounds at least. On the one hand Soyinka, like Euripides, is living in an age when committed intellectuals like himself are constantly frustrated by the inveterate stupidity of rulers and their stooges who run their nations aground and are intolerant of those who raise honest voices in defense of good sense. On the other hand, Soyinka is equally aware of the complicity of Western culture (of which Euripides is part of the defining canon) in the abdication, by contemporary African leaders and society, of the defining values and outlook of the race. Thus, although Euripides remains a viable model for interrogating the state of affairs in contemporary society, Soyinka is inclined to exorcize from his work anything that promotes those negative ideologies that have derailed his people’s sense of purpose. In using a Yoruba god to correct what he sees as an error in Euripides’s portrait of a chthonic essence, Soyinka assumes what Tejumola Olaniyan calls “the burden of debunking the claims and assumptions of ethical superiority of the colonialists” (1995, 56). It is a burden that weighed particularly heavily on the first generation of post-independence African writers and thinkers.

Notes

This is a substantially condensed version of a chapter in a forthcoming study titled *Contesting Empire: Black Writers and the Western Canon*.

1. Unless otherwise stated, the edition of Euripides’s *The Bacchae* used is Arrowsmith’s (1959), which Soyinka himself consulted and used in his 1973 adaptation of the play.
2. Euripides’s fascination with the ordinary folk precedes *The Bacchae*, of course, but comes nevertheless in plays set within the latter half of the Peloponnesian War. The peasant in *Electra* (413 B.C.) is a man of old-country manners but honest dignity whose poverty stands in sharp contrast to the wealth of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra that only invites the hatred of her children Orestes and Electra. In *Orestes* (408 B.C., the year Euripides left Athens for exile), a messenger presents a telling contrast, in the arguments over the fate of Orestes, between a “loudmouth” orator and an honest, decent farmer, “one of that class on whom our nation depends.” Given the contexts of composition of these plays, we can hardly doubt that

Euripides must have had his fill of his friends in the agora and learned coterie who carried on as though they had figured out all the answers to the nation's problems. *The Bacchae* itself contains portions where the Chorus, to the extent that it often represents the glancing reflections of the dramatist on issues raised by the play, rises to denounce those who think themselves superior and to defend the humble preoccupations of the simple folk (*Bacc.* 427–433).

3. References to Soyinka's adaptation of *The Bacchae* are given in page numbers, as against verse numbers for Euripides's text.
4. Snowden has unearthed considerable evidence of blacks in early Greek society (1970, esp. 101–155). He has not, however, been convincing in arguing that "the intense color prejudice of the modern world was lacking" among the Greeks and Romans (1983, 158). For a dissenting angle on this subject, see Patterson 1982, 420–421 and 1991, 162, 431.
5. Soyinka has thoroughly reconstructed the first stasimon of Euripides's *Bacc.* 370–433 as a sequence of outraged responses, by the Slave Leader and his fellows, to Pentheus's slap that sends the Old Slave to the floor. Their complaint

Yet we are the barbarians
And Greece the boast of civilisation. (37)

may have been suggested both by the Bacchantes' nostalgia for their favored foreign sites of worship (*Bacc.* 402–416) and by their disdain for "those who consider themselves extraordinary" (*perissoi photes*, 429). This counterhegemonic sentiment is later echoed by Soyinka's Dionysos, in his rebuttal of Pentheus's arrogant claims about Greek culture (1973a, 43).

6. The episode toward the end of Soyinka's play in which the slaves recoil from Cadmus's instruction that they bring down the impaled head of Pentheus (1973a, 95) strikingly recalls that final episode in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in which Okonkwo's townsmen refuse to bring down his hanging body (1958, 147). The two episodes are united both in the revolt against the imperial establishment and in the taboo against a body defiled by an unnatural way of death: Okonkwo by suicide, Pentheus at the hands of a mother who bore him. There may be something traditionally African about not touching such a body.
7. Notice the malapropism of the officer reporting the capture of Dionysus: the god's calm self-surrender embarrassed his professional "code of conflict" (instead of his "code of conduct"; Soyinka 1973a, 39).
8. See, for instance, the vague resemblance between the processional salute in Aristophanes's *The Frogs* (Dover 1993, 404–413) and the Yoruba hunters' chant in Babalola 1966, 173.
9. Tiresias's words "Dionysus I presume?" (Soyinka 1973a, 10) strikingly recall the meeting between David Livingstone and H. M. Stanley in the heart of Africa and so bear some witness to the postcolonial backdrop against which this play has been conceived.
10. See, among numerous references, Bremmer 1994, 40; and Farnell 1971, 97, 125, 197, 205.

11. See, for instance, Gibbs 1986, 113; Etherton 1982, 136; Moore 1978, 151; and Sotto 1985, 169.
12. Note Soyinka's choice of words: "O justice! O Spirit of Equity, Restitution" (1973a, 81), for Euripides's *dika* (*Bacc.* 991–1011), which Kirk (1970) has appropriately translated "Vengeance," considering Dionysus's all-too-obvious agenda in his contest with Pentheus.

6 Antigone in the “Land of the Incorruptible”: Sylvain Bemba’s *Noces posthumes de Santigone* (*Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone*)

John Conteh-Morgan

[I]n the spasms of the young when faced with the unctuous imperative of the old, in the daily rub of Utopian or anarchic impulse against the mildewed surface of “realism” and expedient routine, the Antigone gesture is made, the polemics spring out of an ancient mouth.

—George Steiner, *Antigones* (109)

Antigone is considered a figure of resistance. At the end of the twentieth century, she remains the symbol that is invoked in connection with great female figures like the Burmese Ang San Suu Kyi and the Bangladeshi Muslim [writer] Taslima Nasreen.

—Alette Armel, *Antigone* (9–10)¹

The small but vital repertory of African plays modeled on, or inspired by, the Antigone legend and written mainly by English-language dramatists, received a significant addition from francophone Africa with the publication in 1988 of *Noces posthumes de Santigone* (*Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone*)² by the Congolese novelist and playwright Sylvain Bemba. Written in France where the author had spent the year as a writer in residence at the Centre National du Livre in Limoges, it was first performed in that city in 1990 at the Festival des Francophonies, the annual festival of international French-language theatre. Just under a decade later, in 1999, the Mandeka Theatre of Mali, in a production by Sotigui Kouyaté, performed another francophone adaptation of the Antigone story in various Parisian theatres, this time by Habib Dembélé and Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvaurox (Chalaye 2001, 189–194). These plays are not the only re-workings of Western classics for the francophone African stage in recent years.

Others worth mentioning include Sony Labou Tansi's transposition of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* in *La résurrection rouge et noire de Roméo et Juliette* (1990) and *Moi, veuve de l'empire* (1987), respectively; the many productions by the Bin Kadi-So Theater of Abidjan in the 1990s, using African ceremonial performance techniques, of such European classics as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Goethe's *Faust* (Valy 1999, 127–134); and, a decade earlier, Marie-José Hourantier's stage adaptation, *Orphée d'Afrique* (1981), of Werewere Liking's novel on the Orpheus myth.

It is obviously impossible within the limits of this chapter to discuss, even in a general way, these recent exercises in intercultural theatre. What I propose instead is to focus on one of the most interesting of them—Sylvain Bemba's *Wedding*. In the first part of the chapter, I will make references to and briefly discuss some of the ancient Greek myths in Bemba's work prior to his 1988 play and then in the second concentrate on his reworking of the Antigone myth, relating it, but not reducing it to, the specific historical circumstances that inspired his play.

Even if it is his most elaborately refashioned, Antigone is only one of several ancient Greek myths that Bemba uses to explore contemporary African situations. One of his earliest plays, *L'enfer, c'est Orféo* (1970)—about a doctor, Orféo, who, in the throes of feelings of self-disgust and existential nausea, seeks salvation in revolutionary political action in the wars of decolonization in Guinea Bissau and accidentally discovers a long-lost sister, Anna-Maria—invokes in its title and quest motif, if not exactly in its narrative particulars, the legend of Orpheus. In 1984, Bemba published another work inspired in part³ by Greek myth, *Le dernier des Cargonauts* (*The Last of the Cargonauts*). A conflation in its title, as Jacques Chévrier has shown (Chévrier 1997, 73–90; Bokiba 1997, 56–72), of both the millenarist myth of the cargo cults and of the fabled Argonautic expedition to Colchis, this novel narrates the life of a modern-day African Jason, Emmanuel Mung'Undu, whose father (an African Pelias), launches him out, through his tyrannical actions, into a life of exile, errantry, and perilous adventure. From various cities in his country (the fictional Republic of the Tropics), he moves to Paris, from where he is subsequently expelled, returns home, and settles in a small rural community deep in the forest where he eventually meets his death at the hands of a woman (like Jason at Medea's) in a fit of jealous rage.

Bemba's few but important references to the Argonautic-inspired adventures of Ulysses (1984b, 86) and to the *Iliad* (1984b, 50) are an indication of the fact that he was consciously patterning his story on the ancient Greek legend. But perhaps it is in the deeper symbolic significance of his tale that the parallel between it and that of the Argonauts can be best observed. Commenting on the meaning of the myth of the quest for the golden fleece, Emmet Robbins observes:

Something in [that myth] suggests experience psychological more than historical. It has been argued that the myth . . . is essentially the account of the voyage out

and the return of the shaman, that figure familiar to so many cultures, who mediates between this world and the beyond and whose most extraordinary characteristic is his ability to bring souls back from the realm of the dead. Jason is such a figure. His role is to rescue and repatriate a lost soul. (1982, 7)

“To rescue and to repatriate,” to mediate between worlds—such exactly is Emmanuel Mung’Undu’s mission. Unlike Jason, however, his is not a search for a lost soul but for regenerating knowledge. Knowledge that has been lost to his post-independence world of strife and tyranny; knowledge, in his uncle’s words, of a “beyond which, for most human beings, remains an inviolate kingdom” (Bemba 1984b, 168), the conquest and repatriation of which the hero sees as indispensable to his mission to inaugurate a new golden age among his fallen people.

If I have spent some time on Bemba’s novel, it is to show that he comes to the Antigone legend with a practice of framing African situations in the idiom of Greek myth, a practice born of a strong sense of the latter’s relevance to those situations. Commenting in the preface to his play on his choice of Sophocles’s *Antigone* as a source of inspiration, he explains:

Sophocles’ immortal work is . . . today the heritage of all mankind. . . . And it is because it is, as the expression goes, in the public domain that I have tried . . . to fit it in a theatrical fiction that exhibits the still-fresh wound of the memory of the man⁴ who was mourned by the youth of Africa . . . as the second Lumumba of our century. (*Noces*, Preface, 9)

Kevin J. Wetmore, in his fine study of ancient Greek myth in African drama, specifies a more concrete content to the “relevance” referred to not just by Bemba but also by such other playwrights as Fugard, Brathwaite, and Osofisan. If they and their audiences are attracted to the Antigone legend, he explains, it is because of the urgent topicality in contemporary African sociopolitical contexts or (as the second epigraph would have it) in developing countries in general of some of the issues it encodes: the “resistance to oppression . . . to power and its capricious display through unjust laws,” “the . . . conflicts between the disfranchised and the ruling elite” (Wetmore 2002, 171).

While such conflicts are the warp and woof of quotidian social and political life in post-independence Africa, nowhere, perhaps, did they erupt more dramatically on the stage of 1980s African politics than in Burkina Faso. It is therefore not surprising that a writer such as Bemba, who creates, and is attracted to, rebellious characters in life as well as in art⁵ and whose creative imagination, as we have seen, is attuned to the mythical in historical events, should have sought to frame that piece of recent African history in terms of one of the archetypal and best-known myths about conflicting claims in world literature: the Antigone. But first a brief recall of that history.

In August 1983, a young and charismatic army captain, Thomas Sankara, was propelled to power in Upper Volta following a coup d’état. Four years later, in a situation that contains all the ironies of great and even tragic theatre, he fell equally dramatically, toppled and killed by the very group of friends who had

released him from incarceration four years earlier. The putsch that brought Sankara to power was no ordinary game of political musical chairs among ruling elites. It was a grassroots socialist revolution. With its focus on access to education and health for the majority marginalized rural population, its vigorous reform, and its sometimes-outright abolition of indigenous institutions and customs deemed unprogressive, the Sankara revolution constituted a radical break with successive postcolonial dispensations. To many in his country as well as across Africa who aspired to see the long-betrayed promises of independence fulfilled, Sankara (like Lumumba before him) rapidly became a figure of legend, a martyred saint even, a status reinforced by his tragic destiny.⁶

Echoes of these events are unmistakable in *Wedding*: in the fate of Titus Saint-Just, the ruler of Gold Nugget, the play's imaginary African country, who is betrayed and turned on, like his real-life counterpart, by his brothers in arms; in the christening of that country as Amandla ("liberty") in a manner reminiscent of Upper Volta's name change; but above all in the shared vision of the fictional and historical rulers. Like Sankara, Titus Saint-Just is impelled by a sense of social justice, duty, and self-sacrifice to the point of being nicknamed "Chief Justice." And like Sankara, who sought to promote pride and national self-reliance in a country in a state of abjection, Titus "restored a soul, a land, a sovereignty to a people previously dispersed" (*Noces* 30; *Wedding* 13)

Now, while Sankara's tragic destiny and the events leading to it are the source material for *Wedding* and the ones memorialized in it, the play is not reducible to them. It is a metaphor of the condition of politics in the postcolony, a dimension made obvious by a number of elements: the setting of the play—no specific African country, the absence of temporal details, and the name of this nation's leader, Titus Saint-Just Bund, chosen, as Wetmore observes, for its suggestions of ancient Roman military glory and French revolutionary ardor (2002, 205). But there is more to this choice of name than that. By calling Amandla's revolutionary leader Saint-Just (the Frenchman who, like Sankara, was both an agent and victim of a revolution and the motto of whose Committee of Public Safety, "liberty or death," was slightly adapted by Sankara into "fatherland or death," even if not by his fictionalized counterpart), Bemba, it seems to me, pursues one important objective. And that is to translate the Amandlan/Burkina Faso events into French revolutionary terms, thereby not only vesting them with the prestige and significance of a world historical event but also making them intelligible to his Western, and more specifically French, audience for whom he wrote the play. He is by implication staking the same claim to universality for those events that the French do for their revolution. This is a point to which we shall return.

But for now let us examine what is, perhaps, the most obvious change that Bemba brought to his historical material; namely, the invented figure of Melissa, the play's main character and Antigone figure and the fiancée of Titus Saint-Just, whom she decides to marry posthumously (Act II, tableau VI). That Melissa is presented as an African Antigone is not surprising. First there is her passionate defense of her husband's utopian ideals and her resistance to tyranny

after his demise to the point of almost becoming his double and his uncrowned successor. Indeed, the name that appears in the French title of the play, *Santigone*, combines, as Bemba explains (Preface 10) the first three letters of the French word for blood, “sang” (in this case Titus Saint-Just’s), and Antigone, his wife’s adopted name. But “Santigone” can also be seen as a blend of the first syllables of “Sankara” and “Antigone.”

But if the figure of Antigone, an emblem of female heroism and defiance in many influential interpretations of the character, suggests itself to the dramatist in the context of the revolution that inspired his play, it is also because of an important feature of that revolution: its agenda of women’s emancipation, inscribed not only in its programmatic documents (see Sankara 1990) but vigorously promoted through concrete socioeconomic policy and action.⁷ It is therefore no coincidence that in *Wedding*, the main characters (Melissa, Dorothy, and Margaret) who spearhead resistance to their country’s (male) civic order, who are imprisoned and, in the case of one, murdered by that order, are all women. It is no coincidence either that the only portion of Sophocles’s *Antigone* (lines 386–517) that is adapted and performed in *Wedding* (Act II, 5) is the sharp confrontation between Creon and Antigone that in the Bemba play is made to end with Creon’s dramatic statement—addressed to Haemon in the Sophoclean text (line 671) but to Antigone in the Bemba adaptation as if to underline the gender dimension of the conflict—“But while I live, no woman shall prevail” (*Noces* 61; *Wedding* 37). This explicitly gender-conscious statement is returned (nearly) in kind toward the end of the play by one of Melissa’s sisters in resistance, Margaret, in her confrontation with an officer of the security forces of the Creon of Amandla. To the officer’s reprimand:

No need to ruffle up your feathers like a mother hen whose chicks are under attack. Flying off the handle does not suit you. Leave it for the cocks

she replies:

By which you mean the “pricks” ever rising to the occasion for the cause of male supremacy. (*Noces* 77; *Wedding* 49)

By exalting his female characters, casting them all in the role of resisters to the tyranny of the fictional Creon and his real-life counterparts, to what George Steiner calls Creon’s “doctrine of male prepotence” (1984, 239), by placing their actions squarely within the public realm of politics usually reserved for men, Bemba pays tribute to the cause of (African) women’s emancipation. By the same token, he draws attention to the reality of their situation in most postcolonial societies where such actions, though not unheard of, are usually viewed as transgressions of a social order that restricts female possibilities to the private realm. A closer examination of the play will bring out these issues much better.

Wedding is an artistically self-conscious work that manipulates art and reality, fact and fiction, role-play and identity, through the use of the widely practiced technique among African dramatists of the play within a play (see Crow 2002). In its own case, however, there is a double-layered performance—artistic and

political. On the artistic level, the play is about the staging of a play—Sophocles’s *Antigone*. But this aesthetic or stage performance rapidly transitions into a slice of “real-life” performance, in which Melissa, the stage character acting Antigone, finds herself thrust into the public arena following the assassination of her husband and performing—this time metaphorically—a political role. I say “metaphorically” to suggest that while Bemba intentionally frames her “real-life” activities in theatrical terms, and while she may indeed come across to the spectator as an actor, to herself *in this phase of her life*, she is no longer *acting* Antigone, the rebel. She *is* Antigone, the rebel. In her, in other words, “the consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison . . . with a remembered original model of that action”—which Marvin Carlson, following Bauman, sees as a central feature of performance—has disappeared (Carlson 1996, 5). *Wedding* is the staging of the progressive disappearance of that consciousness, of Melissa’s transformation from actor to activist, of the fusion of the actor with her role, the self, and its stage representation.

The play opens with a conversation by a number of female students pursuing acting careers in England from Amandla. One of them, Melissa Yadé, has just been offered the much-coveted role of Antigone in a production of Sophocles’s play by a famed English director, Sir Richard Cooper. She is beside herself with joy and excitement. She tells a fellow Amandlan, John Abiola:

[I should] especially . . . not let Sir Richard Cooper down since he’s the one who’s formed me. As the star, I must be on fire; I must burn and give myself entirely over to my public to devour like fresh bread. I must engulf the theater in flames. (*Noces* 26–27; *Wedding* 11)

To his expression of pleasant disbelief, shortly before the rise of the curtain, that Melissa is Antigone, she replies:

Not quite. There are centuries between the two of us. In the past few months, I’ve embarked upon a long journey in search of her. Moving toward her isn’t enough. We must intermesh. Can Antigone have heard my call and come to meet me half-way across the vastness of time? (*Noces* 43–44; *Wedding* 23)

These words, which might sound like a mere desire on Melissa’s part to emulate a Stanislavskian performance style, are in fact deeply ironic and premonitory. For what she does not realize is that her “long journey in search” of Antigone will come to a fruitful but disastrous end. She *will* find her. But more, she will also suffer her burdensome and tragic destiny.

This fusion of self and persona, of what Bruce Wilshire (1990) in another context calls the “aesthetic” and the “existential,” begins a few moments before Melissa’s appearance on stage, when a phone call from Amandla confirms rumors of a coup in her country and of the death of its leader, her fiancé. His death is a transforming moment for Melissa. Against all expectations, she decides to maintain her appearance that evening, as a protest against his murder. She also achieves a deeper understanding of the meaning of the character

whose fictional struggle has now become her own “real-life” struggle. She tells the stagehands:

I mean to go on tonight no matter what. I must go on so that he won't stop living in the memory of men. I must go to join forces with the men and women who, for more than twenty-three hundred years, have pointed out the road to high standards by way of dignity and honor in the face of adversity. (*Noces* 57; *Wedding* 33)

The intermeshing of identities that Melissa had longed for is now complete, and the stage is set for her emergence as an activist. This new role is played out on the stage of life in Amandla, where she has returned to confront the New Strongman, to challenge the legitimacy of his rule. Cast in theatrical terms, this “real-life” confrontation repeats, with a difference, however, as we shall see, the earlier fictional/Sophoclean one in which she had acted Antigone. A number of echoes of the latter can be detected in the former. If nothing else, Melissa's self-identification as Antigone—“Hands off,” she tells Amandlan soldiers about to arrest her, “no one lays hands on Antigone” (*Noces* 89; *Wedding* 59)—is proof of the intertextual links between this episode and its ancient Greek model. But there are other echoes: the closing words by Melissa in Act III, 3, “My words are those of love and not of hate,” come from a line by Antigone, Bemba states, in the French version of the play that he used. Also, the New Strongman's advice to Melissa, to “Let the dead bury the dead” (*Noces* 82; *Wedding* 53), is reminiscent of the Greek Creon's “It is vain and stupid to honor the dead” (line 120). Finally, Melissa's evocation of a “sacred obligation” to her dead brother (one of the coup's other victims) is of course at the heart of the ancient play's conflict (*Noces* 82; *Wedding* 53). Situationally there are also very faint parallels: both Creon and the New Strongman accede to power following a set of violent political events, a fratricidal war in the case of one, a coup d'état in the other; Melissa and Antigone, are both forbidden by tyrannical edict from burying, in the case of Melissa even mourning, a deceased brother, and, of course, both defy those edicts. And finally, if the one's “bride-groom is Death” (line 810), the other's is the dead Titus Saint-Just.

But echoes are not similarities, and they should not obscure the fundamental differences between the two situations. Let us focus on one: the characterization of the Creon and Antigone figures who in the Bemba play have been completely recontextualized. Whereas the Greek Creon comes across as inflexible, imperious, and obsessed with a sense of his power, Bemba's Creon–New Strongman is a weakling. Faced with the determination of Melissa–Antigone Bund, as she finally comes to be known, not just to openly mourn her brother but to act as a rallying point of opposition to the new ruler's regime and, even worse, an advocate of her dead husband's political vision in contravention of his edicts, the Strongman literally falls on his knees to beg. Compare Creon's opening salvo in his conflict with his niece—“You, you who are looking at the ground . . . did you know what my orders were? And you dared to break the law?” (lines 440–448)—with the Strongman's to Melissa:

I've come here tonight as a suppliant. I bear all your abuse with humility. . . . I am ready to grovel at your feet like a puppy dog. (*Noces* 80; *Wedding* 51)

Although also ambitious, he cleverly cloaks his interests behind a discourse of public order and national development. He tries to bribe Melissa into silence and does not hesitate to enlist the help of the local archbishop in these efforts. Like Jean Anouilh's Créon, he presents himself as a victim of fate and evokes the complexity of life to justify his compromises. Unlike the ancient model, he is gnawed by guilt, tormented by the voices of the many he has tortured and killed, to the point that with Melissa's mere reference to the name of the most famous of them, Titus Saint-Just, he collapses and faints (*Noces* 89; *Wedding* 58). Finally, he is a coward. Determined to put Melissa to death but afraid of the dangers to his rule of such an action, he surreptitiously arranges, so the Storyteller plausibly suggests, to have the plane taking her back to England destroyed in flight by a bomb, thus "'immur[ing her] alive' in her steel sarcophagus with one hundred and thirty other passengers" (*Noces* 93; author's translation).

Melissa is also a portrait that contrasts with that of her model. She is not the wailing, tearful young girl of the original, even if both of them share a principled opposition to tyranny. In her relationship with her country's Strongman, she emerges as the dominant figure. She dictates terms to him and reprimands him for betraying the dreams of their youth—a reversal of roles whose clear gender dimension is highlighted by the description of Melissa as a "woman-man." Also, although she speaks of a "sacred obligation" to her brother, her preoccupation is not the enforcement of the observance of some religious laws. It is primarily secular and political. Voicing to her in poetic accents the abjection of Amandlans, the Storyteller-Narrator laments:

Our nights became deserts with breasts dry of the milk that suckles the stars.
Souls crack and dreams fray to tatters of unslaked desires. Who then will come
to resow the seed of man in man . . . how can we warm the agonized hearts to
bake the bread of hope? (*Noces* 85; *Wedding* 55)

This is the silent but pressing call that stirred her husband to action, and it is to the pursuit of his dream for an alternative (and in her context) utopian vision of a society of social justice and political legitimacy that she dedicates the rest of her life.

Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that the rewriting in *Wedding* of aspects of the African experience in the idiom of ancient Greek legend and the play's various references to figures from European history are partly meant to make that experience intelligible to Western audiences. While this remains true, important aspects of the play's hybrid form—in which the music of Camille Saint-Saëns's "Danse macabre," for example, blends with military drum music, the cawing of crows, and traditional African drums—are borrowed from African performance traditions. Examples include the use of masks, which are particularly effective in Act III, 3, as an instrument of communication with the living by the denizens of the spirit world. Then there is the technique of role-splitting and doubling. In the former, one character appears as different figures—Titus

Saint-Just, for instance, as *The Patient* (Act I, 3), *First Silhouette* (Act II, 3), and *The Young Officer* (Act III, 4). In the latter, the same performer acts different roles, which is the case with the Narrator-Storyteller, who in that capacity wears a mask but removes it when he is acting one of the many other roles in the play.

But it is the incorporation of the figure of the Narrator-Storyteller that is perhaps the playwright's most obvious attempt to set the Antigone legend to African performance techniques. Sitting next to a television set whose arrival as a form of entertainment in Africa had been said, he explains, to constitute the death knell of his ancient art, the Narrator-Storyteller mockingly declares: "They've been looking forward to my burial for a long time . . . but I have yet to have my last say" (*Noces* 31; *Wedding* 43)—a declaration supported by the important functions he continues to perform in African theatre, and not least in *Wedding*. In this play, he mediates between the stage and the audience, explaining and summarizing the action for the latter before it is acted out—a particularly useful role in a work whose mythic material is not accessible to majority-African audiences, whose action is constantly shifting between countries, and some of whose characters, such as the Second Figure In Black or the Figure With The Scythe (Act I, 3) are obscure but important. Additionally, he illuminates character, foreshadows events, and narrates off-stage events such as the crash of Melissa's plane. But he is not always a detached observer or commentator. At the height of the Melissa-Strongman confrontation, he intervenes as an actor, voicing the concerns of his community.

In the chapter on "canonical counter-discourse" in their book *Post-Colonial Drama*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins write: "A prominent endeavour among colonized writers/artists has been to rework the European 'classics' in order to invest them with more local relevance and to divest them of their assumed authority/authenticity" (1996, 16). Bemba fits this model only imperfectly, it seems to me. If his play is an attempt to appropriate a "European," legend for local ends, which it is, it is no less an attempt to use that legend (a powerful cultural megaphone, as it were)—with its increasingly "talismanic status," not just within Europe, as Steiner thought, but around the world—to give global resonance to local concerns. And these concerns are not cast in the tradition of the "empire writes back" reworkings of Western classics. His interest, in other words, is not to destabilize "imperial hegemonies." If anything, it is to use a text of empire to interrogate and destabilize *not* the power of empire but of the Creon figures of its postcolonial successors.

Notes

"Land of the Incorruptible," it will be remembered, is the meaning of the name "Burkina Faso," given to the former Upper Volta after that country's 1983 socialist revolution.

1. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the original French are mine.
2. Hereafter *Noces* and *Wedding*. Although I will be using the English title of the play, page references will be taken from both the French and English editions and inserted in the text.
3. For a study of other myths, Congolese as well as American, in this novel, see Chévrier 1997.
4. The man in question, an editorial note in the preface to the French edition makes clear, is “Thomas Sankara (1949–87), President of the Revolutionary Council of Burkina Faso” (*Noces* 10).
5. Examples of such characters in his work, in addition to Orfeo and Mung’Undu, include Fabrice M’Pfum, the Patrice Lumumba-like character in the novel *Léopolis* (1984c) and Moudouma Ngoyi Faustin in the play *Tarentelle noir et diable blanc* (1976).
6. For background information on Sankara and his revolution, see Lejeal 2002, 115–292 and Englebert 1996, 55–61.
7. These include for women “access to land, education, credit, . . . paid employment . . . and [the abolition of cultural] practices judged ‘retrograde’” (Lejeal 2002, 289–290).

7 Gestural Interpretation of the Occult in the Bin Kadi-So Adaptation of *Macbeth*

Marie-José Hourantier

The Bin Kadi-So adaptation of *Macbeth*¹ explores different levels of reality that lead us to participate in an occult world, where everything occurs in a muted atmosphere and the essentials of action are woven together. In that mysterious universe that tradition reveals to us by facilitating its communication with our plane of existence, we can study the actor's gestural performance when his or her eyes encounter the unseen, hears the unheard, and touches the untouchable. The actor leads the spectator into places that are familiar, where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible are abolished and the actor both unleashes and struggles against dark forces.

The body is the locus in space where all planes of existence converge and all lived experiences are structured and registered. The invisible is translated in the African adaptation of *Macbeth* through an actor who, through gestures above all else, subjects the environment to his will to power. The actor's mystical gestural language cannot be subjected to a precise interpretation by the spectators: it is first and foremost a matter of the spectators individually apprehending it, sensing its manifestations in the characters' comportments, immersing themselves in it, and then projecting their individual interpretations. Each spectator reaps, then, the fruit of his or her individual openness to the experience.

Gesture in Africa operates, as Bergson said, "*dans le sous-sol de l'esprit*" (in the depths beneath the mind). Trance is born of a rhythm created through the play of instruments and song, which must reach a certain threshold to achieve the second state, that of the "*criseur*," that is, the "entranced individual." Each individual obeys a personal rhythm, and when the instrument is attuned to that person's biological rhythm, the individual experiences a trance. Trance, for the purposes of this chapter, is considered a rite of passage where the problem character passes from one level of consciousness to another, expressing another personality that he or she reveals to himself or herself and that often triggers the behavior to come.

This phase dramatizes desires and their conflicts and tensions. During these rites of trance, the individual departs from reality for a symbolic world filled

with liberating images, where social masks are removed so that fantasies become corporeal. In *Macbeth*, a number of sequences are understood only under the effect of a trance: in Act 1, Macbeth receives a message from King Duncan as soon as he enters into a state of trance: “*Voyez comme notre compagnon est absorbé*” (“Look how our partner’s rapt”; 1.3, 144).² The production consists of two settings, used simultaneously: the forest, symbolized by a camouflage net where spirits stir about, and the palace, symbolized by cloth corridors. Facing the forest, shoulders shaking rhythmically, he unleashes the image of the King, who rises out of the netting like a ghost and confides: “*Mes fils, mes parents, et vous chevaliers, sachez que nous voulons léguer notre empire à notre aîné, Malcolm, que nous nommons désormais Prince de Cumberland*” (Sons, kinsmen, thanes, / And you whose places are the nearest, know / We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The Prince of Cumberland”; 1.4, 35–39).

The trance facilitates the liberation of his secret desires; the designation of the title of heir (“Prince of Cumberland”) startles him and strengthens his resolve: “*Le prince de Cumberland! Voilà une marche que je dois franchir sous peine de faire une chute*” (“The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down or else o’erleap”; 1.4, 48–50). The trance intensifies, with Macbeth gripping the palace hangings as if to better consolidate his decision: “*Etoiles, cachez vos feux! Que la lumière ne voie pas mes sombres et profonds désirs! Que l’œil se ferme sur le geste!*” (Stars, hide your fires. Let not the light see my black and deep desires. The eyes wink at the hand). The word-become-incantation is married to gesture and induces Lady Macbeth’s trance in the forest. Lady Macbeth has received in psychic fashion the information about her husband, informing her of the spirits’ prediction: in a gestural performance that is danced, she takes on Macbeth’s demeanor, designating him through his characteristic gesture of power—the raised arm—and imitating the timbre of his voice, and the message comes through as easily as a letter that has been mailed.³

In Act 2, gripped by an unrelenting anguish on the night of the assassination, Macbeth allows himself to enter a trance that “expels” his torments: he is projected into the forest as the spirits surround him and brandish imaginary daggers as if to direct him toward Duncan. Yet again under the spell of a trance, he reaffirms his will and plays with the organizing image that is to lead him to the act itself. His gestures of combat and destruction of the obstacles predispose him to succeed in the act. Finally in Act 4, Macbeth once more discovers the rhythm of the trance upon the injunction of the *djinadjougou*, who induces apparitions thus: frozen, then shaken by a slight rhythm that is maintained by the *djina* through an orchestra leader-type movement, Macbeth’s actions become progressively stronger. By manipulating scraps of material left by the ghosts, he visualizes in horror Banquo’s royal descendants; through a game of mirrors he reads the future while giving human shapes to the pieces of cloth. Then the trance intensifies, ever encouraged by the *djina*’s gesture of power (her arm held toward Macbeth), and the spirits fill the space, manhandling Macbeth with a simple gesture. The manipulation is meant to be subtle, with an emphasis upon

lightness of movement in the shoulder, elbow, and finger, corresponding to the motions of the actor, who begins to stagger more and more as he is transformed into a zombie. The gesture of the Mask imposes its omnipotent force by keeping the stunned Macbeth on the ground—a gesture that leads the power to its end.

Emotional shocks, the participation of entities who open the doors to another world where profound being is expressed and where desired actions are asserted by means of the necessary rhythmical agents, are forcefully experienced. Trance, in conclusion, can lead to possession, as occurs with Lady Macbeth in Act 1, when the information she receives (the spirits' predictions) causes her such upheaval that she becomes open to all intrusion. The instruments' rhythm achieves their paroxysm, the actor opens up to the invisible world by dividing the space from front to back, left to right, above to below, making use of the body bilaterally. To the rhythm that now matches the actor's own (that is, in traditional language, that of her spirit), she attempts to free the entity that has taken refuge within her. As the drum intensifies, Lady Macbeth's gestural movements become slower and slower, tracking the image of the spirit that is incarnated in her. The whole body must enter into the proposed newness with muscles, skin, blood, nerves. When the character of Lady Macbeth takes shape, moved by the *djinadjougou*, another drum takes over, punctuating every gesture brought forth and marking the metamorphosis:

Venez, venez, esprits qui assistez les pensées meurtrières! Déssexez-moi ici, et du crâne au talon, remplissez-moi toute de la plus atroce cruauté: épaissez mon sang; fermez en moi tout accès, tout passage aux remords. . . .

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse. . . . (1.5, 40–44)

Then the murderous plot is assimilated (“*Que mon couteau aigu ne voie pas la blessure qu’il va faire*” [That my keen knife see not the wound it makes]; 1.5, 52): the monster has taken total possession and will henceforth command Lady Macbeth's dreams and acts: the *actor* has become one who has been *acted upon*, a mime of the double who guides that actor in every fiber of the body.

Trance, as has been seen, thus induces the apparition of Masks: in Act 3, during the scene of the reception, upon the mere evocation of the recently assassinated Banquo, Macbeth enters a trance and confronts Banquo's ghost. Masked in white, with tortured features, the ghost comes out of the labyrinth, with winged steps, easily passing through the palace's flowing cloth tapestries. The gestures are amplified, the gait of a slowness that contrasts sharply with Macbeth's staggering movements. At the end of Act 3, the forest is animated by two masked spirits, led by a song filled with incantations. The accentuation of words creates a poetic language (“*la nuit est longue / la nuit des dévoreurs d’âme*” [the night is long / the night of the devourers of the soul]) that sets in motion the slow movement of the Mask followed by the sweeping gesture of arms cov-

ered with the netting. . . . Mystery of a gesture playing upon the simple rhythm of the poetic word and remaining in suspense. . . . The Mask becomes sign, a warning against the terrible and fatal deed, for an ultimate awareness.

The Mask interludes in Act 4—through the *djina*'s intervention, neuter Masks come forth in personalized gait to dictate the future to Macbeth through deliberate, hypnotic gestural movements—present gestures “in the act,” causing an immediate repercussion upon the environment. The Masks' cries and Macbeth's reaction to their gestures-stimuli announce the co-penetration of the universe of the visible and the invisible, with one submitting to the other. The white masks are deliberately neutral so that each individual can project his or her interior demons. To be able to look face to face at the spirit of the Mask is to come to know oneself and to accept oneself—despite the traumatizing experience of the nocturnal face that is communicated, translated through the violent and unbridled gestures of a Macbeth who is incapable of enduring the reverse of his act.

Finally, another means of expressing the Mask is the “human mask” of the *djina djougou*, when the face's features are fixed in an expression of caricature. Sheltered from gazes in the forest, the *djina djougou* has no need for the material mask that preserves the boundaries of her territory, but her arms, her hands, her gait all obey the coded and conventional nature of a character who is “out of tune,” that is, who has left her plane of existence. Her gestures are dissonant, emphatically jerky; the dance outlines in space a precise geometry where circles and crosses refine the “transpersonalization” (abandonment of the social personality). The *djina* brings to life the forest spirits, who respond to her magnetizing gesture. Gestures of power are reinforced by song, poetry, the flute (the instrument of the forest spirits), which all preside over the metamorphosis of the spirits in which the human cohabits with the animal: guttural sounds orienting gestures that are riveted downward, backward steps. (At stage front, in the presence of the audience, the spirits rise up, soften their expressions into a half-smile: a means of adaptation meant to seduce human beings.) It is the mimodramatist who marks the symbiosis of the two worlds.

The shadow pursues the play's heroes in the obsessive way of the trace of a spirit who will shortly have nothing more to say to humans. At the beginning of Act 1, Macbeth and Banquo fight against the shadows after the departure of the *djina djougou*: “*Ce qui semblait avoir un corps s'est fondu comme un souffle dans le vent*” (what seemed corporal melted, / As breath into the wind”; 1.3, 81–82). In the palace, the movement of the cloth hangings symbolizing the labyrinth of corridors where everyone plays hide-and-seek predisposes a sort of spectacle of shadows that delight in taking shape according to the actors' imagination: while anxiously awaiting the murder, Lady Macbeth imagines her father's shadow as she causes the cloth hangings to move. Then she stops her own gestures so as not to interrupt the process in motion. Macbeth in turn runs through the palace corridors, not daring to touch the tapestries after the crime, as if he is afraid to leave his fingerprints.

Shadow-sign of the otherworld seeking to change the orientation of the act

(the shadow of the Father), shadow-guardian, shadow-remorse (the shade of Duncan on the throne, in the scraps of material), shadow-trigger encouraging the visualization that promotes the act (“When in swinish sleep / Their drenched natures lie as in a death,” Lady Macbeth, 1.7, 68–69). Over and over again, the actor delineates this shade, speaks to it, tames it, or flees it.

To have power over someone’s shade—is that not to have power over that very person? Thus Macbeth struggles against the shades to capture their energy. This shade is also the double, the moving shade that our hero must dominate, that he sketches and magnifies all the better to take possession of it. That shade also pushes him to analysis, to clarity: “*Si une fois fait, c’était fini, il serait bon que ce fût vite fait*” (Bin Kadi-So Act 2; “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well / It were done quickly”; 1.7, 1–2). Macbeth tracks down his shade in the corridors and his wife speaks with it in the forest, clinging to an animated trunk when she recognizes the power of seduction that has transformed her into a criminal. Finally, in the battle of the last act, the warriors confront the shades of their adversaries. Macbeth and Macduff decline hand-to-hand combat in favor of a battle of initiates where the blows cause reverberating shocks in a perfectly regulated occult ballet: power is laid bare when the actor is a musculature with free play of the entire body; the least shock in the supposed shade affects the enemy. This is the result of a subtle technique where gesture, word, percussion all achieve their manifestation.

Is consciousness not the unique privilege of actors when their gestures must achieve exactness in order to be conveyors of meaning? Gesture is a power that acts; none can see it, but it is incorporated into the visible world just as breath is incorporated in each of us. For Macbeth this power is concentrated in the hand, counted as the fifth element,⁴ the spirit, the quintessence that manifests good or evil. His two hands often clutch at his chest as if to expel the evil hidden within, and his arms flail in a gesture of despair. Hands that force eyes to look upon them like an unbearable mirror, proof of the guardian of the threshold who returns the grimacing image of deeds that have been committed: “*Quoi? ces mains-là ne seront jamais propres,*” moans Lady Macbeth (“What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” 5.1, 42). Accusatory hands that knead bodies unceasingly and that practice flagellation. The gesture brandished by Macbeth, encircling the profaning act, brings it to light body to body, heart to heart, head to head. The gesture of murder endlessly relived as it comes into consciousness. It creates all the monstrous forms of the crime: the diabolical couple never stops resurrecting and repeating the horrific gesture that will finally become “algebrois,” stripped of its meaning.

These character-mimers have tried to maintain with their creation a “divine dialogue”: traditional gestures, the result of a tried-and-true practice. Arms are raised as if in benediction when Malcolm is recognized as King, and fingers are pointed at the enemy to concentrate all maledictions upon him.

These gestures of the occult, the product of traditional practices, unite different levels of existence, open doors onto parallel worlds. Techniques of initiation order the emotions and transform mankind, rituals of great symbolic effi-

cacity, sacralizing space, altering relationships, and calling upon the forces that penetrate into the bodies that are offered up. Macbeth and his wife, inhabited voluntarily by a violent entity, reveal a hard lucidity and seek through gestures of madness to free themselves of the encumbering “hosts.” The brutal end of these two heroes will expel forever the maleficent spirit, in the last tableau, with actors throwing the clothing of the “old man” upon Macbeth’s cadaver—a heavy and rich gesture of consciousness rescued from the jaws of death.

—Translated by R. H. Mitsch

Notes

1. The adaptation is called *Macbet*—trans.
2. The English is taken from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.
3. In the original text, Macbeth writes to his wife.
4. In African tradition, each body part represents an element.

8 Yoruba Gods on the American Stage: August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Sandra L. Richards

Central to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are elements of memory and desire, both in terms of characters who are seeking to reorient themselves and in terms of August Wilson's self-described project of creating a body of plays that will help U.S. African Americans more fully embrace the African side of their "double consciousness" (DuBois 1903, 38). Set in 1911 during the Great Migration, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the rural south to settle in northern industrial centers, the play dramatizes the various wanderings of a group of African Americans in search of a place where they can feel at home in the world; that is, in search of an economic, social, and cultural environment that will enable their agency. Taking temporary refuge in a Pittsburgh boarding house, they share fragmented memories of family members before seemingly being propelled by desires for adventure, love, or single-minded purpose to journey further. Memory takes many forms: the story of a "shiny man"—suggestive of the Yoruba gods Ogun and Esu—who encourages fellow travelers to claim their predestined "song" in life; roots working and juba dancing, or African spiritual practices adapted to the ecology of the United States; and a temporal sensibility that simultaneously looks back to the Middle Passage and forward to Africa.

Chief among these roomers is Bynum, a conjurer, or priest-like figure, who early in the play recounts a transformative experience involving a mysterious shining man walking along a country road. Because the man promised to reveal the "Secret of Life," Bynum accompanied this man; eventually, he met his father, who, grieved that his son seemed to be pursuing dreams not of his own making, taught Bynum how to find his own "song." Properly deployed, that song will enable him to have a unique impact, to make a "mark on life" (Wilson 1988, 10). Since that experience, Bynum has taken as his life's task to "just like glue . . . [stick] people together" (10), and he hopes to confirm the validity of his choice someday by encountering another shiny man.

Critics Trudier Harris (1994) and Kim Pereira (1995) have noted that Bynum's description of the shiny man as "One Who Goes Before and Shows the

Way” has biblical resonances, but with the exception of Paul Carter Harrison (1991) and Pereira, who offer brief comments, virtually no other critic has probed the narrative’s relationship to Yoruba cosmology. In failing to identify this intertext, critics and audiences miss several things. Wilson has fashioned a diaspora text that, given its specific reference to Yoruba belief systems, posits migrancy as the norm and implies an Africa that is always-already hybrid. His drama runs counter to the desire for a site of pristine origin found in many U.S. African-American discourses of identity. Furthermore, rather than reading the play as an instance of realism that bewilderingly lurches into the realm of the supernatural (see D. Richards 1988), viewers can profit from understanding Joe Turner . . . as a tragedy modeled upon Wole Soyinka’s deployment of the myth of Ogun, whom he characterizes as “[t]he first actor . . . first suffering deity, first creative energy, first challenger” who risked his own psychic disintegration in order to reunite the gods with mankind (Soyinka 1976, 144). As such, the Wilson drama posits a holistic view of life, implying thereby a link between individual spirituality and collective political consequences. It marks a continuity between Wilson and those “angry” black playwrights of the 1960s, but this link between spiritual apprehension and political agency was largely forgotten after the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.; government suppression of political radicalism; and public retreat into consumerism. Hence, the outraged surprise and thinly disguised accusations of ingratitude lodged against Wilson after his “The Ground on Which I Stand” address and Town Hall debate with Robert Brustein, in which he argued not for assimilation but for the continued autonomy of black theatre.¹ Viewed through the more appropriate lens offered by Yoruba culture, the play with its representations of agency, cultural braidedness, and open-ended possibility can, perhaps, help audiences engage the “cultural work” (Tompkins 1985, 200–202) of thinking through complex interrelated questions of identity, cultural production, and democratic ideals.

Devotees claim that “Ogun has many faces” (Barnes 1989, 2) and as a reputed trickster, Esu is known to assume many guises. How then is one to identify these gods, given the multiple properties attributed to them and their dispersion from West Africa to the Americas? Cultural anthropologist Sandra Barnes advocates a polythetic system of classification that recognizes a porousness that stimulates creativity while insisting upon enough stability to stave off distortion; under such a system, the presence of a combination of telling features is sufficient to distinguish one domain or, in this instance, one god from another. Similarly, Sidney Mintz and Richard Price assert that in assessing continuities between Africa and the Americas, one needs to ask “what the representations mean, intend, and express” rather than search for strict correlations between practices in the two environments (qtd. in Barnes 1989, 10). Thus, in seeking to identify a Yoruba thread in Wilson’s drama, we need to evaluate the combination of features that would place Bynum’s shiny man within the domains of Ogun and of Esu.

According to Yoruba cosmological lore, Ogun was the only god willing to risk

psychic disintegration in order to traverse the chthonic abyss that separated the gods from humans (Soyinka 1976, 27–28). Mastering fire and fashioning the first tool, namely an iron sword, he cut through a formidable nothingness to lead the other gods to their desired reunion on earth. Thus, like the Christian god, Ogun is a divinity who takes on a collective burden and leads others to self-knowledge. The shininess that Bynum reports may be related to iron, the essential feature associated with Ogun.

In fact, the written text hints at the domain of Ogun at the very outset for those with the “diaspora literacy,” or knowledge of African diasporic cultures, to recognize the signs.² As the first smith who learned how to change ore into iron, Ogun challenges those who journey onto his terrain to create new technologies and thus new (or, in truth, refashioned) identities in response to changing conditions. Wilson emphasizes the historical fact of Pittsburgh as a city of steel, where individual mettle as well as civic identity was forged. Black migrants are characterized in iron-making imagery as

marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles
and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the
malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and
sincere worth. (Wilson 1988, n.p., immediately prior to Act 1)

“Foreigners in a strange land,” these newcomers—or diaspora folk—bring histories of separation and dispersment and search not for a sense of home or stability but for ways to “reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy” (Wilson 1988, n.p.). Of course, spectators do not have access to these rich clues except through the skill of the theatre director, designers, and actors in making palpable this arduous move towards self-cognition. Bynum says of this shiny man, “This fellow don’t have no name. I call him John ’cause it was up around Johnstown where I seen him” (Wilson 1988, 8). A plausible explanation of a possible name, but in the context of other signs, astute readers are likely to suspect other referents as well. Note that Bynum meets this person on a road and he offers a solution that functions like a riddle in that it propels Bynum to search for further confirmation. We seemingly are in the domain of Esu’s younger relative, that African-American folk figure known as High John the Conqueror. Anthropologist and creative writer Zora Neale Hurston reports that High John was said to be a physically big man, a small man, and no “natural man” at all who came from Africa and took human shape in order to help black peoples survive slavery with their dignity intact (1943, 922). Similarly, Esu’s praise songs describe him as having difficulty sleeping in a house because it was too small but finding comfort in a hut in which he could stretch out. Esu is said to be able to turn right into wrong and wrong into right (Pemberton 1975, 25). High John has similar abilities, for he often bamboozles the slave master for the benefit of the enslaved.

As the mediator between the divine and the human, Esu favors the crossroads where men and women must make decisions; High John, or John, has met By-

num on the road and led him to a life-changing challenge. Esu is also acknowledged as the keeper of *àse*, or the power to make things happen that resides in human beings as well as in objects (R. Thompson 1983, 5–6). Each individual possesses her/his own unique *àse*: “It is the ground of all creative activity, which, if not properly acknowledged, may prove destructive to human endeavors” (Abiodun 1991, 13). As unborn spirits, we are allowed to choose our individual destiny, but that knowledge is forgotten upon our entry into the material world. Thus, divination is one of the means through which we humans discover our *orí inú*, or personal identity (also translated as one’s inner, spiritual head); in so doing, we repeat aspects of divine experience, thus partaking in the essence of a particular god (or gods), who is (are) designated as the god(s) of one’s head. Esu is closely allied with the god of divination known as Orunmila, or Ifá, because Ifá is said to pronounce the truth of one’s destiny, while Esu presides over its decoding or interpretation (Gates 1988, 21).

But Soyinka suggests an even closer relationship between Ogun and Esu when he writes that Ogun is

“Lord of the road” of Ifa; that is, he opens the way to the heart of Ifa’s wisdom, thus representing the knowledge-seeking instinct, an attribute which sets him apart as the only deity who “sought the way,” and harnessed the resources of science to hack a passage through primordial chaos for the gods’ reunion with man. (1976, 27)

Bynum’s story of a shiny man, then, joins Ogun and Esu into a single force field that, after performing a ritual cleansing, transforms and magnifies the physical landscape into a metaphysical terrain where self-cognition can occur. It is on this ground that Bynum sees his father, whose mouth seems to take up his entire face, this enlargement signaling perhaps the awesome force of the words he is about to give his son.³ Like a *babaláwo*, or diviner, Bynum’s father

[t]old me he was gonna show me how to find my song. . . . Then he showed me something that ain’t got words to tell you. But if you stand to witness it, you done seen something there. I stayed in that place awhile and my daddy taught me the meaning of this thing that I had seen and showed me how to find my song. (Wilson 1988, 10)

Occurring early in the text, this “Secret of Life” narrative prescribes the drama that will follow, as Wilson seeks to dramatize that which lacks the fixity of words in such a persuasively affective manner that we the spectator-witnesses gain an understanding of the operation of *orí inú*, or individual destiny in the world. Hoping to encounter another shiny man whose aura will confirm the validity of his understanding of his destiny, Bynum serves as *babaláwo* ministering to Herald Loomis, who also will claim to be without words to describe what he is experiencing.

Like Ogun, Loomis must wrestle to stand in the face of his own Dry Bones

vision. He retraces the trajectory of tragedy established by the god, for as Soyinka argues:

Only Ogun experienced the process of being literally torn asunder in cosmic winds, of rescuing himself from the precarious edge of total dissolution by harnessing the untouched part of himself, the will. This is the unique essentiality of Ogun in Yoruba metaphysics: as embodiment of the social, communal will invested in a protagonist of its choice. It is as a paradigm of this experience of dissolution and re-integration that the actor in the ritual of archetypes can be understood. (1976, 30)

Thus beset by overwhelming disasters, Loomis must impose his will in order to avert psychic fragmentation and progress through an abyss of nothingness. In so doing, he reassembles himself in ways that may be instructive to a community of witnesses who invest in the protagonist's struggle as emblematic of their own journey.

It is interesting that there is one important aspect of Ogun's history that Wilson chooses not to repeat. Given his creative solution to a shared problem, Ogun is regarded as emblematic of the artistic spirit, but a significant portion of his legendary corpus also deals with his destructive capacities. These Wilson chooses not to incorporate into the drama, perhaps because of the constricted American racial imaginary that already stigmatizes black males. But Ogun is understood ultimately as the progenitor who creates technologies that both nurture and destroy; furthermore, he signals the need for constant self-scrutiny as one seeks to balance between the creative and the destructive, between freedom and restraint. Says anthropologist Barnes:

Ogun is a metaphoric representation of the realization that people create the means to destroy themselves. He stands for humans' collective attempts to govern, not what is out of control in nature, but what is out of control in culture. He represents not so much what is inexplicable, unseen, or unknown, as what is known but not under control. (1989, 17)

Loomis is the primary protagonist on this journey toward self-cognition and control. Separated from his wife and daughter when Joe Turner captured him and kept him on the chain gang for seven years, he says on more than one occasion that he wants to find his wife so that he can have a "starting place in the world" (Wilson 1988, 72). Seemingly, through Martha, Loomis wants to establish an originary point for a future narrative that he will enact; thus, the search for Martha becomes a search to make sense of his past. Loomis's experience repeats in miniature the experience of Africans in the Americas: brutally and abruptly torn from their families, these Africans have had to come to terms with why they were dehumanized and how they are to erect a new, enabling narrative.

Here it is useful to examine Yoruba concepts of narrative in order to ascertain what light they may shed on Loomis's and, by extension, African Americans' project. The Yoruba word *itàn* is commonly translated as "history," but as linguist Olabiyi Yai notes, because the cognate *tàn* means to spread, open up, or shine, the concept brings together three dimensions:

First, there is the chronological dimension through which human generations and their beings, deeds, and values are related. Second, there is the territorial or geographical dimension through which history is viewed as expansion (not necessarily with the imperial connotation that has become the stigma of that concept in the English language) of individuals, lineages, and races beyond their original cradle. In that sense it is important to observe that the Yoruba have always conceived of their history as diaspora. The concept and reality of diaspora, as viewed and perceived in certain cultures (Greek, Jewish) as either necessity or lamented accident, are rationalized in Yorubaland as the normal or natural order of things historical. (1994, 108)

And finally, the third dimension is discursive and reflexive; *tàn* also means to discern or disentangle, and thus in constructing a story (*pa itàn* or *pitàn*), one is expected to discourse profoundly on the chronological and expansive or diasporic dimensions (108). While we know from the Wilson text itself that travel will be an important element of Loomis's narrative, this linguistic analysis suggests that movement, shorn of nostalgic desire for a fixed center, is integral to the narrative of self that Loomis/African Americans will construct. As I will demonstrate shortly, Loomis effects a psychic orientation toward Africa that will make his geographical wanderings easier. But it is debatable whether the larger collectivity will come to accept dispersal not as tragedy but as the "natural order of things historical"—witness the longing for fixity from which Afrocentrism springs.

Through the Juba dance, African spirits, masked in the discourse of Christianity, force a crisis of consciousness in Loomis. As Wilson notes in his stage directions, the Juba dance with its improvised percussive polyrhythms and circular movement is related to the ring shouts formerly practiced by slaves. Furthermore, historian Sterling Stuckey argues:

Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed—it is called the ring shout in North America—the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of the movement. The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America. (1994, 12)

Indeed, the circle ritual, particularly in its Kongo articulation of a spiritual sensibility, contributed to transforming ethnic groups from present-day Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Sierra Leone into the race of Africans or blacks (Stuckey 1994, 10–11). Regardless of whether they lived in the South or North of the United States (indeed of the Americas as a whole), slave dance was substantially similar in its use of the circle. As Africans came more under Christianizing influences, the memory of specific African gods was superseded by worship of a Western god in certain regions of the African diaspora. Though outwardly Christian, the resulting religious practices were/are in fact a blend of Christian and precolonial African belief systems. Thus, it should come as no surprise that in Wilson's text, Seth, whose pride in his free birth leads him to

denigrate southern customs associated with slavery, is the one who suggests that the household engage in Juba dancing. But whereas Seth is ignorant of his syncretic or braided (see Lionnet 1989) past, Herald Loomis, under the propulsive call-and-response rhythms and invocation of the Holy Ghost, is shocked into remembrance.

Demanding to know why the others ascribe so much power to the Holy Ghost, Loomis first challenges, “Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me?” (Wilson 1988, 52). He then begins to whirl around the room and speak in tongues, a sign of divine presence readily familiar to these roomers because of Pentecostal or charismatic traditions within the Christian church as well as spirit possession within precolonial African religious practices. Coached by Bynum, Loomis begins to communicate. But his vision predates a black Christianity, even while it is couched in language filled with biblical allusions (Ezekiel 37): “I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water” (53). Loomis sees himself among the bones that sink, rise, and take on flesh; the other bones accept the breath infused into their bodies, stand, and move away. However, Loomis finds, “The wind’s blowing breath into my body. I can feel it. I’m starting to breathe again” (55), but “My legs won’t stand up! My legs won’t stand up” (56).

Critics have interpreted this vision with its segments about a watery death, renewed life, and dispersal—“They [the bones now people] shaking hands and saying goodbye to each other and walking every whichaway down the road” (55)—as a symbolic reference to the Middle Passage from Africa into the Americas, and certainly I concur with that reading.⁴ But I would add that no geographical direction is given in Loomis’s narrative, and thus, in addition to looking back to a past history, this story as Loomis eventually enacts it simultaneously looks *forward* to a return to Africa.

That movement forward occurs in two stages. First, like Ogun, Loomis must make sense of an experience that threatens to permanently paralyze him; he must understand why Joe Turner imprisoned him. Bynum, with Seth looking on, provokes a confrontation with Loomis’s past by singing the blues ballad “They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone / Ohhh Lordy / Got my man and gone / He come with forty links of chain” (69). Surprised that Bynum can somehow see a disfiguring mark that Joe Turner may have left on his body, Loomis confesses:

I ain’t never seen Joe Turner. Seen him to where I could touch him. I ask one of them fellows one time why he catch niggers. . . . He told me I was worthless. . . . Worthless is something you throw away. . . . So I must got something he want. What I got? (73)

Ever the pragmatist dealing in facts and figures, Seth replies that Turner wanted Loomis’s labor, but this answer is unsatisfying because it simply reiterates Turner’s evaluation of him as property devoid of any human characteristics (Nadell 1994, 100–101). Bynum responds symbolically:

Every nigger he catch he's looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he's got you bound up to where you can't sing your own song. . . . But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it. (Wilson 1988, 73)

This exchange, as does Wilson's play in total, operates on several registers at once. It is historical, for Joe Turner was in fact the brother of a governor of Tennessee, and he operated a lucrative convict-lease system whereby he entrapped black men and leased their labor to southern businessmen for periods of five to twenty-five years.⁵ It is legendary, for blacks, whose opportunity for formal education was severely circumscribed, memorialized and repeated this history in the blues ballad that Bynum sings. It is metaphorical because such power accrues to Turner that even though he catches people, his features or physiognomy as an index of motives are never clearly discerned, and he is able to transform men such as Loomis into a zombie, whose body continues to labor while its spirit or *àse* (power to make things happen) is deadened (Harris 1994, 55).⁶ It is religious, for as Loomis acknowledges when he subsequently says to Bynum, "I know who you are. You one of them bones people" (Wilson 1988, 73), the diviner, or *babaláwo*, has pronounced a solution to this crisis of consciousness. It is now up to Loomis to make sacrifice; that is, to carry out a magical-material act that performs one's realigned apprehension of his/her relationship to the community of the living, dead, and transhuman, or spirits.⁷

And Loomis does indeed make sacrifice. As in the earlier Dry Bones vision that was preceded by the Juba, sound is again *àse* charging the air for a spiritual manifestation. Bertha Holly, who like Bynum counsels the love-stricken and nurtures through her constant cooking and ordering of the domestic space, remarks that love and laughter are all anyone really needs. Walking about her kitchen as though she were blessing it, she releases "a near-hysterical laughter that is a celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing" (87) in which Bynum, Mattie, and even Seth join. Into this purified space walks Martha Loomis Pentecost, whom the People Finder Rutherford Selig has located—just where Bynum hinted he should look. As the long-separated couple struggles to come to terms with each other, Martha projects a concept of history quite different from that of Loomis. As stated earlier, he has been attempting to understand his capture. But Martha is uninterested in shuffling and reshuffling elements of her narrative until their arrangement provides solace:

They told me Joe Turner had you and my whole world split in two. My whole life shattered. It was like I had poured it in a cracked jar and it all leaked out the bottom. When it go like that there ain't nothing you can do put it back together. (90)

And after waiting five years for his return:

I woke up one morning and decided you was dead. Even if you weren't, you were dead to me. . . . So I killed you in my heart. . . . And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you. (90)

Unlike Loomis, who wants to identify a point of origin for his narrative, Martha is ultimately willing to erase an earlier history and journey north with fellow

church members. Seemingly, her diaspora movements are Yoruba-like; that is, without the nostalgia that linguist Yai (1994) associates with Greek and Jewish articulations.

In this second stage of a movement forward to Africa, Loomis must take another step toward assuming full responsibility for his actions. When he learns that Martha had in fact left their child in her mother's care, he attempts to shift responsibility for all those years of wandering onto Bynum. Brandishing a knife, he rages, "All the time it was you that bind me up! You bound me to the road!" (Wilson 1988, 91). This time Bynum couches his spiritual pronouncement in less ambiguous terms:

I bound the little girl to her mother. That's who I bound. You binding yourself.
You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald
Loomis. (91)

Recognizing this as a moment of spiritual crisis, Martha begins her own talismanic chant, reciting the Twenty-third Psalm and pleading with Loomis to put down the knife and embrace Jesus instead. But Loomis rejects this notion of an intercessor god, seeing Christianity instead as the discursive mask of oppression:

Great big ole white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting . . . "Well, Jeremiah . . . what's the matter, you ain't picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you on half rations." (92-93)

If, as Martha argues with Loomis, sacrificial blood (of Jesus) cleanses, then Loomis will bleed for himself. In slashing his chest and rubbing the blood on his face, he discovers, "I'm standing. My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" (93). He has made sacrifice and thereby begun to claim his *orí inú*. Like the god of his head, Loomis has successfully navigated passage through chaos to an African shore of self-defined agency. This Ogunian tragedy ends not with a stripped and chastened hero. Rather, Loomis, still brandishing his knife, the divine metonym for creativity, new technology, and self-definition, journeys toward an unknown future. The drama necessarily remains open-ended because Esu, who is integral to decoding destiny, is virtually guaranteed to meet the unsuspecting traveler and offer a soul-chilling opportunity to reenact the drama of Ogun. Further, Ogun does not always function as creator, for, as his lore demonstrates, the drive toward freedom at times has disastrous personal and collective consequences. And finally, many spectators, who hold African-inflected Christian beliefs akin to those of Wilson's characters, understand spiritual apprehension less as an endpoint than as the "starting place" on a "hard Christian journey" (Sobel 1979, 101).

What are the implications of this Yoruba-inflected play for audience members and for current debates concerning identity and cultural production? What are the benefits of reading in this diasporic or "post-Afrocentric" (see Olaniyan 1995) manner? First, such an approach underscores the epistemological agency

of people of African descent by uncovering ways that we have theorized. Creatively formed out of the destructive crucible of slavery yet confined within nationalistic boundaries, U.S. African-American cultural production cannot name its full history. Thus, it is often reduced to the level of an ensemble of idiosyncratic vestigial folk customs or exciting new raw materials that invigorate a white mainstream. Its operation within interlocking systems of philosophical, spiritual, political, and social thought remains unsuspected. Rejecting the assumption of Western intellectual dominance, this approach acknowledges similarities to Euro-American traditions yet argues that African-American cultural production posits an alternative worldview.

But while this post-Afrocentric reading links U.S. black culture to a longer history and complex epistemologies, Africa is not privileged as a site of pristine authenticity. For as Yoruba linguistics posit, and as Loomis's trajectory (and that of the other boarders at Seth and Bertha Holly's house) demonstrates, movement and hence incorporation of new knowledge are the norm. Within the constancy of change there exists a centeredness located in the metaphysics of the gods who trace for humans a collective history, or *itàn*, that is assimilative. Speaking of tribal wisdom that accepts the "elastic nature of knowledge as its one reality" (52), Soyinka adds:

[A]n attitude of philosophic accommodation is constantly demonstrated in the attributes accorded most African deities, attributes which deny the existence of impurities or "foreign" matter, in the god's digestive system. . . . This principle creates for society a non-doctrinaire mould of constant awareness. (1976, 54)

Thus, Yoruba gods sometimes wear the costumes of Catholic saints and fraternize with indigenous deities in order to remain in communication with their peoples shipped into the "new" world of the Americas. They also claim European descendants as their devotees. The old concedes ground to the new, the new demonstrates its allegiance to the old. In this dynamic process both entities shift and entertain the possibility of merger as each seeks to probe and identify the limits of sameness and difference.⁸ "Africa" is always-already an active space of cultural crossings⁹ and specific to a particular historical moment. The "Africa" that Wilson would have black Americans embrace is first an internal state of self-possession and agency. It is, secondarily, discursive and reflexive, a story (*pitàn*) remembered and retold from various elements of the past in order to realize desires for a particular present and future.¹⁰

Similarly, the reader/spectator is challenged to produce a critical discourse that is self-reflexive and comfortable with contingent pronouncements. Recognizing that visibility is a function of ideological perspective, this diaspora practice adopts a skeptical posture, probing whether the immediately visible masks or deflects attention away from a less visible entity (see V. Clark 1991; S. Richards 1995). The binary of *either/or* is replaced by the principle of *both/and*: the ring shout is both Christian and African; Martha recites the Twenty-third Psalm of the Christian Bible in the manner of an African conjurer. Likewise, constancy and change are not opposites. Always joined on the divining board that maps

human history, Òrúnmila (or Ifá) continually insists that men and women theorize their experiences through various systems of logic, while Esu regularly shatters those constructions in order to sow an apparent contradiction that will in turn stimulate women and men to produce new narratives. Thus, within this framework, the United States, like “Africa,” is a site of cultural becomings; though the idea of democracy may be a constant, its substantive meanings and referents are continually changing.

Similarly, Wilson’s dramas and artistic practice are better understood in terms of the layered, push-and-pull dynamics of a *both/and* perspective. He continues a line of argument propounded by those “angry” black male playwrights of the 1960s who loudly called for black pride and black power. His entry into and acceptance by mainstream, historically white regional theatres appears to be a rupture with that past if one chooses to confuse rhetorical loudness with intellectual content, dissociate spiritual apprehension from collective political action, or disregard the ethical claims of a past history on a present reality.¹¹ Yet at the level of material practice, the production of his plays at venues such as the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center National Playwrights Conference and Yale Repertory in New Haven, the Goodman in Chicago, or the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco also marks a healthy departure from earlier artistic policies privileging dramas written by white men. And as Wilson himself so forcefully argued in his 1996 Theatre Communications Group (TCG) speech and again in 1997 before audiences at the National Black Theatre Festival,¹² his success does not reduce the command of funding dollars and artistic vision by those committed to the dominance of Euro-American culture, as evidenced by the existence of sixty-six white LORT theatres, only two black LORT theatres, and no LORT theatres producing work by Asian Americans or Latinos.¹³

As applied to current debates about funding for the arts, this *both/and* perspective identifies a dynamic circuitry of diverse cultural interactions within asymmetrical power relations. Just as a variety of values operates in the cultural production by people of African descent, so too with the other racial and ethnic groups that constitute the United States. Diversity exists both within a particular cultural entity and among the different racial, ethnic, class, or gendered groups that dialogue, appropriate, or distinguish themselves in interactions with each other. All have legitimate claims—though differing, unequal claims, given different histories and positions within systems of sociopolitical, economic, and cultural power—on the public’s support for the arts.

August Wilson’s plays and practice speak to American audiences who are challenged to acknowledge the facticity of their national identity as a site of multicolored, cultural crossings despite its ideological construction as a white monolith. Obviously, racism and its close cousins such as homophobia are still operative and creative in their articulations. Strategic essentialisms are often necessary to counteract their debilitating power, particularly in the allocation of resources. But as this examination of Yoruba culture in an Afro-diasporic drama has demonstrated, these essentialisms are also fictions challenging all of

us to recalibrate present and past understandings as we seek, Ogun-like, to fashion technologies for the future.

Notes

An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a paper at the 3rd Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST '97) in Cape Coast, Ghana, August 1997.

1. Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech was delivered in June 1996 at the eleventh biennial National Theatre Conference sponsored by Theatre Communications Group, one of the major service associations for not-for-profit professional theatres in the United States. The debate, hosted by prominent performance artist-playwright Anna Deavere Smith and Robert Brustein, considered one of the deans of the regional theatre movement, was held in New York's Town Hall in January 1997. See Brustein 1996; Gates 1977; "On Cultural Power," 1977; *Theater* 27, no. 2-3; and *African American Review* 31, no. 4: 565-638 and 647-658 for some of the impassioned reactions to the Wilson-Brustein exchanges.
2. I am grateful to Professor Harry Elam for calling this aspect to my attention during informal conversation at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education convention in Chicago, August 1997.
3. Robert Farris Thompson cites an *oriki* that says when Esu sings, his teeth temporarily vaporize in order to allow full passage of his words (1994, 227).
4. For a representative sample, see Harris 1994, 54-55; Morales 1994, 111; Kester 1994, 106; and Pereira 1995, 73-74.
5. Wilson cites the liner notes on the album *W. C. Handy Sings His Immortal Hits*, in Shannon 1995, 124.
6. The production of zombies is, of course, a practice associated with Haitian *voudun*. It is painfully ironic that while whites have been fascinated by this practice and in the process have debased a system of religious belief to the level of superstition, they have failed to acknowledge that they themselves have practiced zombification, robbing many people of African descent of a sense of agency and humanity while extracting labor.
7. For further discussion of sacrifice, see S. Richards 1996, 120-125.
8. Even though I have concentrated on Yoruba culture, this philosophic principle is also captured in the Akan *adinkra* symbol of the *sankofa* bird, which looks backward in order to move forward.
9. Theorizing the significance of Esu for cultural formation, Leda Maria Martins uses the term *cultural crossing* in relation to Afro-Brazilian culture specifically and Afro-diasporic cultures more generally in order to suggest possibilities of masking or doubleness that are not suggested in the term *syncretism*. Unfortunately, her English-language essays such as "Theatre of the Sacred: The 'Congados' of Brazil" (1994) and "The Yoruba Deities and the Quest of Black Identity in Afro-Brazilian Theatre" (1993) exist mainly as typescripts; readers of Portuguese may want to consult her *Afrografias da Memória* (1997) or *A Cena em Sombra* (1995).

10. Discussing the relationship between history and the supernatural in Wilson's *Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner . . .*, Morales makes a similar point about the historical specificity of Wilson's construction of African-ness:

To separate the historical from the metaphysical, or to read the African elements of the plays simply as metaphors, loses key elements of Wilson's use of African traditions. Wilson uses his "ancestral legacy" to differentiate his own historical tradition as well as to emphasize the "cultural retentions" of his characters. (1994, 112)

and:

It is important to recognize that Wilson conceives of this African retention not as a fixed cultural trait but as a worldview always subject to transformative processes. (113)
11. William A. Henry III typifies this position when he writes: "Wilson is not a 'black' playwright in the sense the term was applied in the confrontational 1960s and '70s. He movingly evokes the evolving psychic burden of slavery abut without laying on guilt or political harangues" (1988, 77).
12. That speech has been published in *Callaloo* 20, no. 3 (1998): 483-492.
13. LORT (League of Resident Theatres) constitutes a chief mechanism through which professional, nonprofit (i.e., non-Broadway) theatre is produced in the United States.

Part Three:

*Radical Politics
and Aesthetics*

9 Femi Osofisan: The Form of Uncommon Sense

Tejumola Olaniyan

In the plays which I have written onto the bleeding pages of this troubled age, I have sought, advisedly by suggestive tropes, to deny consolation to the manufacturers of our nation's anomy, and at the same time to stir our people out of passivity and evasion.

—Femi Osofisan, "Playing Dangerously" (1997, 24)

In Femi Osofisan's *Birthdays Are Not for Dying*, Kunle Aremo is heir to a large fortune at the center of which is a business corporation. On his thirtieth birthday, he decides to assume the presidency of the company, in conformity with his father's wishes in the latter's will. Kunle also decides to do something else: clean up the corruption, fraud, and sycophancy that have become endemic in the company. His mother firmly opposes him and implores him to ignore his father's will and give up the company: she is certain that his idealism will lock him in a fight to the death with entrenched interests in the company, a fight she is sure he could never win. True enough, one by one the board of directors, veritable dung beetles at an Augean stable, threaten Kunle with death if he fails to reverse his anti-corruption crusade. Kunle is brash and uncompromising, but it is unclear whether any posture of less severity could accomplish the task; his crusade is directed at those old enough to be his father (and who indeed knew him from when he was a babe)—a not-insignificant fact in his gerontocratic context—but they are the right targets and they never deny the accusations of corruption against them. The ethical lines are starkly drawn, and Kunle has all the right on his side but, most amazingly, not (poetic) justice. Calamities rain instead on the basically good man—his migraine is unyielding, his sick "son" dies on the way to the hospital, and he is himself poisoned by his wife, the daughter of one of the corrupt board members—while the bad fellows gloat in self-justification. All these on Kunle's birthday, an occasion for celebration and hope, certainly not for dying.

Birthdays is not considered one of Osofisan's significant plays. It is not one of that select group of about half a dozen plays generally agreed to bear the Osofisan imprint at his most perspicacious: characterized by deft appropriation

and reinterpretation of indigenous performance forms, a fine-tuned materialist revision of history, and a consummate dramaturgic sophistication and openness that takes us a few steps beyond Bertolt Brecht, one of the dramatist's many inspirations. *Birthdays*, on the other hand, is a short, technically unchallenging one-act play with a very simple and straightforward plot, one of many in Osofisan's "peripheral" canon of naturalistic—itsself a crucial factor in the critical location of the plays far below the supple, extended parable and epics—plays. The dramatist himself is wont to cuddle up or shove them aside as his "less adventurous plays in the popular realist tradition," as opposed to the "parables" and "political epics" (Osofisan 1997, 24). But lightweight and all, *Birthdays*, indeed like others of its kind such as *No More the Wasted Breed* or *Altine's Wrath*, has never failed to elicit active debate after a performance: the signature effect we take for granted in the more well-known plays such as *Once upon Four Robbers* or *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* and indeed the oft-stated central ideological design and goal of the dramatist. Obviously, the "peripheral" plays prove, there are several paths to get to the market.

In its own specific case, the path of *Birthdays* is composed of a frugal, economical plot. None of those deliciously affective Osofisanian riddles and surprising turns. Deploying dramatic and propitious entries and exits, all the drama plays out in a single unchanging scene of Kunle's bedroom, furnished more like a living room complete with settee, armchairs, drinks trolley, and standing mirror. The pace is swift, relentless, even breathless as the exposition, spilled out but always holding back a mystery or two in the manner of police investigations, tries very hard to pretend it is not a deluge, which it is. As the gallery of characters—the right but brashly uncompromising and the corrupt but smugly unapologetic—enter and exit, not even the deft manipulation of diegesis as a hold-all space for whatever threatens to retard the remorseless pace of the action could allay the charge of "stifling" against the mimetic space. But the play is not done yet. It violates, flagrantly and several times over, the commonsense ethical ideal that poetic justice be done, that those so vulgarly corrupt get their just deserts. Plus—how can we forget!—that cheap, populist, tearjerker ambient irony of the day of Kunle's tragedies being no other but his birthday!

But the audience-arousing factors of *Birthdays* are not all *artistic*; there are *sociological* ones as well. The play was first published in 1990. Its Nigerian audience could not have failed to see in the 30-year-old Kunle and his inchoate reformism its own 30-year-old independent nation and its endless groping for directions. Depending on their ages, audience members would have witnessed times without number confrontations between reformist and entrenched conservative interests as the nation quested for a just and egalitarian society, with the corrupt order often bruised but harder than ever to crack. In the immediate context of the play's publication (which was years after several productions), a tentative hope of political renewal that attended General Ibrahim Babangida's promises on ascension to power in a coup d'état five years earlier in 1985 had all but dissipated:¹ another success for the forces of reaction. Thus the play taps

into the disenchantment of the audience with the corrupt forces, but it refuses them—the spectators—the expected pleasurable magic of art in which dreams come true, normality prevails, and the scale of justice is balanced.

The well-noted success of *Birthdays* in eliciting involved audience reactions (Awodiya 1993, 103, 133) is due to this well-managed relation between compositional strategies and sociological factors. Each of the more well-known plays embodies similar relations in different configurations. In other words, the entrenched hierarchical categorization of Osofisan's plays as central and peripheral may mean very little indeed if the goal is a provocation of the audience to a critical reexamination of their social circumstances, to "stir our people out of passivity and evasion," as the author writes in the epigraph above.

I have engaged in this revisionist reading of a "minor" play not necessarily to contest its designation as such. On the contrary, my suggestion is that what is unique in the Osofisan corpus is not so much the aesthetic provenance (upon which a hierarchy is thereby constructed) of this or that play (so let our beloved "parables" and "political epics" come tumbling down from their high thrones!), but that fundamental social-psychological *form* that subtends his dramatic practice in general. This form I identify as "uncommon sense." Manifested in varying guises and measures across a spectrum of the plays, the propagation of uncommon sense is at once the embodied leitmotif, organizing principle, and ultimate goal of Osofisan's dramaturgy.

Uncommon sense is a discriminating analytical perception produced by a reflection on reflection, that is, a second-order metacritical contemplation; a discourse on discourse. It is a contingent, specific, goal-driven knowledge that is alert to the particular circumstances that call it into being. In those circumstances, it directs unsanctioned ways of viewing and interpretation or reconfigures entrenched methods in ways that reveal new possibilities. Against a reality in which historically produced habits—both of thought and behavior—have or constantly threaten to become naturalized, "a matter of course," the rallying cry of uncommon sense is "Always Relativize!" Its emphasis is on the cognitive: a supple critical consciousness, but as a social-psychological form, it also affirms the centrality of the affective in the play of human agency on history.

It ought to be clear now, of course, that the main target of uncommon sense is "common sense," that sedimented habitual, unconscious, and therefore largely a-reflexive perception of the world that has become conventional, traditional—that is, "common"—in a given society or epoch. That it is conventional does not mean it is unchanging; common sense is flexible and continually adapts itself to changing conditions of its context to which it is supposed to provide explanations. As an erratic, contradictory set of commonly held beliefs and assumptions, it customarily comforts itself with the existing, the obvious, and the most easily available—of visions, definitions, rationalizations. This is why common sense is most often very conservative. Although Antonio Gramsci, the most perceptive theorist of common sense, invests the broad masses with this outlook, the specifics of the sociohistorical context I am dealing with demand that I be much less absolute about its class character. Nevertheless, I do agree with

Gramsci that it is generally the case that common sense is “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is” (1971, 419), the “spontaneous philosophy of the multitude . . . which has to be made ideologically coherent” (421).

Polemically, Gramsci talks of common sense as imposed, “a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e. by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world” (323).² In a related manner, Osofisan laments “our distorted consciousness,” which “shows itself in our collective amnesia and inertia, in cowardice, and an inordinate horror of insurrection” (1998, 15). This remarkable similarity of articulation also extends to ameliorative strategies. For Gramsci, common sense must be transformed to critical consciousness “made ideologically coherent.” Osofisan would “lance, and heal from within,” our common sense—an “abscess” of “distorted consciousness,” as he describes it—so that an “educated class” with “proper ideological consciousness” (14) can emerge.

Osofisan’s name for his project, coined to reflect the peculiar demand of the authoritarian context it is fashioned to address and operate in, is “surreptitious insurrection” (11–35). I have reconceived this as “uncommon sense,” a concept that retains the dramatist’s subversive agenda as well as its stealthy coding but is more descriptive, more accessible, less evaluative, and therefore infinitely more pedagogically resonant. When audiences vehemently reject the ending of *Birthdays*,³ the dramatist is carrying out a surreptitious insurrection by assaulting the “common sense” of the audience, prodding them to think critically, differently; that is, to think with “uncommon sense.” Uncommon sense stimulates awareness and self-reflexivity, which produce a plenitude of options, an indispensable catalyst for admission of errors and for self-criticism.⁴

I have detailed the schemes of *Birthdays* toward the path of uncommon sense, but the writer’s artistic strategies are as varied as the plays. For instance, apart from its famed democratization of playmaking in which the narrator gives directorial instructions and performers take up roles, cue colleagues, exchange characters or displace themselves halfway through roles, and construct make-believe settings, all in full view of the audience, what most powerfully propels *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* is its language. It is measured, poetic, and laden with proverbs and colorful imagery through which principled insolence is given a most convincing cultural anchor and the absolutist excess of gerontocracy unscrambled. The dialogues are exchanged in schematic, spat format, a sort of grave repartee that calls upon verbal dexterity and quickness of wit. Unknown to the young lovers Olabisi and Akanbi, a deep-seated enmity connects their two families. The friendship of the two fathers was “proverbial” (Osofisan 1986, 13) until Olabisi’s father one day killed Akanbi’s, and Adigun, Akanbi’s uncle, avenged by promptly killing Olabisi’s father; all happened in error. The two families have since then kept apart. So, expectedly, a myriad of oppositions rise up against the lovers’ proposed union, almost breaking their resolve. Against the metaphysical concept of honor postulated by Adigun, Akanbi’s uncle:

Is a lion taught not
To eat dung with dogs? You bear a
Proud name which should teach you
Who not to mingle with. (15)

Akanbi counterposes the reality of the times, especially of where he and Olabisi would be living when married:

In the city, all names
Empty out with empty stomachs. (15)

As the young couple individually confront their parents' logic with their own logic, commonsense wisdoms come out like so much of better-disposed burden:

OLABISI: I love him, not his family.
BABA SOYE: A leopard's son, remember,
Will also have spots . . .
OLABISI: As a fine dancer can come
from the womb of a hunchback. (43)

ADIGUN: Enough! Nonsense.
You feed me with arguments
And obedience is what I demand.
AKANBI: You will be well obeyed,
When you have ordered well.
ADIGUN: Since when it was the custom, for
The tail to teach the head?
AKANBI: Whenever the head
Lost himself in a calabash.
ADIGUN: Does a child instruct his father
On how to wield a cutlass?
AKANBI: No, but the child can still tell
When the cutlass is not in demand.
ADIGUN: Young man, you try my temper.
When the old command,
It is not for the young to talk back.
AKANBI: Nor is it for the old to talk wrong,
And lead the young into needless despair.
ADIGUN: I warn you!
I shall not give my consent.
AKANBI: Pardon me then,
I shall leave without it. (63)

The young couple ultimately succeed in weathering the storm and, in addition, bring about the reconciliation of the warring families. But that is really the anticlimax. The powerful anti-commonsense energy of the play is in its rhetorical robing of—what contextually is a generational—iconoclasm in the most sen-

suous, seductive form. Here, as Fredric Jameson writes of Brecht's poetry, "the cognitive becomes in and of itself the immediate source of profound aesthetic delight" (1988, 348).

In *Morountodun*, pivotal character growth in the space-time of the drama is the key. We see, literally, the heroine, Titubi, go through a searing transformation from a saucy, callow defender of common sense, of the way things are, to a contemplator of, indeed a fighter for, the way things should, could, and ought to be. Both in consciousness and action, the fight was class suicide. And lodged in the midst of all the rib-cracking fun in the comedy *Midnight Hotel* is the *uneasy* laughter that Member of Parliament Awero usually elicits when she insists that like her male colleagues in the Building Committee who are always "sampling the goods"—"taking some member of the opposite sex somewhere or the other before jobs are given out"—she too would like to do that to contract-seeking Pastor Suuru before she votes for his bid (Osofisan 1985, 13). Uneasy laughter because of the question mark Awero's insistence raises against entrenched gender and sexual codes and practices. Suddenly, even after all the decadence that the play serves up and the audience gobbles gleefully, one bit tastes too spicy, too unnerving. Perhaps "unnerved" best describes the university administrator who approached me, as a lecturer in the drama department, the day after one of the nights of a historic two-week run of *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* at the Obafemi Awolowo University. "Wake up!" he earnestly advised us "theatre people." "This is Nigeria. How can a person be that good to the point of self-destruction? It's unreal, pure and simple." He was referring to the character Omele, one of the poor, itinerant minstrels who receive a magic power to use once to help people from whom they can then demand recompense, thereby bettering their own lives. It was only Omele who does not specifically and *exclusively* search out the richest to help, those who can reward most handsomely. He spends his magic to help heal a poor woman rejected by the others, and worse, risks the magic again to help someone in no better situation than the first, a leper. The disease infects him. *Esu* is a morality play, so in the end the greedy minstrels are punished and Omele rewarded and his leprosy magically healed. And the audience is unnerved: it cannot openly claim the "realistic" characters who calculatedly, greedily covet the opportunity they have, though it be the only one, to lift themselves up from poverty; but at the same time, it can also not honestly identify completely with Omele—"too good" was the audience's refrain—because he stands as an absolute, even *absolutist*, critique of the "realistic" (the true and unspoken meaning of which is "self-serving") common sense they hold so dear that one should think of oneself before others, that goodness has its limits, and so forth. The point of uncommon sense here is not that subversive truth necessarily resides in the opposites of these maxims, but that critical, reflexive searchlight is constantly beamed at accepted axioms, for only that promises the most resourceful responses to the intricate challenges of the social. Elsewhere (Olaniyan 1999), I have considered in detail *Once upon Four Robbers*, perhaps Osofisan's most popular play. Rather than further sample more plays, I will attempt instead a more extended

reading of a relatively recent, controversial, and much less critically discussed play, *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen*.

Aringindin opens with wails and laments by merchants: their stores have been broken into, again, and valuables carted away by robbers. Armed robbery has become a defining crisis for the residents of the small town, and the police have been notoriously unresponsive. The beleaguered traditional chief, Baale, could do nothing, nor has he a workable vision to arrest the crisis. Kansilor, the elected councilor, fares a little better only by appealing to the people's common sense in supporting the call by the shadowy ex-soldier and war veteran Aringindin to form armed vigilante groups under him as night watchmen. With the people caught between the inadequacies of the rule of the chiefs and that of the politicians, they invest all their hopes in Aringindin, who promptly begins a reign of terror with his army of guards. He turns out to be the patron of the armed robbers, most of whom are also the night watchmen. The local teacher Ayinde as well as his friend Yobi, two visionary critics of the existing order, end up dead: the former killed by the robbers, the latter a suicide—her refusal to be a pawn between her corrupt father, Kansilor, and the tyrant Aringindin. The play premiered in January 1988 and was published two years later.

We will never get this from the play's unhurried pace, nearly symmetrical two-part structure, satirical role-playings, and interspersed humor, singing, and dancing, but its really underlying catalytic energy is an exasperation: exasperation at what it represents as an *institutional* crisis of epidemic proportions. It identifies the institutions of political leadership and dramatizes their disintegration or failure: the indigenous customary chieftaincy system, the imported but yet-to-be-domesticated electoral system (Claude Ake, the distinguished political theorist, refers to the practice of so-called "electoral democracy" in many African countries as little more than the "democratization of disempowerment" [1994, 1–23]), and military rule. The three are by no means what the play is all about, but they exert so much representational pressure that they determine its ruling passion, which I have identified as exasperation, and tone, which even the interspersed lightness cannot relieve of its omnipresent somberness. The institutions inscribe, in the symbolic universe of the play, a closed triangular structure, a sort of unholy trinity. The triangle is far from being equilateral, of course, as the play aptly demonstrates the asymmetrical power relations that bond the three leadership forms. We must open up the structure for a closer look.

Baale, representing the indigenous leadership order, is no more than a piece of antique furniture in the present time of the play: he commands reserves of affect from the people but is fundamentally vulnerable; he does not have the power to make and effect policies that can make a difference in the life of the community. His long opposition to Aringindin's plan to arm the populace has only moral, not legal or political, sanction: "Such panic! Is disaster ever stemmed with anarchy?" (Osofisan 1991, 25) he pleads. But such rhetoric, when it is not backed up with concrete action, is obviously inadequate to arrest the

deepening contemporary crisis. Inevitably, Baale has to concede his authority to the trigger-happy Aringindin and Kansilor, in a scene obviously orchestrated by the dramatist to be of epochal significance:

BAALE: (*in great humiliation*) Aringindin . . . Kansilor . . . (*he takes off his cap. Immediate consternation at the symbolic gesture, some screaming, some sobbing*) My people . . . no need to cry. . . . (71)

Amid a swelling, powerfully moving dirge, Baale continues:

[W]hen the lion at the end of a pack can no longer read the wind right and mistakes the scent of the hunter for that of the prey . . . when the great araba, under whom we shelter loses its leaves, and begins to wilt . . . my people . . . we have seen such moments indeed when elephants invade a housestead and the head hunter finds his arms paralysed . . . and it is time then to go, to stop and join the ancestors. (72)

. . . [W]e inherited ancient powers the intangible force which binds us to the roots of the earth . . . but the times have changed! (72)

But what we have here can only be treacly pathos, far from the absorbing effect the dramatist is patently striving for. This is not because the scene is not managed well but because of the historical disjuncture that structures it, much like characters from the black-and-white era appearing in technicolor to lament the passing of their reign. The true referent for Baale's concession scene is the historical divestment of Africa's indigenous political order that happened almost a century ago with formal colonialism.⁵ But in spite of the overly exorbitant rhetoric and symbolism—the orchestrated gravity—that I argue are meant to make the scene epochal, the play actually presents it as a contemporary event that is only just happening rather than as history.

By that aesthetic choice, the writer is calling on the audience to forget what they already know too well about the institution of chieftaincy: that the chiefs really do not exist in the juridical, administrative, or political structure of the contemporary Nigerian state; that with all their aura of our ancient history, they have been, since independence, no more than Ping-Pong balls in the hands of one military or elected government or the other; that, in a desperate effort to be relevant, many chiefs colluded with various tyrannical regimes and thus brought the institution into disrepute. The audience must forget all this so it can make an imaginative leap and more poignantly relive that historical moment of divestment of its indigenous leadership, not by colonialism this time, but by other forms—"electoral democracy" and military autocracy—that colonialism engendered. This is a lot to ask of an audience so thoroughly experienced with the contrary, an audience for whom the heights of glory and autonomy of the chiefs exist only on the pages of history books, an audience watching a play it knows is so aware of the point itself that it—the play—cannot even fictionalize on stage a once-glorious age for Baale but only display dexterity in penning his epitaph, which stretches from curtains open to curtains close, or

cover to cover. Osofisan is very bold indeed for this depth of uncommon sense he is requesting from the audience.

Perhaps some ambiguity in the portrayal of Baale should thus be expected, after all. He—and the order he represents—is simultaneously validated and voided, affirmed and disavowed. Even within the traditional metaphysical worldview, Baale cuts an unacceptably absurd figure as he repeatedly invokes tradition (his “chest of several centuries” [17]) and the “Oracle” in every conceivable context as panacea. Yet many of the core truths of the play come from him. It is the challenge of genuine leaders, he theorizes in warning against the call for the militarization of the populace, “to strain like horses against the leash of common sense!” (26). Or take this historical consciousness of a paradigm shift as he concedes his (non)reign: “History no longer listens to the pull of the spirit, or to the words forged of water and wind and faith, history has become the obliging bride of guns, and of those who wield them” (73).

Baale is passé but at least has some serviceable thoughts about the course of history. Kansilor, and by extension the electoral system he represents, lacks even this small redeeming quality. He has a gift for words but uses it for what most politicians use such a gift: garrulous wrangling and showmanship. Because he sees Baale only stereotypically, that is, as a relic of a past era, his working assumption is that no relevant idea could come from Baale. This means, of course, that Kansilor takes a dim view of his own cultural history and its relevance to the present, but he is not apologetic about that since he is drawing from a discourse whose screeching race for “progress and modernity”—unacknowledged synonyms for Westernization—cannot pause to think. He is simply unconvincing when he waxes rhapsodic about how “time is the wind beating against the people whose trust I hold”:

The wind is strong against us beating us down, till with a thrust of our elbows
we rise to our feet, push our chest out, and then we too are strong against the
wind! (20)

In Kansilor’s view, this “modern” Africa will have very little to do with, or build upon in, its past. “That chest of centuries,” he tells Baale flatly, “perhaps it is time for it to stop beating” (17), adding the clincher some moments later: “Your Oracle does not speak to the urgency of our needs” (21).⁶

Kansilor is a crass positivist who sees the people’s security as a “simple question” (17) requiring simply arming the populace. He trades in common sense and the obvious, and because these do not demand much thinking to grasp, he often commands the frenzied cheer of some of the people (21). It is his shallowness that makes him fail to realize that Aringindin is using him, and when he does realize it, greed makes him accept Aringindin’s offer of being second in command in a despotism (75–76). He even throws his daughter, Yobi, into the bargain, offering her hand in marriage to Aringindin (77). What is a politician without power? So Kansilor’s defense of his actions is that “Aringindin . . . is a powerful man” (76). And what of the people who elected him? Yobi

asked in disbelief. “They are not awake, alas!” (76), he retorts in his self-serving justification for snuggling up to tyranny.

Aringindin, retired ex-soldier and the figure for military rule, completes the triangle of institutional leadership forms explored by the play. An inscrutable character, his comparatively few lines and infrequent appearances on stage actually belie his hawkish determination to be the absolute ruler of the town. His mysterious entries and exits; his “notorious habit” (2) of playing his mouth organ unperturbed even at awkward moments, as if signifying to the citizens that they would one day have to dance to his tune; his haughty demeanor before Baale and Kansilor—all of these confer on him, in the eyes of the people, a larger-than-life image. But Aringindin does not depend on the manipulation of symbols alone to achieve his devious aim. He is the “master’s voice” behind most of Kansilor’s voluble campaign for armed vigilantes.

Once Baale gives in to the pressure of common sense from his people to form an armed vigilante group with Aringindin as leader, the latter promptly institutes a rule of terror and intimidation, all in the name of security: “We sleep safely, but everywhere Aringindin’s decrees surround us like iron fences” (56), Ayinde, the vocal teacher, laments a little later. But Aringindin must be the absolute head, not only of the night watchmen but of the town too. He engineers, along with Kansilor, a coup d’état against Baale, but when the plan is exposed before execution (56–59), Aringindin simply outflanks his own co-conspirator and effects a new plan in which even the latter is in turn a mere spectator and among the victimized. Aringindin wants the people to see him as the only savior, a messiah, and he mobilizes his men to rob the people and humiliate both Baale and Kansilor (65–69) in order to hasten this perception. We are dealing, then, with a very calculating and ruthless military figure, and he is the one who stands tall at the play’s end.

I arranged my consideration of the three institutions of leadership in the foregoing particular order so as to tease out the play’s allegorical mimicking of Nigeria’s, and generally Africa’s, historical experience in which colonially weakened indigenous rulers gave way to corrupt elected politicians at independence, themselves overthrown one after the other by tyrannical military regimes. More interesting, though, is the play’s subversion of the popular narrative device of triplication in which, of three, one—and most often the third—is always the appropriate, the desired, the golden mean, or simply the different. Here there is no choice for the people among the play’s represented three leadership types. All three are involved in a zero-sum game that either imprisons the people within the triangle or casts them out of its “protection.” In other words, the people have no home in the remorselessly closed triangular symbolic universe of the play. Thus, the challenge facing them is to break open the closed ternary structure and, to borrow another mathematical imagery but one with egalitarian meanings, *square* things up.

Sadly, however, that challenge goes largely unacknowledged by the people—it is the lack of acknowledgment that is partly responsible for what I identify as the exasperation that subtends the play. The play takes one sweeping look and

concludes that the infirmity that corrupts the leadership institutions seems not to have spared that greatest of all society's institutions and the last redoubt of hope, *the people*. This is one institution whose vast heterogeneity would have been thought to be its redeeming feature. There are the merchants, but they are profiteers who care the least for the nature of their community's leadership as long as it ensures the minimum conditions for the smooth operations of the market. In Ayinde's pugnacious description, they are "vultures" being deservedly devoured by other vultures, armed robbers; vultures who "for years chewed this town like meat and swallowed all the best in it down [their] insatiable gullets," who "created scarcity and inflation, so that swelling banknotes may continuously glut their bloated stomachs" (32). Of the common people, many are Aringindin's night watchmen, the active apparatus of his tyranny, and the rest are, as Kansilor reports, "not awake, alas!" And what binds together all of the groups in this institution, high and low, is their surrender of initiative manifested in their obsessive, unreflective search for a messiah in every leader.

But the people, as an institution, are often everything that is said about them, and then something *else*. The play, indeed, bears out this truism. In the wilderness of eerie grayness laid out by the play rise the voices of Yobi, Kansilor's daughter, and Ayinde, her friend, the local teacher. These are the carriers of the remnants of the community's conscience and, therefore, hope. When the robbed merchants rail and wail in self-righteous anger, it is Ayinde who complicates and put things in proper perspective by underscoring their profiteering as robbery. Again, when Aringindin's men have made the nights safer, it is Ayinde who sours the sighs of relief everywhere by uttering the uncommon-sense thought that the citizens should calculate the exorbitant costs of that safety—extreme policing, roadblocks everywhere, numerous decrees: in short, unfreedom (55–57). And by his vigilance, Ayinde exposes the plots of Aringindin and Kansilor (57–65). Yobi stands as a most eloquent critique of Kansilor, her father, and his corruption. But the two, Ayinde and Yobi, are lone voices, and both are soon squelched. Ayinde is killed by Aringindin's night watchmen masked as robbers. Yobi so trusts her father that she foolishly bets her hand in marriage to Aringindin over Kansilor's integrity. But Kansilor is Aringindin's co-conspirator and is more than willing to trade his daughter for political power and its perquisites. Yobi promptly disowns her father by killing herself rather than honoring the wager but not before articulating the hope in her and Ayinde's exertions, as well as in the exasperation that I suggest is the play's catalytic energy: the hope that

one day, our people will be awake. They will stop calling so helplessly for messiahs. They will be ready, everyone, to assume responsibility for their own lives. And then true democracy will come. (77–78)

Stirring as it may be, Yobi's speech did not erase what appears to be the play's unrelieved bleakness. This feature, coming as it is from a well-known left-leaning playwright, soon became a source of heated controversy, especially from fellow writers and critics of similar ideological persuasion. Olu Obafemi, in a

wide-ranging interview he conducted with Osofisan, speaks for many of the play's critics:

The choice or the conflict is really between the feudal oligarchy and the military oligarchy. The peasantry, the community were followers. We never really heard their voice. They never had the chance to take a position, or to even intervene in the course of the history that is being lived on their behalf by these two dominant elites. (qtd. in Awodiya 1993, 103–104)

The contentions here are that it does matter that the masses be represented as active agents fashioning history rather than as passive surfaces on which history is inscribed; that since the masses do the labor of the society, even their errors and inadequacies deserve historically informed sympathetic airing, not condemnation; that especially when there is pervasive rot in the society, it is crucial to foreground the small acts of progressive heroism that will certainly be found here or there. These are commonsense expectations in Nigerian, nay, African Marxist criticism; their classic formulation in the Nigerian context is by Biodun Jeyifo in his now-famous 1978 review of Wole Soyinka's sweeping venomous satire, *Opera Wonyosi*:

Art can and should reflect, with the "dominant" temper of the age, those vital, positive points which, even in the darkest times, are never totally absent. (12)

It is this "common sense" that Osofisan deliberately violates in the representation of the people in particular and, within that heterogeneous body, the "killing off" of Ayinde and Yobi, the only "points of light" in the play. But if the goal of the play, as I have been arguing, is the fostering of uncommon sense, of unsettling settled expectations, then the point is well made, as seen in the reactions to it. And what is more, the cause for which the uncommon sense is broadcast and the unsettling done is unmistakable and unimpeachable. The play was written during the regime of the notorious General Muhammadu Buhari, which lasted from December 1993 to August 1995. This was a leader whose first declaration on assuming office was popularly remembered to be, "Yes, I intend to interfere with the press," which he promptly did with the promulgation of the infamous draconian Decree 2. His assistant, Brigadier T. Idiagbon, was said to have listed "cartooning the head of state" as one of the greatest signs of the people's "indiscipline" destroying the nation. Since then, regimes have changed and the truth of the play has been repeated two or three times over, depending on how one counts—a fact which puts the play among those Osofisan lists as reading the country's political progress "sometimes with a clairvoyance that takes me myself by surprise" (1997, 24).

It is mildly interesting, therefore, that the writer himself was apparently perturbed enough by the reactions to the premiere that he succumbed to the anticlimactic by including, in the published play, a "Preface" that sets out to explain and defend its "apparently bleak end" (Osofisan 1991, n.p.). No, he says, he does not mean to imply that there is a moment in society when progressive forces are totally absent; he is only warning against our fixation with personalities of

rule, rather than the restructuring of rule: “We berate the elite compradors, and replace them with another set of the same jokers. When the military fails us, we promptly ask for another coup d’etat! Whereas all we need is to seize the power ourselves” (n.p.). The representation is—he even proffers a pathway to reading the play—“deliberately magnified of course, but only in order to increase the shock, the awareness of the peril we continue to run, all of us, by preventable choice” (n.p.). My view here is unadorned: the play’s the thing, the preface little!

It is important not to gloss over a central fact that runs through the Osofisan corpus: that the aesthetics of uncommon sense is not a question of disinterested artistic experimentation but a most appropriate response to particular socio-historical circumstances in which Nigeria—and Africa generally—finds itself. From a larger perspective, it is designed as a response to the peculiar contours of global modernity as it has impacted, and continues to impact, Africa: colonialism, shattered indigenous civil and political institutions, hollow flag independence, unstable tyrannical neocolonial states, economic exploitation by foreign transnational corporations, economic underdevelopment, gross inequality, and world records in civil wars, poverty, disease, and sundry miseries (1998, 12–15; 1999, 3–4). The ambition of the aesthetics of uncommon sense is to subvert the normalization of this condition of adversity in the consciousness of those who are its victims and provoke in them the hope and self-criticism they need to demand more from themselves and from those who manage their affairs; to change themselves and their condition. Thus uncommon sense occupies, and is the language of, the interstitial space between the existing and the envisioned. Insofar as Osofisan is unable to imagine an African present which is not a transition, the aesthetics of uncommon sense is, more properly speaking, the aesthetics of the interregnum—an interregnum constituted by a neocolonial present smitten by a “great variety of morbid symptoms” (Gramsci 1971, 276) and an envisioned egalitarian future.

If we agree with Osofisan that uncommon sense is indeed the best aesthetic weapon to hasten the end of neocolonial interregnum, then we must soberly examine the mechanics of its transmission in relation to its context. An inescapable central issue here is the language—English—in which Osofisan writes, in a context where, to quote the writer himself, “the majority of the populace are still not only illiterate, but communicate normally in their mother tongue” (Osofisan n.d., 8). The “anomaly” of “African literature” in European languages is now an old, very much discussed but undying problematic in African literary discourse. The dilemma is particularly poignant in the case of radical writers bearing an empowering message but in a language not understood by those they want to empower. Unlike most commentators, I would like to drag literary critics too—who very often write as if they are impartial outsiders—into the charmed circle of the problematic. In the context Osofisan defines, his dilemma in fashioning an emancipatory aesthetics in English is no more poignant than that of the radical critic who would explain and interpret that aesthetics in the same language. Harried writers ought to increasingly direct the searchlight back at the critics.

Osofisan's approach to the dilemma is multipronged and instructive. First, he argues that in view of the multiethnic and multilingual character of Nigeria—as indeed of many African countries—the use of English, which is the most national because it cuts across ethnic lines, is the “most expedient” and “most pragmatic for now” (Osofisan n.d., 9, 8). The English will be “Africanised, domesticated” and deployed to create a national literature and through that, a national consciousness—the absence of which has been the bane of political stability (8–9). The key project here is Africanization, the infusion of English with indigenous idioms. This solution is mainstream among African writers, and it was first famously articulated by Chinua Achebe in the 1960s (1975, 55–62).

But Africanized English is a weak response to the predicament, for in practice, it is still very much English; it is not even close to “pidgin English,” the plebeian though literarily infirm—because of wide variations across language groups, limited vocabulary, and lack of standardized orthography—hybrid of an indigenous language and English. Besides, to overvalorize the Africanization of English as a solution is to turn historical accident into destiny. One decade after his famous pronouncement, Achebe issued an equally famous lament: “[T]he fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature leaves me more cold now than it did when I first spoke about it. . . . And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution of that problem” (1975, xiv).

The unease here is caused by a fundamental fact which is often realized but hardly verbalized: that the only egalitarian relationship between two living languages is translation or at least mutual incorporation, not displacement, as is the case between the colonial and African languages, and that “pragmatism” or “expediency” can only remain eloquent justifications of, not solutions to, the status quo. It is this fundamental fact that most of the criticisms of, or reservations against, Ngugi for his famous shift to using his Kenyan Gikuyu language after a distinguished record of writing in English (see Ngugi 1986) nearly completely becloud. If now, a decade after Ngugi's shift and the decline in the unnecessary hoopla about it, works originally written in English by other leading African writers such as Wole Soyinka and Osofisan himself are being translated into and performed in their indigenous language, Yoruba, to enthusiastic receptions, it is because, after all, there was really no “grandstanding” at all about Ngugi's shift and such a shift is not necessarily incompatible with the multilingual nature of most African countries.

Osofisan's other approach is much more interesting because it is more socio-structural than linguistic. The call for writing in the indigenous language retains its unimpeachable edge especially when that writing is articulated as a means to educate the masses. The masses do not speak English.

What Osofisan does is to strip this class of its long-acquired privilege as the rallying point of radical change. They are illiterate, unable to grasp the global dimensions of the complexity of the neocolonial present, too easily sold to the corrupt values of the ruling class . . . :

[The] question I ask myself, you know, which would sound really, perhaps blasphemous is whether in a neocolonial state, the masses can be entrusted with their own salvation, in our post-colonial, neo-colonial state? Lenin himself, finally, got to this point of an avant-garde clique that would lead the revolution. Yes, and I begin to wonder whether, you see . . . because in a post-colonial state, as I see it, the masses themselves have been terribly corrupted by the prevailing values that they have had to live under from the corrupt ruling classes. (qtd. in Awodiya 1993, 95)

For these reasons, transformative energies ought to be focused primarily on those with the wherewithal to manage a modern economy: the “educated class”:

[O]ne vital prerequisite for the task of salvaging our country is a committed educated class. As I see it, of all the various “communities” which make up Nigerian society it is the educated community, armed with a proper ideological consciousness, that can successfully undertake the building of a dynamic modern economy, towards which we yearn to stir our country. (Osofisan 1998, 14)

The “really vital battle,” Osofisan contends, “is to be waged by the educated class” (14), a “committed middle class” (14) that, “properly mobilised . . . can form a decisive revolutionary army that will arrest the present drift of our society and, in the manner of the Asian Tigers, transform it into a flourishing modern and industrial economy” (15).⁷

Thus, Osofisan’s second answer to the dilemma posed by writing in English is to say that he is actually writing for the class he considers has the greatest potential to transform the society: the educated class, which is already literate and understands English. There is food for thought here, and it will grate somewhat harshly with the facts that most of Osofisan’s characters are not middle class and that, more important, the unmistakable inspiration, address, and addressee in most of the plays are the lower classes.

To put doubts to rest, Osofisan’s argument about the significance of the middle class is uncontestable. Even if it does not lead revolutions, a revolution can hardly endure without it. As shaper and interpreter of public opinion, the middle class can, where powerful, do or undo political regimes. It is often contemptuous of the lower classes but, at the same time, the latter will find no more committed ally elsewhere. If Nigerian, indeed, African radical discourses have always ignored or treated the middle class with disdain in their vision and practical schemes of radical change, it is more a reflection of the low level of self-reflexivity of the discourses than of the insignificance of that class. One main prop of that poor level of reflexivity is the Marxian call for “class suicide,” a call that has mostly been interpreted in an absolutist way as implying the impossibility of genuine alliance with the lower classes while also maintaining middle-class ties. However, to move from the exclusive privileging of the lower classes—which is wrong-headed in the first place—to an exclusive privileging of the middle class is to move from one extreme to the other, with similar risks. A critically conscious and alert populace is the indispensable guarantor of any “committed” middle class. There is just no such thing as a leadership that is

good for long and committed of its own volition, without such a major “encouragement” as a discriminating populace, to constantly scrutinize its performance. The point, really, is not to choose between the lower or the middle classes, indigenous languages or colonial languages, but to envision both equally as recipients and weapons of the liberating aesthetics of uncommon sense. Here lies a genuine pragmatism to fit our current circumstances.

Notes

1. See Babangida’s *For Their Tomorrow* (1991). Babangida made all the gestures of a quick return to electoral democracy, but he soon revealed himself to be a no less power-hungry dictator, only a more wily one, a quality that earned him the nickname “Maradona,” after Diego Maradona, the international soccer superstar famed for his amazing hat-trick dribbles on the field. Babangida covertly subverted democratic institutions such as labor unions, banned and unbanned politicians, endlessly changed the dates and rules of the transition program, forced a two-party structure on the politicians, and had the government write their manifestos. When the people’s persistence finally forced him to hold elections in June 1993, he annulled them because the results showed the “wrong” presidential candidate to be winning. For more on the resulting crisis, see Soyinka 1996.
2. At his usual dispassionate moments, Gramsci does offer less “mechanistic”—to borrow from his usage—accounts of subjection and subjectivity formation: “In acquiring one’s conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or the other, always man-in-the-mass or collective man. The question is this: of what historical type is the conformism, the mass humanity to which one belongs? (1971, 324).
3. At different times, Osofisan has talked about the reception of the play: “I deliberately want to stir the audience into hostility. I want them to be angry . . . to reject that ending. And they do that. And I have battles every time other people I direct the play. They can’t take it because every night the audience assails them, assaults them” (Awodiya 1993, 103). “Once we did *Birthdays* in Lagos, even the German ambassador was there. And after the play I couldn’t leave, I was besieged by people and I had this discussion that went on for over two hours. But if we had ended the play happily, would it have raised all that argument, all the questions? Would it have struck our conscience that way?” (Awodiya 1993, 134).
4. The great advance in being able to relativize and criticize one’s thought is usefully underscored in Gramsci’s now-famous passage: “To criticize one’s own conception of the world means therefore to make it a coherent unity and to raise it to the level reached by the most advanced thought in the world. It therefore also means criticism of all previous philosophy, insofar as this has left stratified deposits in popular philosophy. The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘know-

- ing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (1971, 324).
5. One of the finest requiems for that divestment in recent political scholarship is Basil Davidson's *The Black Man's Burden* (1992). For a more systematic account of how colonialism subverted, reshaped, and incorporated Africa's chieftaincy system, see Mamdani 1996. For a most perspicacious fictional equivalent, see Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964).
 6. The erroneous view widely held, even among radical intellectuals, is that the African mythopoeic worldview is the opposite of scientific attitude, the ticket to modernity. Outside of the remnants of our self-deprecation brought about by colonialism, it is difficult to understand how this view has come to have so much powerful hold, given that even a cursory look at the history of science would convince anyone to the contrary. Even with the many famous religion-inspired repressions that we know, mythopoesis has not, on the whole, been the enemy of science but very often its handmaiden, catalyst, shepherd. We all saw the Japanese watching the 1997 Nagano winter Olympics with twenty-first-century televisual technology while also praying and making earnest offerings to their deities for adequate snow for the games. A major part of the African problem is a misdiagnosis of the problem!
 7. Perhaps the point is overstated, especially on example. The so-called Tigers turned out to be bubbles after all; more importantly, they became "Tigers" in the first place because of their open-door trade and investment policies and therefore heavy capital inflow from those Osofisan himself calls "marauding multinationals" (1998, 14). Furthermore, democratization was only fitfully on the agenda, if at all. No, not yet a model; a visionary and committed technocracy would have to do better than that. But there is a general critical point that needs to be underscored: with Osofisan's emphasis on the middle class that will create a "flourishing modern and industrial economy" comes a trade-off of the traditional radical insistence on economic egalitarianism for a "working economy" measured in terms of high productivity, low unemployment, and advanced and functioning infrastructures. The justified context of this trade-off is the collapsed economies of Africa that serve neither the middle nor the lower classes as classes rather than as a coterie of individuals close to political power: "[I]n the light of market developments in the post-communist era," Osofisan explains, "an honest, patriotic and committed middle class must be assembled, gifted enough to lead the urgent work of repair and raise the investment necessary for industrialisation and the building of infrastructures" (14). Unhinged from this desire is any thought of, or emphasis on, economic equality. The implied hope, justified or not, is that such a developed economy will provide much better prospects and a much bigger prize for struggles for economic equality.

10 Revolution and Recidivism: The Problem of Kenyan History in the Plays of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Nicholas Brown

Given the immense power of the regime . . .
One would think they wouldn't have to
Fear open word from a simple man.

—Bertolt Brecht

In a recent essay, “Art War with the State,” Ngugi wa Thiong'o engages in a dialogue with Brecht's “The Anxieties of the Regime,” the poem from which the above fragment is taken. Ngugi, who has been censored, imprisoned, and finally exiled by the Kenyan government, has more right than anybody to pose anew the question of the “subversive” power of art. This question had begun to seem at best self-indulgent—in the context of a European or American intellectual sphere that is ready enough to assimilate the most apparently “transgressive” avant-garde aesthetics under a contemplative attitude toward the object and a commercial sphere that immediately makes over dissent and subversion into the “alternative” and into “shock value”—at worst an ideological mystification. But Ngugi's theatre, which was shut down more than once by the Kenyan state and was ultimately razed by state police, permits us to take seriously the possibility that art can be at war—in more than a metaphorical sense—with the state. What indeed is the origin of the regime's anxiety? Is it mere paranoia? Or did Ngugi's theatre pose a real threat to the neocolonial state in Kenya?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's radical transformation of the East African theatre apparatus begins in earnest in 1976 with the origins of the Kamiriithu theatre group—a village-based collective of peasants, workers, petty bourgeois, and intellectuals—which produced only two plays (*I Will Marry When I Want* [*Ngaahika Ndeenda*] and *Mother, Sing for Me* [*Maitu Njugira*]) before being shut down for good by the government of Daniel arap Moi. I will begin, however, with a somewhat earlier work, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*,¹ which he and

Micere Githae Mugo started in 1974 and which was published just before Ngugi began work on the Kamiriithu project. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* shares the central preoccupation of the Kamiriithu plays: the attempt to narrate, and in narrating to rethink the meaning of, the Mau Mau uprising of 1952–1956, whose role in forging Kenyan independence is still a matter of debate.² Moreover, it already contains, in embryonic form, the problematic that haunts the Kamiriithu plays and which will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi begins, appropriately enough, in a courtroom, at the arraignment of Dedan Kimathi, the Mau Mau leader whose capture and execution in 1956 put a close to the already-waning period of Mau Mau resistance (see Venys 1970, 63). But the courtroom trial only frames the real trials of the play, which are four temptations that Kimathi, sequestered in his cell before the courtroom trial begins, undergoes before his martyrdom. Kimathi is first visited by his capturer, Henderson, who offers him the collaborationist option: he may save himself by betraying his fellow fighters in the forest. The second visitation, by a triumvirate of bankers (British, Indian, and African), represents the temptation to trade real victory for a share in the spoils of colonialism. The third temptation is brought by another trio—Business Executive, Politician, and Priest, all African—who represent the hollow nationalization or Africanization of the bourgeoisie, the political class, and the church (and perhaps the intellectual class more generally). The fourth, as Henderson returns—with gloves off, so to speak—is to capitulate under brutal violence. Kimathi refuses to submit and is sentenced to death.

Interleaved with this narrative is the story of a Boy and a Girl, who first come onstage locked in a deadly battle over a few coins tossed by a tourist. The subplot of the Boy and the Girl represents colonialism in quite another way, as a fourth principle character, a Mau Mau sympathizer, named simply the Woman, observes:

The same old story. Our people . . . tearing one another . . . and all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and the leftovers thrown to us—in our own land, where we should have the whole share. (18)

Continuing this allegorical subplot, the Woman ultimately unifies the two in a common effort to free Kimathi, as she asks them to smuggle a gun into the courtroom. The lesson is clear enough: that “tribalism” and other divisions, really induced by competition for scraps of colonial power, are only overcome by an armed struggle against a common enemy, forging a new national consciousness. The climax, however, as Kimathi’s death sentence is announced, is more ambiguous. The Boy and the Girl, holding the gun together, stand up crying “Not dead” and a shot is fired; but darkness falls, obscuring the meaning of the shot. But then “the stage gives way to a mighty crowd of workers and peasants at the centre of which are Boy and Girl, singing a thunderous freedom song” (84, rendered in Swahili in the English text):

People's Song and Dance:

SOLOISTS: *Ho-oo, ho-oo mto mkuu wateremka!*

GROUP: *Ho-oo, ho-oo mto mkuu wateremka!*

SOLOISTS: *Magharibi kwenda mashariki*

GROUP: *Mto mkuu wateremka*

SOLOISTS: *Kaskazini kwenda kusini*

GROUP: *Mto mkuu wateremka*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-i, hoo-i kumbe adui kwela mjinga*

GROUP: *Hoo-i, hoo-i kumbe adui kwela mjinga*

SOLOISTS: *Akaa mwanza mimba wetu*

GROUP: *Akijitia yeye mshindi*

SOLOISTS: *Wengi zaidi wakazaliwa*

GROUP: *Tushangilie mazao mapya*

SOLOISTS: *Vitinda mimba marungu juu*

GROUP: *Tushambilie adui mpya*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye wafanya kazi wa ulimwengu*

GROUP: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye wafanya kazi wa ulimwengu*

SOLOISTS: *Na wakulima wote wadogo*

GROUP: *Tushikaneni mikono sote*

SOLOISTS: *Tutwange nyororo za wabeberu*

GROUP: *Hatutaki tumwa tena.*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye umoja wetu ni nguvu yetu*

GROUP: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye umoja wetu ni nguvu yetu*

SOLOISTS: *Tutapigana mpaka mwisho*

GROUP: *Tufunge vita na tutashinda*

SOLOISTS: *Majembejuu na mapangajuu*

GROUP: *Tujikomboe tujenge upya. (84-85)*

SOLOISTS: *Ho-oo, ho-oo great calm river!*

GROUP: *Ho-oo, ho-oo great calm river!*

SOLOISTS: *From the west to the east*

GROUP: *Great calm river*

SOLOISTS: *From the north to the south*

GROUP: *Great calm river*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool*

GROUP: *Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool*

SOLOISTS: *He killed our first-born*

GROUP: *Making him the victor*

SOLOISTS: *Many more have been born*

GROUP: *May we celebrate a new birth*

SOLOISTS: *The last-born, fighting-stick held high*

GROUP: *May we ambush the new enemy*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world*

GROUP: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world*

SOLOISTS: *And all the peasants,*

GROUP: *Let us all link arms*

SOLOISTS: *Let us attack the strong man in his weak spot*

GROUP: *We don't want slavery again*

SOLOISTS: *Hoo-ye, hoo-ye our unity is our strength*

GROUP: Hoo-ye, hoo-ye our unity is our strength
SOLOISTS: We will struggle until the end
GROUP: Stand we firm, we will win
SOLOISTS: Hoes and machetes held high
GROUP: May we redeem ourselves and rebuild anew.

The first substantive lines of this song celebrate a truly dialectical turn:

Hoo-i, hoo-i how the enemy is truly a fool
He killed our first-born
Making him the victor

The enemy is a fool because killing Kimathi made of him a martyr: the execution of Kimathi is simultaneously defeat and victory. But like the shot that ended the action of the play, this martyrdom is itself ambiguous. What exactly is celebrated here? For what revolution was Kimathi's death decisive in any other but a negative way? Does this poem, in commemorating Kimathi's martyrdom, insist that it ultimately led to real independence?³ Or does it, rather, refer to a future victory against a "new enemy"?

The temporality of these lines is deliberately ambiguous. (In fact, the entire song is temporally ambiguous, tending to gravitate toward the subjunctive.) I have had to translate "*akaua*" as "he killed," but the *-ka*-infix denotes not necessarily the past, simply narrative succession. Generally a sequence of verbs in the *-ka*-tense is preceded by a verb with a more concrete temporality (a series of instructions, for example, would begin in the present tense), but here that is not the case. The following line is temporally indistinct as well, using the *-ki*-infix that here hinges on the tense of the previous phrase (which, as was just noted, has no distinct temporality), an effect that can be translated into English by the progressive. In the context of the play these lines refer to Kimathi; but when the play was first published and performed in 1976 (Sicherman 1990, 10), another political martyrdom would have been fresh in the mind of any Kenyan audience: the brutal murder, almost certainly by government forces, of the politician J. M. Kariuki (himself a hero of the Mau Mau period)⁴ in March 1975, an assassination that provoked rioting and "the biggest political crisis which the [Kenyatta] regime had ever faced" (*Independent Kenya* 1982, 33).

It is not necessary to grant this specific (and speculative) interpretation to see that the "new enemy" that appears four lines after this ambiguous martyrdom certainly seems to open up the play to contemporary history rather than bringing the curtain down on the defeat of Mau Mau. But there is a slyness to this line, too, that depends on the worn-out quality of the word *umoja*, "unity" (lit.: oneness) a few lines later. A hasty reading or hearing of these lines celebrating the defeat of a "new enemy" with "our unity" might turn up nothing more than the submissive repetition of a constant refrain in Kenyan political discourse: the use of "unity" as a justification for repression of dissidence or, in a somewhat less ideologically suspect context, as a call for the end of "tribalism" (which call has also often been, since colonial times, a justification for repression). Here, of course, "unity" in fact names a call for a revolutionary proletarian consciousness

as figured by the Boy and the Girl; but “Our unity is our strength” sounds like something that might have come from the lips of Moi as easily as from the pen of Ngugi. Similarly for “May we redeem ourselves and rebuild anew”: on a casual reading, this might sound like the perfectly acceptable Kenyatta-era rhetoric of “Harambee,” the anti-tribalist national slogan of “pulling together.”

Of course, the lines “Hoo-ye, hoo-ye workers of the world / And all the peasants / Let us all link arms” recall a quite different rhetoric, paraphrasing as they do the peroration of the Communist Manifesto. But the phrase “*wafanyi kazi wa ulimwengo*” has none of the recognizable urgency that the analogous phrase has in English, and “*Tushikaneni mikono sote*” (“let us all link arms”) is much less threatening than “Unite!” “*Majembe*” and “*mapanga*,” a few lines later, are indeed “hoes” and “machetes,” which are of course symbols of the peasantry. But, besides being part of the peasant means of production, the *jembe* and the *panga* are formidable weapons: the machete and the Kenyan hoe, which looks more like a long-handled pickaxe. The peasant with *jembe* held high flips rather easily between a homely and a militant image.

The point here is not that the song cannot decide what it is trying to convey but that it is in fact a sly communication in an acceptable language of a forbidden message. Taken at face value, it appeals to national unity, to independence as the “defeat” of the colonial power (a vexed issue to which we will have to return), to the rustic values of the hoe and the machete. But, attended to more closely, it constitutes an appeal to contemporary proletarian class-consciousness, to the defeat of the national bourgeoisie, and to a militant peasantry. At this moment, the very last moment of the play, the whole of what has passed before suddenly changes meaning. Or rather, it retains its old meaning but gains a new allegorical layer: the drama of the Boy and the Girl over a few coins is still an allegory of colonialism, but it applies equally to a neocolonial situation (understood as the perpetuation of colonial structures in a politically independent state whose economy is nonetheless dominated by foreign capital) where “tribal welfare associations” fight over shares in parastatal and multinational ventures. Kimathi’s four temptations turn into historical moments that have yet to be overcome: the betrayal of democratic national ideals in order to curry favor with the West; the scramble for the spoils of the old colonial system; the replacement of a truly egalitarian consciousness with a petty-bourgeois African nationalism; and the smothering of dissent with brutal reprisals. The daring suggestion, which could never have been made in other than this veiled allegorical fashion, is that the road not taken by Kimathi is the road taken by Kenyatta. Finally, Kimathi (Kariuki?) is not so much a martyr for independence as a martyr for a peasant revolution which is still to come.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, along with the more radical theatre experiments I shall turn to in a moment, ultimately calls for a redemption of the present in a utopian future: “*Tujikomboe tujenge upya*.” The verb *kukomboa* is already a dialectical word in Swahili, meaning “to redeem” but more literally “to hollow out,” carrying within itself both images of plenitude and poverty. *Upya* here translates most fluidly as “anew,” but it is in fact the nominal form of the

normally adjectival radical *-pya*. Ordinarily, this would signify something like “novelty,” but this is obviously too prosaic for the context; perhaps it might be more accurate to translate the last line of the play as “May we redeem ourselves (through hardship) that we might build the New.” In its final moment, then, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is not so much the celebration of a revolutionary past (although it is this too) as the call to utopia through a revolutionary future.

But hasn't this “future” already come and gone once already? The allegorical double meaning of the play depends on the elision of the difference between the colonial and the postcolonial. This logic, carried further, might prompt the question of what difference there might be between the outcome of Mau Mau and some future uprising (such as the failed coup attempts of 1981 and 1982, which only helped Moi to consolidate power). The question is a practical one and not easy to answer; the point here is that this particular allegorical form evades the issue altogether. Left out when postcolonial history is collapsed into a narrative of the colonial period (either this or the reverse occurs also in each of the Kamiriithu plays) are the crucial years between 1956 and 1963, when, with Mau Mau defeated, the British negotiated a transfer of power with very favorable terms for the settler and expatriate communities and with very little change of existing economic structures. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* projects a utopian possibility that is potentially the future of the present; but it does so by animating with the urgency of the present a revolutionary past whose future was far from utopian. If *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* attempts to represent the genuinely revolutionary possibility of a peasant and proletarian class-consciousness, this attempt is frustrated by Kenyan history—the fundamental referent of both this play and the Kamiriithu productions—which turns this utopian possibility into the memory of a missed opportunity.

Although the Kamiriithu plays, as we shall see, develop a similar structure on a different plane, Ngugi's experimental theatre at Kamiriithu admits of an altogether different mode of explication than his earlier plays, one which depends less upon the text as the origin of meaning and more on reading the circumstances of production as text.⁵ The narrative of Ngugi's experience with the Kamiriithu theatre group up to 1977—a history to which we will return—is movingly told in Ngugi's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981, 72–80), which was largely written—on toilet paper—during the author's year in detention for the first production at Kamiriithu.

Kamiriithu is, first of all, a place, a village in what used to be known as the White Highlands; a reader approaching Ngugi's theatre from this period from a perspective that ignores this fact will come away disappointed. The primacy of the local is by now a cliché—“Think globally, act locally” being only the most easily appropriated slogan for personalized responsibility in the face of epistemic problems—but Ngugi's Kamiriithu dramaturgy is profoundly embedded in a very particular, and short-lived, political situation. An understanding of Ngugi's theatre in relation to this situation tells us something more generally about the possibilities of art in a period of social unrest; but to begin with

the general would ultimately be fruitless. Nor is this to say that Ngugi's plays themselves contain no wider significations; on the contrary, a sympathetic reading of his work must come to terms with the fact that at the center of Ngugi's work is the attempt to represent history itself. But the function of the particular is quite different from that which pertains in, for example, the work of Achebe or Kane, where the particular is first and foremost to be understood as an allegory of the general. The fictional histories of *Umuro* or of the *Diallobe* are indeed local histories and derive much of their impact from the violence done to particular modes of life and speech; but they are narrated in such a way that the general situation of which they are the allegory is apprehended almost simultaneously with the particular. Ngugi's work figures this relationship quite differently, in that the particular through which the general is to be apprehended has none of the transparency it has in these other writers; for a reader or observer outside of this context and unfamiliar with Kenyan history, in particular of the Mau Mau rebellion and the vexed history of Kenyan independence, the story being told remains somewhat opaque, perhaps pointlessly didactic, stereotyped, even clumsy.

Ngugi does nothing to dispel this opacity by leaving important words, phrases, and songs in Swahili or Gikuyu even in his English and "translated" works; indeed, now is probably the time to address, briefly, Ngugi's famous "farewell" to the English language (1986, xiv) and his determination to compose only in Gikuyu and Swahili. One is treading on treacherous ground if one takes too far the epistemological argument that African experience can only be captured in African languages (see 1986, 4–33). After all, the experience Ngugi narrates above all others is the experience of worker and peasant life under multinational capitalism, "our people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control" (29)—an experience that does not originate in an African context in the same way as do African languages. Similarly, the proprietary view of culture—in which European languages are seen to be stealing the vitality of African languages "to enrich other tongues" (8) in the same way as neocolonial economic regimes enrich the first world at the expense of the third (see also 1998, 127)—has polemical value but does not do justice to the complex dynamics of cultural borrowing, to the possibilities of hybridity and *mitissage*. From a perspective of "cultural decolonization," neither can this impulse toward "national" languages be rigorously separated from the petty-bourgeois impulse toward cosmetic "Kenyanization" from which Ngugi is careful to distance himself and which, as we have seen from the example of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, is always to be criticized or lampooned in his plays and fiction.

This is not to dismiss out of hand the question of language; on the contrary, it will soon become apparent that Ngugi's shift to Gikuyu opens up a whole new set of dramatic possibilities and strategies that had not existed before. One might conceive of this shift in terms of audience: how else could a historical and self-conscious awareness of their proletarianization be inculcated in a Gikuyu audience except through their language? But here the word "audience" is already wrong and implies a set of relations which Ngugi's theatre aims to

clear away; further, to leave the matter there would oversimplify the problem by framing in purely ethnic terms what is, here, also an issue of class relations. It is not that the Gikuyu are “addressed” by Ngugi through the medium of the play; rather, composing in Gikuyu makes possible a whole new set of social relations among the intellectuals and peasants, proletarians, and bourgeois that made up the Kamiriithu collective.

We might think of the choice to compose in Gikuyu as a means by which the play “addresses itself” not to an audience but to a situation of which it is the narration:

Ngaahika Ndeenda (*I Will Marry When I Want*, the first play to be produced by the Kamiriithu group] depicts the proletarianization of the peasantry in a neo-colonial society. Concretely it shows the way the Kiguunda family, a poor peasant family, who have to supplement their subsistence on their one-and-a-half acres with the sale of their labor, is finally deprived of even the one-and-a-half acres by a multinational consortium of Japanese and Euro-American industrialists and bankers aided by the native comprador landlords and businessmen. (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 44)

This is an accurate enough summary by Ngugi of his and Ngugi wa Mirii’s own play, at least as it appears at first glance. But *I Will Marry When I Want* is less a representation of social reality than a process or event that both prepares and allegorizes some quite other historical possibility. Indeed, Ngugi’s dramaturgy only makes sense within the context of an historical situation that it not only represents but addresses in order to change.

This brings us back to the geographical place on which the drama of the Kamiriithu cultural project was staged. Kamiriithu is a village in Limuru, in the Kiambu district, part of the former “White Highlands,” where the historical ground of the Mau Mau rebellion is almost dizzyingly close.⁶ Although the geographical location “Kamiriithu” predates the colonial period, Kamiriithu village was first set up as an “emergency village” during the Mau Mau period. As in some Central American countries, areas where guerrilla activity was suspected were razed, suspected Mau Mau sympathizers and guerrillas such as Ngugi’s older brother were sent to detention camps or killed, and new, concentrated, easily administered and isolated villages were set up in the place of the older, more diffuse communities. The narrative of the play *I Will Marry When I Want* resonates with this much larger history; but it also frames the memories of the participants themselves. The colonial-era events to which the text of *I Will Marry When I Want* constantly refers took place within living memory; in a particularly poignant example, a prop manager who “made imitation guns for the play at Kamiriithu was the very person who used to make actual guns for the Mau Mau guerillas in the fifties” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 55). Within the play this revolutionary memory is vividly and painfully enacted:

It was then
That the state of Emergency was declared over Kenya.
Our Patriots,

Men and women of
Limuru and the whole country,
Were arrested!
Our homes were burnt down.
We were jailed,
We were taken to detention camps,
Some of us were crippled through beatings.
Others were castrated.
Our women were raped with bottles. (27)

It is not only the colonial past and the struggle against it which are inscribed in the very landscape in which the theatre sat, but the neocolonial present as well. The arrogance of the original settlers' expropriation of land—the dispossession of the peasants' means of production that is the engine that has driven Kenyan history—was such that near Kamiriithu some of the most fertile land on the continent was converted into hunting grounds, race tracks, and golf courses for the entertainment of the European farmers. Twenty-five years after the Mau Mau uprising, when Ngugi engaged in his Kenyan theatre projects—indeed today, fifty years later—the old pleasure grounds—controlled now by the new ruling class, for whom the landless peasants are still a source of cheap labor—remained as powerful reminders of how little had changed with the end of direct European colonialism.

This neocolonial situation is, of course, the setting of the play itself, which, as we have seen, represents the present-day continuation of the colonial expropriation of land:

Our family land was given to homeguards.
Today I am just a laborer on farms owned by Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru. (29)

The very name of the African landlord—baptized Ahab, after the ultimately humbled King of Israel, of whom it was said that “there was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord like Ahab” (I Kings 21:25)—is a complex signifier that pulls together both historical moments, the colonial and the neocolonial, in a single figure. Besides appearing to be a transformed version of the settler name “Connor,” “Kanoru” simply interposes a syllable into the name of Kenya's ruling (and, at the time of these plays only) political party, KANU (Kenya African National Union). The form of the name (“wa Kanoru”) suggests “son of Kanoru,” son of KANU, as well as “son of Connor.” Although KANU was originally the more radical of the two parties existing at independence, it gradually came under control of GEMA (Gikuyu, Embu, and Meru Association), a “tribal welfare organization” that controlled much of the land in Limuru as well as interest in manufacturing concerns. The KANU government, allied from an early stage with comprador business interests, is accused of granting foreign multinationals fantastic terms to locate factories in Kenya without instituting any controls on where profits accumulate.⁷

The foreign-owned Bata shoe factory, which constitutes the major industry

in Kamiriithu, is one such entity, referred to here by a character in *I Will Marry When I Want*:

You sweat and sweat and sweat.
Siren.
It's six o'clock, time to go home.
Day in, day out,
Week after week!
A fortnight is over.
During that period
You have made shoes worth millions.
You are given a mere two hundred shillings,
The rest is sent to Europe. (34)

This contemporary experience refers back to the past: the factory alluded to here is dramatized as a part of the characters' (contemporary) daily life, but the "general strike" (68) that comes up later in the play was actually a 1948 strike at this very factory, well within the memory of many villagers. This event, while not strictly a general strike, was simultaneous with a more general phenomenon with which *I Will Marry When I Want* links it. Mass "oathing," the administration of oaths of unity among squatter populations, began in Kiambu district during this time and spread to the rest of the highland areas. The "general strike" is enacted in the play not through a representation of the strike itself but through an oath administered to the strikers. The militant (indeed, military) language of the oath makes it clear that, within the context of the play, this oathing is identical with the Mau Mau movement (indeed, the oathing of squatters during this time, simultaneous with the Bata strike, did contribute to the Mau Mau movement [Sicherman 1990, 74]):

If I am asked to hide weapons
I shall obey without questions.
If I am called upon to serve this organization
By day or night,
I'll do so!
If I fail to do so
May this, the people's oath, destroy me
And the blood of the poor turn against me. (69)

The narrative building-blocks of the anti-colonial struggle—which in themselves can be acceptable content for the KANU government—refer to a moment in history, brief but within memory, when the peasantry and rural proletariat seemed poised to take over the position of the subject of Kenyan history. As with *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* but centered in the present rather than in the past, the contemporary history which dominates the play is narrated in continuity with this older history: "African employers are no different . . . from the Boer white landlords" (20). Moreover, the elision of the moment of independence is thoroughgoing, so that the strike against the Bata plant in 1948 becomes a protest against current conditions, and the Mau Mau oath of unity

ultimately becomes a call for revolutionary action in the present, once again projecting, by means of a revolutionary past, the possibility of a future when this appropriation of history by the peasantry and proletariat has indeed taken place:

A day will surely come when
If a bean falls to the ground
It'll be split equally among us,
For . . .
The trumpet—
Of the workers has been blown
To wake all the peasants
To wake all the poor.
To wake the masses (115)

The elision of the break between the colonial and postcolonial situations is figured not only within the play but, by a twist of fate, between the play and its social context. In a dazzling if depressing irony, the play mentions an old colonial law designed to prevent the swearing of Mau Mau oaths:

It was soon after this
That the colonial government
Forbade people to sing or dance,
It forbade a gathering of more than five.

This law, stating that “more than five people were deemed to constitute a public gathering and needed a licence” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1981, 37), is still on the books, and it is precisely this license which was withdrawn from Kamiriithu by the government in November 1977, effectively ending the run of *I Will Marry When I Want* (58).

But the content of the play forms only part of the allegorical raw material of the play; as with Brecht’s learning plays, or *Lehrstücke*, the circumstances of its production and the relations among the participants and between the participants and the audience determine the meaning of the play as much as the content itself. In the following pages, I will refer to Brecht’s dramatic theory, particularly to the theory of the *Lehrstück*, or learning play, but I should make it clear that this should not be taken to represent a thesis on the influence of Brecht on Ngugi’s dramaturgy. The importance of Brecht’s work for Ngugi is well known, but we have every reason to be suspicious of the language of “influence,” a force that only works in one direction. The Brechtian language of *Umfunktionierung*—“refunctioning,” which implies a kind of retrofitting of older techniques to meet new circumstances—poses a solution by reversing the positions of subject and object: the historical author, rather than projecting a whole complex of anxieties, becomes mere raw material to be *umfunktioniert* into something original. What is of interest here is not Brecht’s influence on Ngugi, but why a late twentieth-century Kenyan playwright should find useful models for political theatre in a particular form of late Weimar-period drama.

As Fredric Jameson points out in his gloss on Reiner Steinweg’s thesis on the

Lehrstück (1998, 63–65), more decisive to the meaning of the learning play than its content are the circumstances of its production: the relations between the actors and the text, the director and the actors, the actors and the stage, the actors and each other. The *Lehrstück* is not a didactic form if by that it is meant that the audience is simply to be edified by its content; instead, the play is most essentially its rehearsals, in which the meaning of the narrative, and even the narrative itself, is constantly elaborated and disputed. The public performance is secondary, one possible performance among many, which happens, this time, to be witnessed by nonparticipants. The text itself becomes not exactly a pretext but the provocation for a learning process (which, even in its formal outlines, has political and philosophical content). The Kamiriithu project dramatizes, to an extent that perhaps even Brecht's theatre never did, the possibilities of the *Lehrstück*.

The shape of Ngugi's learning plays begins to emerge with the history of the Kamiriithu center itself. As is suggested by the passages above, the Kamiriithu theatre and its first production developed with explicit reference to a particular manifestation of the neocolonial situation. It is against this neocolonial backdrop that Ngugi helped to develop the cultural wing of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre, which began in the mid-1970s as an initiative by village groups for renovating a defunct youth center.⁸ In 1976, the villagers who had built the Centre asked Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, the director of the literacy program, to write a play to be produced by the Centre. This play, which ultimately became *I Will Marry When I Want*, incorporated biographies written during the literacy program, which also became a kind of political seminar (Björkman 1989, 52). The outline produced by the two Ngugis was hammered out by the collective into a working script, which incorporated older songs and dances that were relearned and *umfunktioniert* for their new context. Meanwhile, members of the collective who had renovated the Centre designed and built an open-air theatre—apparently the largest in East Africa (60)—to accommodate the production. Since the theatre was outdoors, the rehearsals were public: thus, the production was open to critical commentary from the village as a whole. The final product, by Ngugi's account, bore little resemblance to his original script: "[T]he play which was finally put on to a fee-paying audience on Sunday, 2 October 1977, was a far cry from the tentative awkward efforts originally put forth by Ngugi [wa Mirii] and myself" (1981, 78). When the production opened on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Mau Mau uprising, it was a towering success: critics from Nairobi refused to believe that the musicians and some of the actors were villagers rather than ringers brought in by Ngugi. After seeing the play, several villages sent delegations seeking advice on beginning projects along the lines of Kamiriithu. After nine performances, the play was shut down by the KANU government, its license withdrawn for reasons of "public security." Soon afterward Ngugi himself was arrested at midnight and put in detention.

After being held in prison without trial for a year, during which he wrote—also on toilet paper—much of his first novel in Gikuyu, translated into English

as *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi was released, along with all other political prisoners in Kenya's prisons, as suddenly and surprisingly as he had been taken. (Jomo Kenyatta had died, and Daniel arap Moi, who had taken over the presidency, released all political detainees in December 1978. His reasons, it turned out, were far from altruistic; he was in fact releasing mainly enemies of the old Kenyatta-centered power structure which still threatened his young presidency. These events, as we shall see, are signs of the conditions that led to the possibility of Ngugi's theatre.) While Ngugi had been in prison, the Kamiriithu group had not languished but had in fact grown both in number and in ambition. When Ngugi completed the outline of *Mother; Sing for Me*, a musical composed in several Kenyan languages, 200 villagers volunteered for the production (Björkman 1989, 54). The script, set in the 1930s, was a thinly veiled allegory—so thinly veiled that, as in a Brechtian parable, this veiling itself is an impudence—of the betrayal of independence by the new ruling class. Like the earlier play, it was filled in and altered by the group; the ending, as with Brecht's *He Who Said Yes*, switched polarity before the play took final form. It was to premier at the National Theatre in March 1982.⁹ When the group went to take final rehearsals there, it found the gates locked, with the police standing by. After the play moved to a new rehearsal space at the university, people flocked to the rehearsals; every evening the house was full four hours before rehearsals began (really full—people were sitting on the stage, in the lighting booth, at the windows, down the stairs); Uhuru highway was blocked each afternoon; whole villages chipped in to hire buses to take them in to the city for the rehearsals. According to one estimate (Björkman 1989, 60), twelve to fifteen thousand people saw the production in ten performances. The show had never been advertised. After ten rehearsal-performances, the government banned the play, forbidding the Kamiriithu group to use the university theatre. Soon after, police—police in Kenya carry machine guns—were sent to Kamiriithu to raze the theatre complex to the ground. The two Ngugis and the play's director, Kimani Gechau, were forced to flee the country. Whence the “anxiety of the regime” at the root of such extraordinary reprisals?

Official Kenyan theatre under British colonialism and after must be considered somewhat of a special case in that its ideological underpinnings did not need to be discovered by dramatic theory; colonial theatre was already explicitly ideological. During the Mau Mau period, popular anti-colonial songs and dances were countered by propaganda theatre: captured rebels in the countryside or suspected sympathizers were shown sketches and plays demonstrating the relative wages of confessing and not confessing, recanting and not recanting, informing and not informing (see Kariuki 1963, 128–129). Meanwhile, in the capital, there was a more traditional European theatre whose function was, quite explicitly, to help create a national bourgeoisie by bringing together the African, Asian, and European privileged classes under the influence of a shared British culture. As the representative of the British Council in East Africa from 1947 through Mau Mau put it:

It was hoped that through the theatre the goodwill of the European community could be gained, European cultural standards could be helped, and, later on, members of the different races [elsewhere, with reference to the Kenya National Theatre, the “*leading people of all races*” (73, italics added)] could be brought together by participation in a common pursuit which they all enjoyed. (Frost 1978, 196)

This theatre continued after independence (and still continues) with its ideological function barely altered: the National Theatre in Nairobi, from which Ngugi’s *Mother, Cry for Me* was banned, continues to put on a steady stream of bland European fare—Andrew Lloyd Webber has had a considerable presence—to which, as Fanon prophesied, the new ruling class fawningly flocks. Ngugi’s indignation at the behavior of this class (e.g., the “modern African bourgeois with all its crude exaggerations of its borrowed culture” [qtd. in Björkman 1989, 73]) echoes Brecht’s famous comment that the bourgeois theatre audience assumes the bearing of kings: “One may think a grocer’s bearing better than a king’s and still find this ridiculous” (Brecht 1964a, 39). The bearing of the audience reveals the ideology of the theatre apparatus, which was explicitly in the Nairobi of 1978 what it was implicitly in the Berlin of 1929: the audience’s kingly attitude of complacent and utterly passive consumption reveals in itself the attitude of pure exploitation. At the same time, this attitude is only a mask that hides the fact that the audience, imitating a class whose position it can never occupy, is at the same time itself the dupe.

As is well known, Brecht’s epic theatre—as opposed to his learning theatre, to which we will shortly return—addresses itself to this audience in an attempt to transform it. The famous *Verfremdungseffekt* does not merely estrange the content from the viewer but reveals the fissures that already lie within the logic of everyday life under capitalism. The dominant figure of the epic theatre has to be the exposure (by text, techniques of acting, and production itself) of the theatre apparatus as an allegory of the demystification of production in general (a privileged example is *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, where one level of literal content consists of the demystification of the meat-packing industry). The epic theatre reveals to the bourgeois audience their contradictory relationship to the social world; it is a critical theatre, a theatre of negation.

The learning theatre—both Brecht’s and Ngugi’s—implies quite another perspective on artistic production, on the “theatre apparatus” that ultimately produces bourgeois theatre. As we have seen, the exposure of this apparatus as the exposure of capitalism itself is the trope that governs the epic theatre; traces of this might be identified in Ngugi’s earlier plays, as for example in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, where the theatrical trappings of the courtroom trial reveal its status as a kangaroo court:

Enter Shaw Henderson dressed as a judge. Not in disguise. He should in fact be seen to believe in his role as judge, to acquire the grave airs of a judge. Judge sits down. The audience sits. Clerk gives him the file. Judge looks at it. (24)

The governing trope of learning theatre, however, is not the exposure of the theatre apparatus as it is but rather its transformation. Its social goal is not to expose a bourgeois audience to the contradictions of its own ideology but to create a new ideology, the New in a utopian sense; this goal is figured in the production of the learning play itself, which takes on a radically new form regardless of the form or content of the final “product,” which is finally not so much a performance as an experience of group praxis and a new historical self-consciousness. The original rift in the Marxist narrative of capitalist production—the alienation of the worker from the product of his or her labor—is metaphorically bridged by the unity of audience and performer. This is radicalized in the theatre of Ngugi, where the totally reified social apparatus of the Nairobi theatre is replaced by the Kamiriithu project, where the village that built the theatre, that wrote the songs, that acted the parts, and whom the performance was designed to reach—and which, in some cases, had lived the history, fought the revolution, and experienced its betrayal—are all identical. It is a constructive theatre, one truly at home only in an historical moment when one can imagine a radically transformed world as a concrete possibility. It is, in other words, a utopian theatre. Even if what is represented is a dystopic present, the relations of theatrical production all suggest that the deepest content of Ngugi’s learning plays is a utopian future where producer, consumer, and the owner of the means of production are all identical. And indeed, in the final moments, against all expectations, *I Will Marry When I Want* calls for such a future:

The trumpet of the masses has been blown.
Let’s preach to all our friends.
The trumpet of the masses has been blown.
We change to new songs
For the revolution is near. (115)

The figural fusion of producer and consumer in the learning play—of which Ngugi’s theatre is a radicalization—only prefigures the real unification which is seen as a concrete possibility. Outside of this element it becomes spurious; the metaphor of art as production, which we use so carelessly today, degenerates into empty metaphor and as such mocks the possibility of a real resolution to the rift that separates humanity from itself. However, the metaphor which, after Brecht, had become a cliché has occasionally been vitally performed when the historical situation permits. The real unity of producer and consumer—that is, the destruction of these categories themselves—can only come about when the producer can imagine himself as the subject of history. Brecht abandoned the learning plays when their historical moment passed, when it became obvious that the possibility of workers’ revolution had been preempted by the rise of the Nazi party. Brecht’s learning-play phase, which began with *Lindbergh’s Flight in 1929*, ended with his own flight from Berlin after the Reichstag fire. He did produce one later *Lehrstück*, *The Horatians and the Curiatians* of 1934, but the fact that this was a Soviet commission rather confirms than contradicts the as-

sertion that the learning play depends on the possibility of imagining a utopian future.

Are we any closer to understanding the anxiety of the state when confronted with Ngugi's theatre? The government of Daniel arap Moi in Kenya now seems so secure—despite recent news of so-called ethnic violence—that it is easy to forget how tenuous the pro-capitalist KANU government was in the late 1970s. It must be remembered that when Kenyatta became prime minister of a newly independent Kenya in 1963, he was—despite his accommodation of settler interests and the maintenance, post-1963, of a significant landholding class—a hero of national independence. His anti-imperialist days as the leader of the Kenya African Union had led to his imprisonment as a Mau Mau organizer. As a matter of historical irony, Kenyatta's involvement with Mau Mau resistance, which was never very deep, was at its lowest when he was detained; however, when he was released it was as a hero of national liberation, and he was regarded as such until his death, even among populations who were hurt by his accommodation of multinational, and particularly American, business and military interests. However, the period during which Ngugi was developing the Kamiriithu project (*I Will Marry When I Want* began rehearsals in June 1977, and *Mother, Sing for Me* was scheduled to open in February 1982) was a profoundly precarious period for the Kenyan government. From 1975 on, it was obvious that Kenyatta was ill and would not live much longer; the behind-the-scenes politicking that went on over his succession left the ruling party severely factionalized and weakened,¹⁰ while the leftist politics of MP J. M. Kariuki (who was assassinated, as mentioned earlier, during this period) gained popularity and momentum. With incredible tenacity and some skillful politics, Moi, who had been Kenyatta's vice-president since 1967, managed not only to make sure he was appointed interim president after Kenyatta's death in 1978 but to win the 1979 election as well. But the popular support for Moi, who, pre-independence, had been staunchly allied with the settlers while Kenyatta was in detention, could command nothing like the loyalty Kenyatta had earned, and his presidency was bought with patronage that his government could not keep up for long. In August 1982, seven months after *Mother, Sing for Me* was banned from the National Theatre, the air force, supported by university students, staged a coup attempt. The aims of the coup have never been made clear, although it seems certain that, despite originating with the military, it was an attempt to move the country to the left: at least popularly, the alliance of the highly educated air force with the student community suggested opposition to the single-party system. The appearance of the Kamiriithu project, like Brecht's *Lehrstück* period, took place in a brief window when radical political change seemed to be a possibility.

The question elided in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, however, resurfaces in another context. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the allegorical representation of revolutionary consciousness subverted itself by celebrating as heroic victory—the future peasant revolution—what it must simultaneously show to be defeat—the failure of the past peasant revolution. The logic of Kimathi's martyrdom—victory in defeat—cannot ultimately be separated from the logic of Kenyan

independence: defeat in victory. The later experimentation with the theatre apparatus at Kamiriithu figures revolutionary consciousness in a different way, projecting by its very relations of production a utopian possibility along the lines of that which had opened up historically from 1952 to 1956. This possibility is ultimately sealed off again, not by any internal dynamic but by history itself; which is, in a certain way, internal to the Kamiriithu project after all. The “August Disturbances” that put a punctuation mark on the Kamiriithu project ultimately served only to justify Moi’s consolidation of power as he continued to transfer police services from executive to party control, including the paramilitarization of the KANU Youth, which answered only to party authority. When the Kamiriithu project began, the populist and relatively permissive government of Jomo Kenyatta was weak and on the defensive; his strong-arm successor had yet to consolidate power, and indeed it seemed unlikely that he could hold on to it; prominent leftist politicians were gaining popularity. It ended when Moi’s regime consolidated power and Kenya became a state governed by a single political party with its own paramilitary. One might well ask when—and where—such a window will open again.

Notes

1. Translations from the Swahili are my own.
2. The question of whether Britain’s handing over of power was a matter of British and world politics or directly due in some way to Mau Mau uprising is a matter of constant debate. A valuable resource (contemporary with the Kamiriithu plays, but still current) for this central issue is a 1977 special number of *Kenya Historical Review*, edited by William R. Ochieng’ and Karim K. Janmohamed, *Some Perspectives on the Mau Mau Movement*. See esp. Maina wa Kinyatti 1977 and Kipkorir 1977.
3. Ngugi’s recent writing seems to endorse this simpler reading. See *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams* (1998), p. 48.
4. See Kariuki’s remarkable memoir, *Mau Mau Detainee* (1963).
5. In discussing the Kamiriithu plays, “Ngugi,” like “Brecht” in another context, actually signifies a number of people in collective effort. The shorthand is, I think, admissible, since Ngugi is, if nothing else, the reason we are aware of these plays. Ngugi himself is always careful to make clear others’ contributions to his theatre projects, as Brecht was not always concerned to do.
6. Much of the information in this paragraph summarizes *Detained* (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1981), pp. 72–80.
7. See *Independent Kenya* (1982), particularly Chapter 2, “KANU and Kenyatta: Independence for Sale,” 13–36.
8. This narrative of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre is synthesized from accounts in Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1981, 72–80; Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1986, 34–62; and Björkman 1989, 51–56.

9. For a more detailed account of the production of *Mother, Sing for Me*, see Björkman 1989, 57–60.
10. The most lively account of post-independence Kenyan politics is probably D. Pal Ahluwalia's *Postcolonialism and the Politics of Kenya* (1996). See particularly chapters 3–6, which try to make sense of political movements in the period between Kenyatta's illness and the attempted coup of 1982. For a specifically Marxist account, see *Independent Kenya* (1982).

11 The Politics and Theatre of Sony Labou Tansi

Dominic Thomas

The impoverishment to which many Third World countries have been subjected will have immeasurable consequences for the future of relations between people on our planet. Fewer and fewer people will accept to be insignificant, insulted, ill-considered, disregarded, wretched, exploited. . . . Reason will gradually give way to indiscriminate violence and revolt. Those who are denied their humanity will choose to act with the lawlessness of wild beasts—listening only to their instinct for survival, exhibiting the gaze of a hunted animal that feels compelled to bite.

—Sony Labou Tansi (1986a, 25)¹

Only a few weeks during the summer of 1995 separated the deaths of the celebrated Congolese novelists and playwrights Sylvain Ntari Bemba and Sony Labou Tansi. Their friendship was well known, as was the unique nature of their collaborative spirit, factors that accorded an additional dimension to these sad losses.² Yet there remains a comforting quality to the thought that their intimate relationship and creative journeys were finally punctuated by the premature termination of their productive trajectories. In a similar fashion, Bemba's own characterization of his dear friend's writing process in terms of a writer who "writes as he invents and invents as he writes" (Bemba 1986, 50) echoes in many ways the experience of reading and discovery available in the legacy of Sony Labou Tansi's work. Invariably we find ourselves transported by the cyclical nature of the recursive mechanisms his work insists upon given its perplexing, innovative, and challenging qualities. Indeed, whether one has been afforded the opportunity of reading his work, attending the performance of one of his plays, listening to the writer discuss his work, or addressing the circumstances of postcoloniality, one soon uncovers the symbiotic attributes that connect each of these categories. Aesthetics and political commitment are inextricably linked, co-joined as the mutually constitutive elements of a sociocultural project.

Sony Labou Tansi's politics and theatre are not the product of autonomous agendas, so the coordinates I propose in this exploration are more concerned with delineating the connections that exist between them. While Sony Labou

Tansi's biography underlines a strong record of social activism that ultimately culminated in his elected position as a deputy of the Mouvement Congolais pour le Développement de la Démocratie Intégrale (MCDDI) for Brazzaville's district of Makélékélé in 1992, his strikingly original corpus of politically committed writing provides us with the clearest understanding of his thinking on the question of the exercise of political authority in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa. Having published five novels between 1979 and 1988 with the Editions du Seuil in Paris (and a sixth one posthumously), the deceleration of his novelistic output after 1988 did not coincide with a parallel reduction in theatrical output.³ The publication of, most notably, *Conscience de tracteur*, *La parenthèse de sang*, and *Je soussigné cardiaque* during the late 1970s and early 1980s, in addition to the remarkable regularity with which these plays were performed by the Rocado Zulu Théâtre under Sony Labou Tansi's directorship and by other troupes (at the Festival international des francophonies in Limoges, the Espace Kiron, the Théâtre national de Chaillot, etc.), accorded unusual visibility to the playwright.⁴ Yet it is significant that Sony Labou Tansi's fundamental belief in the potentialities of drama remained uninterrupted, as he generated complex plays such as *Antoine m'a vendu son destin*, *Moi, veuve de l'empire*, and *Qui a mangé Madame d'Avoine Bergotha?* My interest in this chapter resides in these later plays, and I am motivated by two essential factors. On the one hand, these plays have not received the same degree of critical attention as their predecessors and, on the other, the emphasis on the examination, denunciation, and indictment of the exercise of dictatorial power in the African postcolony has migrated in these works toward a concerted foregrounding of the exploration of the psychology of authoritarianism. In turn, this information provides us with invaluable archival material from which to formulate a more concise rendering of Sony Labou Tansi's political philosophy.

In his groundbreaking book *Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa: A Critical Introduction*, John Conteh-Morgan concluded that “[f]rancophone drama is a drama of social and political combat, of revolt. . . . It believes in the need to awaken the spectator to his condition in an effort to provoke him into action. . . . [T]he one thing on which they are all united is on the need for the theatre to fulfil a transformative role in the realms of society, culture and politics” (1994b, 27). While Conteh-Morgan did not have the work of Sony Labou Tansi specifically in mind as he formulated these observations, their pertinence is nevertheless striking in the importance they accord to the multiple functions of African theatre in terms of political commitment, consciousness-raising, reflection on the individual's “condition” in the postcolony, and of course the “transformative” potential that is intrinsic to its formation. For Sony Labou Tansi, “It is born of a conviction: theatre leaves us lots of room whereas the world we live in is determined to take our place” (Magnier 1986, 18). Indeed, while of course he is first and foremost a practitioner, statements articulated by Sony Labou Tansi on theatre constitute an attempt to theorize the unique capacity that theatre has of absorbing and synthesizing such a broad range of potentialities (1986d).⁵ He sees the theatre practitioner as a kind of licensed

transgressor of social and political taboos. “I have a special visa to speak,” he observes, “an excuse to expect priority when I speak; and I write merely to give a bad conscience to whom it may concern” (1986c, 35). Recognizing the privileged status he occupies in and through language in the public discursive realm, Sony Labou Tansi fastens on the capacity that is invested in “speech” and “writing” to destabilize the hegemony represented by the unproductive, pleasure-seeking elites, effectively subjecting them to scrutiny and then questioning their foundational principles.

While Labou Tansi’s views on theatre might sound very contemporary and might not be disavowed by the “literature of commitment” school made famous by such activist intellectuals as Jean-Paul Sartre, it needs to be emphasized that they derive in part from “traditional” models of performance in his society. This component has its origins in Kongo customs and practices: “Sony’s primary source of inspiration comes from the culture of his native Kongo, and it has provided the most significant component of his creative strength and imaginative powers” (Kouvouama 1997, 99).⁶ Indeed, if one is to invoke the counter-hegemonic quality of Sony Labou Tansi’s work, it remains important to underscore the fact that this does not refer solely to the political institutions in place that come under attack but extends by analogy to those colonial influences and concrete efforts aimed explicitly at the subjugation of African performances. In turn, these find themselves reincorporated in Sony Labou Tansi’s performances that feature therefore a fusion of theatrical influences—ritualistic, “traditional,” colonial, and also of course avant-gardist.

Sony Labou Tansi has himself devoted a short study to some of these forms, which include the *lumbu*, the *kingizila*, the *lamba*, the *yala-yala*, and the *nkoloba*.⁷ These theatrical models have been utilized to varying degrees in his plays—a recurring treatment of the theme of madness, the prevalence of ceremonies, the resurrection of characters, an exploration of the subconscious—and have been supplemented by other elements that have contributed to focal components of ritual performance; namely, the imperative of achieving reconciliation and utilizing the practice as a mechanism for communitarian purging. Traditional Congolese theatre forms and Sony Labou Tansi’s objectives clearly intersect in terms of function. The evocation of the subconscious interests me here in order to better understand the psychology of political authoritarianism.

As many sub-Saharan African countries responded to the imperatives of nation-building in the aftermath of colonial rule, attempts at establishing autonomous sovereign nations were invariably foiled by European interference and intervention in the economic and political agendas of the postcolony. Indeed, as Achille Mbembe has argued in his book *On the Postcolony*: “Postcoloniality could be seen behind the façade of a polity in which the state considered itself simultaneously as indistinguishable from society and as the upholder of the law and keeper of the truth. The state was embodied in a single person, the president. He alone controlled the law, and he could, on his own, grant or abolish liberties—since these are, after all, malleable” (Mbembe 2001, 105). Sony Labou Tansi addressed this problem, signaled the inherent contradictions at the heart

of European interest in Africa, and underscored their responsibility in creating and upholding dictators. The really original dimension that emerges in *Antoine m'a vendu son destin* concerns the shift in focus from the external impact of dictatorial power—violence, extrajudicial executions, torture, and so forth—that had informed his previous narratives in order to concentrate instead on the internal processes that inform its reproduction. “What can be the fate of a dictator,” fellow Congolese writer Caya Makhele asks, “who one day decides to confront himself” (Makhele 1998, 255)? The eponymous central character, suspicious that his enemies are planning a coup d'état, simulates such a coup as a preemptive strike he hopes will enable him to uncover those who plot against him. On a symbolic level, this marginalization and imposed exile through incarceration at Bracara prison—a movement to the inside—affords him the necessary distance he requires from the postcolony—the outside—and coincides with the activation of the process of self-analysis: “Henceforth faced with the tentacles of his obsessions, he undertakes to call them into question. He plunges immediately into his unconscious. Pondering the question of power, authority, his alliances, the masses, the constitution, courage and lowness, Antoine emerges as a self-aware politician” (Makhele 1988, 255). Antoine's introspection is revealing, and the behavior and response of his trusted political allies upon whom the successful outcome of the experiment is ultimately premised are equally informative.

The work of the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee on the question of censorship offers us a better understanding of Antoine's motivations. For Coetzee:

The suspicion that the censor acts on the basis of unadmitted impulse itself belongs to the mode of paranoia. It is answered by the suspicion of the censor, also paranoid, that the call for the end of censorship in the name of free speech is part of a plot to destroy order. Polemics around censorship tend all too soon to fall into a paranoid mode in which every argument presented by the other is seen as a mask for a hostile intention. Once paranoid discourse is entered upon and its dynamic takes over, the intentions of the other cannot but be hostile, since they are constituted by one's own projections. (Coetzee 1996, 200)

There are obvious analogies between Antoine's behavior and that of the figure of the censor. Engaged in the exercise of dictatorial power and having invested his trust in the political counsel of Riforoni and Moroni, the isolation he experiences inevitably leads him to perceive the external world as a hostile entity capable of destabilizing the homeostasis he has inaugurated. The coup d'état he simulates as an expected product of his paranoia results from what Coetzee attributes to the censor's “own projections.” However, the question remains as to how Antoine can continue to function effectively and simultaneously confront the actualization of his paranoid projections, given that the lines of demarcation between his friends and enemies become increasingly blurred as a result of the ambiguous foundations of the events he sets into motion: “*On ne dort pas au pouvoir: on se veille; on surveille et on se surveille*” (One doesn't sleep in power:

one keeps a watchful eye over oneself; one watches and one keeps a watch on oneself) (82).

The success of Antoine's plan to discover his enemies is of course premised on the assistance and collaboration he plans to receive from Riforoni and Moroni, who will remain on the "outside" and oversee the operation. Only Moroni questions the wisdom of this venture, fearing rebellion from loyalists: "*Altesse, je tiens à vous dire que votre loufoquerie de déjouer un prétendu complot par un autre complot est pure et simple duperie*" (Your Highness, I feel compelled to tell you that your crazy plan to foil an alleged plot against you through another plot is pure and simple dupery) (74). However, Antoine ignores his advice: "*Je respecte votre loyauté. Mais je vous suggère de savoir qu'on se s'oppose pas à Antoine: On ne juge pas Antoine. On ne discute pas Antoine; on lui obéit. . . . On est avec Antoine . . . ou bien on est contre lui*" (I respect your loyalty. But you should know that one does not oppose Antoine: one does not judge Antoine. One does not question Antoine; one obeys him. . . . One is either for Antoine . . . or one is against him) (74). Antoine states unequivocally the parameters of his rule, thereby expressing in unambiguous terms the univocal dimension of official discourse. Antoine's various soliloquies serve to further underline the isolated circumstances in which he finds himself and that in turn trigger his paranoia: "*Qui me trahit? Qui veut me sauver? Qui me déchire? Et qui me met ensemble? Devrais-je les manger tous les deux? Antoine! Qui t'aime? Et qui te vend? Dis-moi*" (Who is betraying me? Who wants to rescue me? Who is tearing me apart? And who is putting me back together again? Should I eat both of them? Antoine! Who loves you? Who is selling you out? Tell me) (74). Fearing his enemies, unsure whether to trust his friends, Antoine grows increasingly cogitative. Paradoxically though, while his inner turmoil can hardly provide him with the answers he seeks, the process does lead to a degree of lucidity when he becomes conscious that he has been betrayed. This seems inevitable, since, as Coetzee invoked, the hostility of "the intentions of the other" was always-already present given its origin in his own projections.⁸

Occupying positions of authority while Antoine is in prison, Riforoni and Moroni become interested in reorganizing and redefining the balance of power—Riforoni proposes that Antoine "govern" (*gouverner*) while they in turn "legislate" (*légiférer*) (87).⁹ Uncompromising in his negotiations with Riforoni and Moroni, Antoine is nevertheless unable to impact short-term political developments on the outside: "The tactics the dictator has adopted against his people becomes a self-dupery, since Antoine is unable to grasp that his own project has taken away all his power" (Lulenga 1999, 149). Whereas oppositionality in Sony Labou Tansi's works had traditionally been directed at the dictatorial authorities, in this instance a further subversion of that equation takes place since it is now the leader in the guise of Antoine who refuses to be silenced by history: "*Si le monde entier croit à ma mort, mon devoir est de convertir le monde entier—lui imposant ma resurrection*" (If the whole world believes in my death, then my duty will consist in converting the whole world—imposing on them my resurrection) (94).

Civil unrest on the outside creates new circumstances for Antoine, and he is visited by representatives and foreign dignitaries who plead with him to return to power in order to prevent the civil war. He refuses to listen to them, denouncing their long history of duplicitous behavior in the colony and postcolony. Yet it is significant that Antoine eventually relinquishes power and rejects the terms and conditions of his liberation, abandoning his adversaries, enemies, and former allies to their own destructive devices. As Jean-Michel Devésá has argued, “Because violence obeys a dialectic of tyranny and emancipation in Sony Labou Tansi’s work . . . the dictator can evolve, become aware of his wanderings, and even end up being tired of his own turpitude” (Devésá 1996, 278). The distance imprisonment afforded Antoine from the exercise of political authority provided him with the occasion to revisit these mechanisms and, ultimately, to refrain from participation in their deployment: “Antoine is worn out from the solitary exercise of power; he suffers from being misunderstood” (Devésá 1996, 279). Similar questions are investigated in another play by Sony Labou Tansi, *Qui a mangé Madame d’Avoine Bergotha?* A cursory overview of some of these affiliated themes will be helpful in obtaining a more accurate cognition of Sony Labou Tansi’s theatre and politics.

As early as the title *Qui a mangé Madame d’Avoine Bergotha?*, Sony Labou Tansi introduces what Jean-Claude Willame refers to in *Pouvoir et gouvernance au Zaïre* as “two specific and intricately linked cultural registers in the African context: namely munificence which, for example, turns physical corpulence into a political asset, and particularly the realm of the invisible, that is to say the nocturnal world of the ancestors, of dreams, divination, magic, and witchcraft” (Willame 1993, 209). Access to the play’s deeper significance is partly preconditioned on the reader/spectator possessing or obtaining familiarity with the broader etymological significance of this cultural signifier.¹⁰ With reference to his enemies, the central character President Walante claims: “*Je les mangerai*” (I will eat them) (85). The questions this play raises pertaining to consumption, orifices, and deviant sexuality are inextricably linked as constituent components of an elaborate performance of power.¹¹

President Walante decides to banish all men with the exception of a small number of carefully selected official inseminators and to appoint himself “*in-séminateur unique*” (unique inseminator) (53) in order to establish a generation of genetically superior warriors and citizens on the island he governs. The theatrical potentialities offered by such societal reorganization are tremendous, and Sony Labou Tansi exploits these to their fullest potential. In scene 5, for example, designated as a “*Scène horizontale*” (Horizontal Scene), the “national inseminators” engage in “*inséminations patriotiques*” (patriotic inseminations) (62) and respond faithfully to orders to become erect, achieve orgasm, and then resume intercourse. The synchronicity of the sexual act transforms the staged orgy into a military parade—a dimension that is further emphasized by the nationalistic and patriotic vocabulary that is employed—and that in turn operates in contrast with the implied social chaos that is enacted by the disruption of the postcolony as a result of Walante’s governmental decree. As Mbembe has

shown: “The emphasis on orifices and protuberances must especially be understood in relation to two factors. The first derives from the *commandement* in the postcolony having a marked taste for lecherous living. Festivities and celebrations are the two key vehicles for indulging this taste, but the idiom of its organization and its symbolism focus, above all, on the mouth, the belly, and the phallus” (Mbembe 2001, 106–107). Much in the same way as Antoine, Walante grows increasingly paranoid and his authoritarianism exponentially more violent. His closest adviser, named Yongo-Loutard, goes so far as to assume the identity of a woman in order to escape exile, while Walante’s daughter Messadeck and nephew Madison conspire to overthrow him. In a ridiculous turn of events, Walante falls helplessly in love with the disguised Yongo-Loutard (now Madame d’Avoine Bergotha) but ultimately is successful in eliminating these dissident voices and in retaining his fragile power base.

An attempt to intervene by England (the former colonial power of this imaginary postcolony) results in a vitriolic anti-colonial attack being formulated by Walante. This can only be seen as a precursor to what Devésa has described as Walante’s madness: “The despot metamorphoses into a madman, denouncing the society’s shortcomings” (Devésa 1996, 281), a conclusion corroborated by Walante’s decision to employ his “*fonctions de fou contre cette société tarée, livrée à la stupidité*” (duties as a madman against this corrupt society, given over to stupidity) (93). Somewhat paradoxically, the dictator’s entry into madness coincides with a newfound lucidity concerning the condition of the postcolony. However, this is not accompanied by any program aimed at correcting the subordinated status of his people. For Sony Labou Tansi, the significance of his work resides in his concern with the psychology of authoritarianism, the manner in which absolute rule is assembled, and the particular ways in which members of the postcolony respond.

Returning to Sony Labou Tansi’s essay on Kongo performance practices, and specifically *kingizila*, important connections can be made. For Sony Labou Tansi, the “*kingizila*, or the theatre of madmen (of healing), consisted in giving a role to a sick person—usually a mentally ill person—in a story the whole village had to act out for entire moon cycles, until the afflicted person finds a suitable place in society” (1996a, 354). While Walante’s particular case may not fulfill entirely the requirements of *kingizila* theatre, important parallels emerge from the theatre’s proximity to models provided by traditional structures in terms of function (purging, healing, and reconciliation) and the question of re-incorporating or reintroducing the mad figure into society. With regard to ritual performance, Conteh-Morgan has shown how “what all these performances have in common in spite of differences in structure, function and circumstance of performance is the integrative use they make of the performing arts of music, dance, song, mime, masquerade and sometimes puppetry” (Conteh-Morgan 1994b, 13). The incorporative capacity—what Conteh-Morgan describes as the “integrative use”—of ritual performances were particularly appealing for a writer such as Sony Labou Tansi who was concerned with the importance of politicizing his work (while nevertheless avoiding a programmatic component),

maintaining a performative dimension, and underscoring form. Sony Labou Tansi's theatre is partly modeled on traditional structures in terms of function but is also modeled in terms of form, a dramatic mode that "textualises more systematically the performance modes of traditional theatre" (Conteh-Morgan 1994b, 35).

Sony Labou Tansi makes an important gesture in acknowledging the individual's responsibility for conduct in and complicity with this dynamic, repeatedly featuring characters in his work who are outside of the nomenclature yet eager to penetrate it. Instead, he relocates the origins of madness in the system itself, investigates its capacity to condition and indoctrinate, but remains firmly committed to humanity's capacity for transformation. Rejoining the epigraph to this chapter, Sony Labou Tansi reiterates his position on what he perceives as the mutually dehumanizing qualities of authoritarianism: "Those who are denied their humanity will choose to act with the lawlessness of wild beasts—listening only to their instinct for survival, exhibiting the gaze of a hunted animal that feels compelled to bite" (1986a, 25).

Notes

1. All translations are my own.
2. For a broader discussion of Congolese theatre, see Yawah 2002 and Thomas 2002.
3. See bibliography.
4. See bibliography. On the Rocado Zulu Theatre company, see Devésa 1996 and Tsimbinda 1990.
5. See Ngandu Nkashama 1993.
6. On Kongo influences, see also Sony Labou Tansi 1996b; Ngandu Nkashama 1990b; Malanda and Tshiatshimo 1999; and Devésa 1996.
7. According to Sony Labou Tansi, "The public insult is a kind of *happening* that was played at the *lumbu* (royal court). . . . It is based on the antagonism between those who liked the new elected King and those who decried him; *Kingizila*, or the theatre of madmen (of healing) consisted in giving a role to a sick person—usually a mentally ill person—in a story the whole village had to act out for entire moon cycles, until the afflicted person finds a suitable place in society; *Lemba* was the theatre of the rich. Wealth was considered a risk of marginalization. A person recently named by that calamity had to organize a grandiose spectacle for his initiation to humility and death. The great feast that came at the end of the spectacle led the initiated person to die from drinking and eating in order for the *nganga* (wise men) to speak to his subconscious mind prior to his resurrection (his second birth); the *Yala-Yala* theatre (Nsimba: hold me) was played in honor of new-born twins. . . . If they were not given this honor, the twins ran the risk of returning from where they had come; *Nkoloba* (theatre of the little wooden men) has its origin in the rice, millet, groundnut, or yam fields. To frighten off the wild creatures that destroyed crops, marionettes and scare-

crowns were built” (Sony Labou Tansi 1996a, 353–355). See also the categories provided by Kouvouama 1997.

8. I developed a similar argument in my analysis of the question of paranoia in Henri Lopes’s novel *Le pleurer-rire* (Thomas 2002).
9. The question of betrayal and fragile political allegiance is also the subject of Sony Labou Tansi’s play *Moi, veuve de l’empire*.
10. On the ritualistic quality of eating, see Ngandu Nkashama 1990a.
11. For an analysis of the influences of popular culture on the play, see Nkanga 1999.

Part Four: *Popular Expressive
Genres and the
Performance of Culture*

12 Theatre for Development and TV Nation: Notes on Educational Soap Opera in South Africa

Loren Kruger

“South Africa—a world in one country.” This sunny slogan of the South African Tourist Board is also a sober reminder that post-apartheid or post-*anti*-apartheid South Africa contains within its borders at least two worlds.¹ Development and underdevelopment, or, in the current global vernacular, North and South, are separated not only by residual racial boundaries but also by physical and socioeconomic barriers between rich and poor, especially in Johannesburg, Africa’s wealthiest city. Due in part to these barriers, North and South collide perhaps more vividly in the national media than they do on the streets. On television, which reaches the urban half and some peri-urban parts of the population, sounds and images of global consumer culture (in the format of commercials as well as narrative fiction) interrupt, literally and figuratively, the documentary representation of national history.² Documentaries, especially histories of the struggle such as *Ulibambe Lingashoni (Hold Up the [Setting] Sun*, 1994), a quasi-official history of the African National Congress (ANC) liberation movement turned governing party, have been praised by critics and policymakers in part because they invoke the moral authority of the anti-apartheid movement and in part because they help to fulfill the mandate for local content and nation-building endorsed by the Independent Broadcasting Authority for local content goals of 50 percent or more in news, documentaries, and children’s and educational programs (Independent Broadcasting Authority [hereafter IBA] 1995, chapter 16).³ Despite the 1997 Green Paper on Broadcasting’s endorsement of these quotas and the larger goal of “nation-building” through a “broadcasting system [that is] relevant, accessible, diverse, and responsive to the communication needs of the country” (Department of Post, Telecommunications, and Broadcasting [hereafter DPTB] 1997, chapter 1), fictional series, especially American soap operas, continue to score generally higher ratings than documentaries and, as Jane Duncan of the Freedom of Expression Institute (FXI) argues in her recent critique of the neoliberal reorganization of the national broadcaster (2001, 113–162), indicate its increasing reliance on advertising revenues and overseas imports at the expense of nation-building.

Despite this neoliberal prospect, South African television in the 1990s demonstrated that popular forms such as soap opera could contribute toward “relevant, accessible and responsive” education in post-apartheid society. In comparison to documentaries of national history or of daily life in such series as *Ordinary People* (1994–1996), *Ghetto Stories* (1998), and *Steps for the Future* (2002), soap opera may seem an unlikely site for nation-building. Alternatively celebrated and execrated for its domestic and sentimental themes, its blatantly commercial format, and its interpellation of spectators, especially women, as consumers, soap opera would appear to draw viewers away from an engagement with the “imagined community” of the nation that Benedict Anderson finds in “the mind of each citizen” in the era of mass communication (1983, 15).⁴ Certainly the popularity of American serials such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*, one of the highest-rated shows and a point of reference in popular lore as well as in a well-known stage play, *So What’s New?* (1991) by Fatima Dike, seems to stem from the pleasure in the glamorous otherness of its characters and their elaborate intrigues afforded to urban and urbanizing viewers grappling with the precarious conditions of inner-city Johannesburg or peripheral informal settlements.⁵ But ratings for *The Bold and the Beautiful* have been matched by local melodramas such as *Generations* and by the “educational soapie,” *Soul City*, which began as a half-hour serial in August 1994 under the auspices of the Institute for Urban Primary Health Care (IUPHC), in association with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the parastatal national broadcaster. This serial combined soap opera’s cliff-hanger dramaturgy, sudden revelations, and sentimental portrayal of long-suffering survivors pitted against unrepentant villains with scenarios of personal and social dramas that focus on social health issues from smoking to AIDS, from one child swallowing kerosene to another struggling to talk about sexual abuse; it used urban South African English leavened with vernaculars, especially isiZulu and Sesotho, and located the drama in a peri-urban informal settlement and the local clinic and occasionally in more affluent settings such as a doctor’s home.⁶ In its sixth season at the time of writing (2003), *Soul City* has been distributed in Southern Africa and the Caribbean (in Portuguese and French translation as well as in English) and has encouraged imitators such as *Buang* (*Let’s Talk*, 1997–1998), a workplace serial sponsored by the Department of Labour, and *Yizo, Yizo* (*That’s How It Is*, 1999–), an ongoing serial about gangsterism, abuse, and criminal neglect in the schools, sponsored by the Department of Education.⁷

Describing their product as a “national resource . . . designed in close and ongoing consultation with its target audience” (predominantly urbanizing women) in order to “empower people through knowledge and to enable them to make more informed decisions concerning their lives” (IUPHC 1996b, 1), IUPHC and the producers of *Soul City* legitimated their project by reiterating the IBA’s definition of a public broadcaster as an institution that should reflect “the cultural diversity of South African society” and thus meet “development goals which would empower the poor, women, children, and youth” (IBA 1995, chapter 1).⁸ This assertion of bottom-up empowerment harks back to the small-

scale culture of development projects historically associated with anti-apartheid nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the turbulent 1980s and in the years of cultural and political ferment between the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 and its coming to power in 1994—including community-social-action theatres, alternative video, and the Progressive Primary Care Network, which included many of IUPHC’s physicians. In practice, the *Soul City* project originally depended on the institutional and technical support of a centralized parastatal broadcaster and on financing by transnational capital. Sponsored primarily by the SABC, transnational corporations (especially Nestlé and British Petroleum [BP]), and local corporations (especially newspapers in the Argus Group affiliated with Anglo-American, South Africa’s largest conglomerate, which printed *Soul City* supplements) and secondarily by international agencies such as UNICEF, the project was later also partly funded by the Department of Health.

While there may be no inherent contradiction between nongovernmental culture for development and a multimedia health education program sponsored and purchased by the state or between the small-scale production of low-tech performance or low-watt community radio designed to educate spectators as actors and producers and the mass consumption of commercially sponsored television, the differences in form, scale, and institutional power are considerable. Although not the only project to attempt to combine globalized commercial cultural forms, especially soap opera, with conscientization and “nation-building,” *Soul City* deserves special attention because these differences are played out at several levels, in its syncretic forms, in its mixed conditions of production, and in its complicated engagement with the contradictions in post-apartheid society between the promise of modernity, emancipation, agency, and global citizenship and the reality of uneven development and ongoing gaps between the haves and have-nots in South Africa and its neighbors.⁹ The serial was produced initially only a few months after the ANC came to power and developed over the last few years as the party in government exchanged its anti-apartheid era commitment to socioeconomic redistribution, or at least to “reconstruction and development” (as the now-defunct ministry was called) favoring the disadvantaged majority, for a neoliberal emphasis on privatization and corporate growth.¹⁰ The first season harked back—in form as well as content—to anti-apartheid collective action in scenes such as a theatre-for-development skit on diarrhea, a community radio studio, or a march on the clinic by elderwomen, but later seasons relied on more conventional plots driven by viewers’ identification with particular characters.¹¹ The fourth and so far final series shifted not only to a 50-minute format but also to a later time, a thematic focus, and direct advertising of consumer commodities (rather than sponsors’ spots) to appeal to upwardly mobile black professionals rather than the initial audience of informal settlement workers.

The series was thus inserted into the national broadcaster’s program for promoting “nation-building” and a national government bent on neoliberal cuts to government spending, which did not resolve tensions between capitalist man-

agement and nationalist rhetoric or between ex-activists running the state and still-dissident activists outside it. *Soul City* has had a remarkable impact on its target audience, in that urbanizing women viewers and their families, and to some degree radio listeners in rural areas, followed the serials avidly (IUPHC 1996a); they claim that they heed broadcast advice about health and social issues and also appreciate the serial's engagement with the hopes and fears of urbanizing South Africans and the compelling but inchoate desire for modernity encapsulated in the theme song and the title, *Soul City*. The setting bears a striking resemblance to Alexandra, a dense slum near Sandton, Gauteng's richest district and site of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, in whose Alex Clinic the producers originally worked as physicians. The serial in its early stages also represented an experiment in televisual form, inserting the didactic thrust and formal parsimony of theatre for development and activist video into a melodramatic narrative characterized by an abundance of sentiment, suspense, and moral dilemmas, if not the opulent setting of its U.S. counterpart. Because the television serial reached the largest audience and its name and reputation reached even listeners who did not have access to television, *Soul City* will be the focus of this chapter. I will be closely examining episodes primarily from the first season, since this season helped to establish a normative combination of soap-opera form and educational address, even though its own form remained productively uncertain until the stabilization of the second season and beyond. Before we can look closely at the serial narrative or track any connection between changes in the form and changes in the audience it addresses, we ought therefore to look at the competing institutional conditions of its production and reception since its form, content, and mode of address evolved in concert with changes in the institutional apparatus that produced it.

Topoi of Transition: Theatre for Development, Activist Video, National Broadcasting, and Transnational Commerce

At first glance, the low-tech, often-rural practice of theatre for development may seem far from the glossy form and urban content of most programs on South African television, but it is relevant here for two reasons. The first is that the progressive primary-care movement that bred the producers of *Soul City* was one of the first institutions to use theatre to educate nurses and other personnel about combining health care and social action against apartheid. The second is that this theatre work, which continues in inner-city as well as rural South Africa (Kruger 1999, 199–216), supplemented by community radio, is explicitly represented in key episodes of *Soul City*, which have in turn been acted out by theatre-in-education groups for audiences without television. The significance of social rather than individual or nuclear family audiences is highlighted by the fact that television viewers, especially in crowded informal settlements, tend to watch television in groups that may include neighbors or those

just outside the door rather than in the isolated settings of affluent consumers and is complicated by the fact that women rather than men appear to determine the viewing schedule.¹² The inclusion of theatre and radio production in the television serial emphasizes the importance not merely of community audiences but also of the opportunity for the conscientization and empowerment of non-experts by means of accessible technology.

Scenes such as the health education skits and the community radio broadcast by local young people about measles vaccination during an epidemic highlight the advantages of portable, accessible technology over centralized and professionalized broadcast television. The most compelling accounts of theatre for development suggest that top-down standardized instruction by experts may be more efficient in that the same message can be delivered to several groups at once, but this standardization may discourage active audience appropriation (Kerr 1995, 149; Mda 1993, 46–51). On the other hand, bottom-up attempts to encourage audiences to perform their own scripts—turning spectators into *spect-actors* (capable of social agency as a consequence of their active engagement in the enacted conflict), as internationally peripatetic “theater for the oppressed” pioneer Augusto Boal calls his interlocutors (1992, 2)—depend on sustained social interaction if visiting facilitators are to get beyond the role of experts, if the host community is to get beyond passive reception, and if both are to work toward the transformation not merely of the immediate performance script but also of entrenched scripts of habit and social action.¹³ Culture-for-development practitioners, including those involved in health education, have tended to treat commercial broadcasting as part of a global consumer culture that retards if it does not directly harm the self-sufficiency and agency of local groups (Mda 1993, 48–49), although they acknowledge that technology (especially video) may help to disseminate information. They have also had an ambiguous relationship with central governments, including this new South African government of former activists. Government-sponsored culture-for-development projects have been successful on a small scale, such as locally funded portable AIDS theatre initiatives, but they have been spectacularly misguided on a larger scale, most notoriously in the *Sarafina II* scandal, in which SAR 14 million (nearly one-quarter of the Department of Health’s annual AIDS education budget in 1996)—as against R5 million granted by the department to the three-media *Soul City* project—was squandered on a short run of a big-budget “AIDS musical” of dubious educational value (Bacqa 1996; Mda 1998, 262–263).

Like other parastatal institutions in post-anti-apartheid South Africa, the SABC has been shaped by competing impulses and persistent tensions—between democratic access and efficient management, between strict independence from the state and incorporation into the government project of nation-building and between the claims of diverse but often impoverished constituencies and corporate sponsors’ preference for affluent viewers. Even before the ANC came to power in 1994, the outgoing National Party (NP) came under pressure from groups representing independent broadcasting and film as well as the newly re-

surgent ANC and SACP and pledged to move the SABC away from its role as an Afrikaner mouthpiece. In response to criticism from the ANC government-in-waiting, which feared that the NP might try to privatize the SABC, the government created the Independent Broadcasting Authority in 1993, whose elected board it could not control (Matisonn 1998b). It also made interim adjustments in programming, using its third channel for a highbrow arts-and-education program and its second channel, which had previously catered to blacks on strict tribal lines, for the new Contemporary Community Values channel (CCV TV, 1992–1996), an advertising-driven channel targeting urban blacks (Louw 1993a). CCV provided space and funding for *Soul City*'s first season. This setup was changed again in 1996 when the government's attempt to collect TV license fees increasingly yielded to reliance on advertising revenue, although TV1 was dedicated to news and educational programming, including, in this instance, *Soul City*.¹⁴ In the face of declining revenue, transnational competition such as Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV, and conflicting definitions of "public interest" ranging from the ANC to its most vociferous antagonists, the 1997 Green Paper acknowledged a potential conflict of interest in the creation of a "public broadcaster" whose mission is to be "relevant, accessible, diverse, and responsive to the communication needs of the country" (chapter 1) but whose "primary source of revenue is advertising" (chapter 5), even if it evaded the implications of this conflict—most obviously, pressure by corporate advertisers on the content of sponsored shows, including those where the public good might clash with corporate interests—by treating the SABC's status of "commercial" or "public" broadcaster as a matter of "individual perspective" (chapter 1).¹⁵ This equivocation is not peculiarly South African; Debra Spitulnik's research on Zambia suggests a similar trend toward an ambiguous articulation of public and private, service and profit, in which an official endorsement of "African socialism" or "humanism" is yoked to some version of "African capitalism" and the restructuring of the broadcaster as a "money-making" or, as she argues of the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation (1994, 274–312), a "money-spending" corporation, demonstrating its modernity through conspicuous consumption. What is remarkable is that South Africa's avowed commitment to redressing the injustices of apartheid and its access to far greater resources, in terms of anti-apartheid intellectual and cultural capital as well as access to international and national funding, have been thwarted by its own government's inefficient combination of a neoliberal program for a revenue-generating broadcaster and a postcolonial preference for conspicuous consumption by managers and enforced scarcity for producers (Duncan 2001, 191–201).¹⁶

Soul City resembles the SABC, its host and co-producer, in its syncretic mix of commercial and public service form, content, and address. It is an NGO that has generated revenue (Usdin 1998), a public-interest show sponsored by multinationals and framed by commercials, and a suspense-filled drama that nonetheless pauses to allow characters to instruct the audience in several languages. Whereas the director of the first two seasons, Bobby Heaney, brought to *Soul City* experience directing theatre and film and interest in innovative serials such

as *Twin Peaks* (broadcast in South Africa in 1994–1995), the producers were health professionals interested above all in television as an instrument of education. They aimed to use the popular stories as well as viewer identification with individual characters to “capture the imagination” and to “impart health education messages” (IUPHC 1996b, 2), but this instrumental understanding of the soap opera form does not examine the interplay between imagination (or the fictions that might capture it) and instruction through “health messages.” Further, at a moment when historic ties between African nationalism and social democratic commitments to economic equity were eroding, *Soul City* producers did not deal with potential conflicts of interest between the production of a “national resource” and the most commercial of television formats or between an ideal of the “public good” that might depend on public spending and redistribution of national resources outward and downward (rather than economic concentration) and the interests, habitual preferences, or institutional tendency of advertisers, including transnational giants such as British Petroleum (BP) and Nestlé (the sixth and eighth largest corporations worldwide and *Soul City*’s initial primary sponsors; [IUPHC 1996a, 4]) to target affluent audiences or, if the target audience is poor, to secure cultural capital and state approval by spending money on visible public interest projects.¹⁷

These dualities or downright contradictions are vividly present in the framing image of the first series: the green flag and gold logo of BP as it emerges out of and covers the establishing shot—a mix of apartheid-era housing and the informal settlements of each episode of the first series of *Soul City*—promising to “keep you moving.” The voice-over, by John Kani, probably South Africa’s best-known actor, familiar to many viewers from TV ads rather than his work at the internationally renowned Market Theatre, goes: “BP brings you the show that speaks to the heart of the nation.” Unlike the commercials in U.S. television, which are generally understood as the sign of transaction between networks selling audience viewing time to corporations who in turn buy time on highly watched shows in an effort to reach consumers (Jhally and Livant 1987, 71–83), this spot does not address the target audience of the show—low-consuming informal settlement dwellers—but rather the government departments whose endorsement (and purchase) of the serial enhances the cultural and social capital of the advertisers in the public eye. In the fourth year (1999), the serial shifted from 25-minute linked episodes set almost exclusively in informal settlements to discrete 50-minute episodes. This new address to upwardly mobile blacks rather than squatters was set up by a certain naturalization of the sponsorship spots. Instead of the overall public-interest message, BP spots interrupted the action with narrative clips of clients at BP stations; viewers were enjoined to enter competitions associated with the show’s social messages and implicitly to buy BP gas. These spots resemble U.S. television commercials in their direct address of ideal affluent viewers but at the same time highlight the disjunction in South Africa between stated target audience and affluent consumer. The black urban professionals in the commercials are far away from the precarious informal economy of the peri-urban settlements. In

the 2003 series, the most recent season under review, *Soul City* has returned in part to its origins, insofar as this season focuses once again on informal settlements in and around a township resembling Alexandra and on developing the very first season's concentration on children by focusing this year on the lives of children disrupted by HIV/AIDS (Krouse 2003b). Despite this return to familiar and popular content, the persistence of commercial spots targeting consumers of BP fuel (and now also *Bona* magazine) awkwardly maintains this distinction between needy audience and affluent consumer.

This double address of *Soul City* reflects shifts in cultural authority from anti-statist to state-sponsored representation and a close association of former antagonists, transnational capital, and the post-apartheid state. Anti-apartheid video, whose authority rested on a putatively organic link between activist intellectuals and the masses they represented on screen, has moved from universities and community halls into the national broadcaster and the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), and its narrative form has moved away from an "aesthetics of underdevelopment" (Kottak 1990, 37), the formal and technical frugality of guerrilla representation in an economy of scarcity, toward the relative affluence that has come with legitimation in national institutions. Although *Soul City* shares with much anti-apartheid fiction and documentary film a location in urbanizing informal settlements, the interior scenes in the clinic and a doctor's house, as well as a holiday resort in an otherwise poor rural area, approach the relative affluence of the *telenovela*, if not the U.S. soap opera. Where theatre of development relies for the most part on interchangeable lay performers, anti-apartheid documentary video footage of mass action (albeit punctuated with the leaders' "talking heads"), anti-apartheid film features (such as *Place of Weeping* directed by Daryl Roodt or *Mapantsula* by Oliver Schmitz, both in 1986), and relatively little-known faces in the massing crowd (since apartheid educational and political repression sent talented performers into exile and limited the training of others), *Soul City* draws on a group of black (and some white) South African actors who have become known through television and who lend glamour—in repeated close-ups—to the most modest settings. Moreover, their appearance in more prestigious places such as the clinic, associated with the metropolitan sophistication of imported hospital serials such as *ER*, supports South Africa's claim to be a producer as well as consumer not only of global culture but also of capable modern agents such as Dr. Lerato Molefe (played by TV personality Connie Masilo-Matsunyane), the eponymous hero of the leading radio version, *Lerato Fodisang* (*Healing Hearts*) and a key authority figure in the television serial. A Third World purist might treat the encroachment of affluent settings and dominance of the close-up as an "unnatural" or "imperialist" blight on a "third cinema" supposed to favor long shots of groups in indigenous landscape (Gabriel 1989a, 46–47) or the "collective protagonist" rather than the individualist "hero" (Gabriel 1989b, 60–62). Nonetheless, *Soul City's* syncretic form and institutional hybridity offer a powerful if ambiguous challenge to attempts to invest particular forms with an *inherent* politics or essential African identity and thus provide an exemplary site

for investigating the interaction of formal and institutional parameters in the combination of popular, industrial, and state practices of cultural representation.

Soul in the City: The Dramaturgy of Urbanity, Modernity, and Fellow Feeling

Soul City's syncretic form, multimedia production, and varying modes of address constitute its originality and educational potential but also leave points of tension between experiment and education, agitprop and soap opera unresolved. Early episodes in particular juxtapose different modes of social and fictional representation within and alongside its scripted scenarios of conflict in the family, at the workplace, and, occasionally, on the street. The first episode of the 1994 season opens with the sound of a child crying and closes with his death from infection exacerbated by dehydration. In-between scenes in the clinic show the three doctors, Ian Robertson (Guy de Lancey) and Oscar Budlender (Michael Brunner), both white men, and Lerato Molefe (a black woman) treating other children with diarrhea, telling parents—in relatively abstract English—to rehydrate their children; the nurses translate their instructions into isiZulu. The episode juxtaposes the pathos of a classic soap-opera scenario—the estrangement of husband and wife over the death of a child (enacted here in a typical mixture of isiZulu with English abstract nouns)—with the particularity of South African pressures on family life, most immediately staggering unemployment (ca. 30 percent nationally), as well as the doctor's generalized instruction to other parents in the audience. While the doctors' advice, reiterated in the newspaper inserts distributed during the opening week and in a theatre-for-development skit on infant death in the second episode, takes the address beyond the confines of the narrative, it is the power of the dramatic confrontation with the individual fate of this mother, Nonceba (Pearl Gongxeka), her husband Duma (Lucky Legodi), and their baby son, Bongani, and the representation of that crisis through a classical narrative framework of shot/reverse shot and close-up dialogue that has provoked audience interest not only in the characters but also in the generalizable aspects of their stories (IUPHC 1996a, 45).

This movement from domestic drama through agitprop to social action is not as straightforward as this account may suggest, however. Before the first episode establishes the conflict between Nonceba, who works in a clothing factory as well as at home, and her angry and unemployed husband, Duma, that precipitates the death of Bongani, the opening shots show only Nonceba wakened by Bongani's crying from a nightmare. Heaney's original dream sequence transformed Duma into a predatory monster with a boar's head and Bongani into a doll, silently indifferent to the spoonful of water brought to his lips by an unseen hand. The producers reduced the opening sequence to Nonceba's interaction with Bongani, on the grounds that the surreal menace of the dream se-

quence would frighten rather than enlighten the target audience (Usdin 1994) but left Bongani's condition and Nonceba's panic unexplained until the middle of the episode, when Nonceba returns from work to find Duma drunkenly reiterating his traditionalist mother's proscription of visits to the clinic, where children allegedly die, and her prescription of an herbal enema to exorcize the *inyoni* (bad spirit) rather than rehydration to flush out infection. Nonceba's flight to the clinic with her baby, dodging gangsters apparently out to rape her, and her anxious wait outside the operating room as Ian Robertson and nurses try in vain to save the child, has all the features of hospital melodrama—from the ostentatious display of machinery to heightened whispers to urgent music—that were absent in the earlier daylight encounters with patients and thus appears to give in to the fatefulness of deaths in that genre rather than highlighting prevention. The graphic ("comic") version of *Nonceba's Story*, produced two years after the first series in 1996, revised the format to emphasize education rather than narrative suspense, although it retained the spooky opening cut from the television serial (IUPHC1996a, 1), by segmenting the story into four chapters, each supplemented by "information pages" offering advice in English and translation of technical terms into Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho. It also added short writing and interpretation exercises to stage conflicts generated by the first series; in one exercise, the strip shows the traditionalist Ma-Duma undergo a change of heart in favor of clinic medicine after consultation with a women's group and invites readers to add explanatory dialogue to the new encounter between Ma-Duma and her son (1996a, 26).

The second and third episodes anticipate this critical dialogue in the representation of Nonceba's recovery and determination to play a role in the educational skit designed to inform parents and others in the community about home-based prevention of the disease that kills more babies in Africa than anything else, including AIDS. The original skit was rehearsed in a community hall rather than in the clinic to highlight local empowerment alongside expert advice (Usdin 1994); it deployed the iconography of struggle theatre—the direct address and the emphatic declaration of urgency—as well as the physical comedy and vaudeville sketches familiar to urban spectators of township concerts. Holding an inflatable baby doll, the presenters mime the diarrhea and dehydration crisis and turn directly to the audience to give advice at the end, using the inflatable doll to graphically illustrate the effect of water on the baby's body. The presentation combines melodramatic sentiment, rough comedy (in business with a leaking doll), and choral solidarity with invitations of comment from the audience as the performance ends with company and audience singing: "Save the Children. Save the Nation. Save us all from desolation." In the course of the series, theatre skits offer dramatic capsules of key health-education messages, from preventing and detecting child abuse to encouraging fathers to play a larger role in their children's lives. The last play—and the last episode—provides the occasion for Duma, who has returned from a stint in the mines where he hoped to "become a man again," to jump on the stage and declare both his love for Nonceba and his commitment to active fatherhood. While this didactic ex-

plicitness may seem intrusive to audiences schooled in “Western” habits of silent spectatorship, it reflects the kind of audience comment and advice to characters that often takes place during as well as after theatre performances for African audiences (Kerr 1995, 137; Kruger 1999, 158–161) and offers a vivid, if fictional, instance of Boal’s argument for the potential transformation of spectatorship into social action.

Although this skit was clearly meant to be taken seriously, its preparation and presentation include critical and ironic reflection on the limits of didactic instruction and the legacy of anti-apartheid struggle iconography. Jakes (played by veteran stage actor Selaelo Maredi), the willing but rather blasé scriptwriter, appears in a costume (suit and fedora) and setting (a *shebeen*—a semi-legal bar) that recall the atmosphere of the urbane intercultural “bohemia” of the 1950s, just as his name recalls the leading character of *Sophiatown* (1986), a much-revived (1991, 1994) play about the period. The tension between his cynical comments (“Education doesn’t pay, baby”; “People come to our shows to forget their troubles”) and his practical engagement with making the skit effective resonates with current debates about the relationship between art and function in theatre for development (Mda 1993, 18–19) and about the worthiness of township musicals for government subsidy. By criticizing the amateurish delivery of the health-education skit even as it conveys the message, the episode tacitly endorses the soap opera’s domestic setting, sentimental tone, and classical cinematic conventions of suspense and editing out explicit audience address while also implicitly favoring the institutional force of mass-mediated broadcasting over the low-tech directness of portable theatre-for-development skits.

If the enactment and framing of the health-education skit in this episode highlight the ongoing negotiation between instruction and edutainment as well as between performance text and televisual context, it does not settle the tussle between these kinds of dramaturgy and representation but rather opens up a space for representation that remains more syncretic than strictly televisual and allows for scenes that depart, in location and style, from the domestic interiors of the soap opera. The fifth episode, for instance, highlights one of the key contradictions of post-anti-apartheid South Africa—the tension between a new privileged class of black managers and the still-impoorished masses—by juxtaposing two journeys: Leroy and Lerato travel in an expensive 4x4 vehicle (apparently subsidized by development funds) to a holiday resort before visiting a rural clinic, while Nonceba travels in a broken-down taxi to the rural slum in search of her husband’s family. Once there, Nonceba participates in a women’s march to the clinic to complain about inadequate services and lack of consultation. Clearly the iconography of the struggle, especially as developed in the activist anti-apartheid video of the 1980s, informs the portrayal of the march, but it is also linked to domestic life, as the grandmother prepares the younger women by recalling and reenacting the historic marches of 1950s, when women defied government orders to carry passes and challenged police retaliation with the now-famous song: “*Wathint’ abafazi; wathint’ imbokodo*” (You strike the women; you strike a rock).

One of the most moving episodes in the serial is also one whose dramaturgy draws on both theatre for development and soap opera. In this episode, Sister Bettina, the clinic's senior nurse and "battle-ax" as one fan/critic had it (Naidoo 1996, 15), played by Lilian Dube, veteran stage and screen actress and TV casting agent, coaxes an eight-year-old girl, Mbali (Noluthando Maleka), to talk about being sexually abused by her uncle. This incident is shown only to the extent that the uncle, a young, angry, probably unemployed man who is barely out of his teens, entices the little girl into his backyard room and later chases her out, leaving her to stagger back to her mother's shack. Since Mbali is unable to talk directly about the experience to her mother or the nurse, Bettina retells her own story of childhood abuse, speaking in the third person about another little girl who talked to her teddy bear—to whom Mbali too can confide her story. Dube's enactment recalls Brecht's association of third person with mindful, *verfremdete* (critically estranged rather than "alienated") acting (Brecht 1992, 138–140; Kruger 2002). This is Brechtian not because of any absence of feeling—Dube's portrayal of Bettina's emotion is clear when she breaks down and reveals her experience to her colleague Dr. Budlender, who suggests that she make use of the teddy bear—but in the affiliation (rather than naturalistic fusion) of the character of Sister Bettina with the authority of Dube's *personage*. Personage in this context means the aura around a celebrity or well-known figure on stage or screen (Graver 1997, 226), especially one who tends to play similar roles; in this case, the forceful woman in authority. Even viewers who might not know much about Dube's life outside her roles would recognize the familiar face and body in a role typical for her (Naidoo 1996, 15), as well as the nurse as "battle-ax" who has become the subject of widespread anecdote in clinics in undeveloped areas in South Africa.¹⁸

The power of this scene lies in Mbali's silence as much as Bettina's narrative, but the latter's confession along with these relatively discreet images was enough to make the episode controversial as well as influential. Even though Bettina's confession remains within the narrative structure (she addresses the teddy bear, the little girl, and her mother, rather than the camera), urban and urbanizing women praised the candor of the episode as well as Dube's performance—"Just from the part I feel that faced with such problems, I will be in a position to handle the situation as she did" (IUPHC 1996a, 45)—and the strategy of talking to a mute but beloved toy resurfaced on the stage in other performances about child abuse. In particular, *Broken Dreams*, a play devised by the Market Laboratory (the Market Theatre's community-theatre training annex), written by playwright and theatre-for-development expert Zakes Mda and financed by the transnational pharmaceutical company Glaxo-Wellcome, gave children, their teachers, and counselors in schools across the country from 1995 on an opportunity and a format for reenacting and making sense of the experience of abuse.

Despite this impact, some male viewers of *Soul City* and listeners to the radio version *umThombanhliziyiyo* in rural kwaZulu thought that public airing of stories about family abuse was "out of proportion, out of order, and out of the

norm” and even felt personally “humiliated” by the uncle’s character (IUPHC 1996a, 50–51). This resistance to the narrative is striking precisely because the character fits the profile of many perpetrators of sexual abuse—young, unemployed men whose acts appear to express their anger at a society that has not brought them the good life promised by the liberation movements and at women who appear to be more successful than they are.¹⁹ This angry reaction even to fictional representations of female agency is characteristic of young rural men caught between the loss of “traditional” masculine jobs in the mines and positions in the provincial and local government bureaucracies, health, and education that were taken by formally educated women who stayed behind when the men migrated. Role-playing workshops with rural secondary-school students suggest that young men with few prospects tend to favor scenarios that feature sexually and economically potent men even if this contradicts their own experience (Kruger and Watson Shariff 2001).

Although IUPHC’s respondents do not explicitly address this question, it is noteworthy that the black female characters in *Soul City* tend to be more nuanced than the men. Lerato and Bettina in the clinic are matched in the surrounding community by the women organizing theatre-for-education skits and community-radio announcements to urge mothers to have their children immunized. In the clinic, the other figures of the authority are white men, Drs. Robertson and Budlender, whose sympathetic mien is linked to “feminine” qualities of empathy and introspection, while their authority is reinforced by their titles. The single significant black male character at the clinic, the porter Ali (Aubrey Moalusi), is initially a comic character whose perennial attempts to diet or quit smoking provide moments of humor as well as instruction. But Ali is also portrayed as a loving family man and a zealous accessory to Ian Robertson’s crime-busting at the clinic.²⁰ The black men outside tend to be more ambiguous. They range from victims of circumstances, such as Duma, through immature but educable delinquents, such as Tumelo (Somizi Mhlongo), Lerato’s kid brother, who blames the “system” for his problems with drink and steals from the clinic until reprimanded and apparently redeemed by Budlender, to outright villains. In the first season, the villain’s role is occupied by Leroy Washington, Jr. (played by African-American David Webb, who has appeared in other local soap operas and high-end commercials), a fast-talking swindler who woos Lerato even as he hatches schemes—with white South African partners—to build substandard rural clinics with government subsidies. In the second, it is a local gangster, Churchill Mfuri, owner of the Golden Peacock nightclub, who masquerades as a generous donor of equipment in order to smuggle drugs through the clinic. Making the chief villain in the first season an African American offers viewers a surprising twist on the predatory immigrant character that has become familiar on stage and screen in the 1990s as many South Africans react adversely to an alleged flood of skilled and unskilled migrants from the north, but the shift to a local man in the second responds to growing concern about the ambiguous aura of gangsters as glamorous outlaws rather than outright villains in the community. The issue of xenophobia reappears in the sixth season as the new clinic

driver Baba-D (played by the stage comic Fats Bookholane) has to deal with relatives who have come to live with him in the wake of devastating floods in Mozambique, but the comic treatment of this serious question resembles more the slapstick of live revues such as John Ledwaba's stage Malawian in his *Jozi, Jozi* (1994) than the more probing representation of xenophobic violence in Zola Maseko's short film *The Foreigner* (1999).

What is striking about this lineup is not simply individual male figures but the effect on the dramaturgy of the serial as a whole. The predominant conventions of soap opera may favor female interaction in mostly domestic spaces, but *Soul City* also draws on the glamorous villains of prime-time melodrama, on the model of *Dallas* perhaps, as well as on the specific character of Gauteng crime, especially carjacking, to create narrative elements that take the drama closer to the space and pace of the thriller and the portrayal of a rogue masculinity. This thriller dramaturgy makes itself felt in the second and third seasons but emerges already in the first. By the middle of the season, Leroy has been accused of pocketing money meant for rural clinics by Ian, who is also Leroy's rival for Lerato's love, and he retaliates by arranging an "accident" for Ian, who winds up in hospital in a coma, watched over by Lerato, until he wakes up in the penultimate episode.²¹ Although this criminal intrigue does not completely eclipse the health-education plots, which include Nurse Lizzie's (Nandi Nyembe) struggle to deal with the fact that her philandering husband has probably left her HIV+, its style prompts the acceleration of pace and music in the later episodes, while its night-time scenes, *noir*-ish lighting, and American B-movie gangster lingo envelope the slower takes, daytime lighting, and vernacular dialogue of the "development" scenarios. This turn to the B movie evokes for South Africans not only the American thrillers currently on television but also the long-standing association of B-movie lingo with the outlaw glamour of the much-recalled 1950s, when black intellectuals, the "American" gang, and journalists on *Drum*, Africa's best-selling picture magazine produced in Johannesburg, shared space and language in the soon-to-be-demolished "bohemia" of Sophiatown.²²

Although Sophiatown is sometimes nostalgically invoked, especially in stage musicals, against the criminal excesses of present-day Gauteng, it provides the predominant model for outlaw glamour, which draws on African-American and other modes of cultural survival on the edge as well as a local sense of post-colonial precariousness in order to create a new black modernity. The circulation of these transnational references can be compared to the black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) and "transnational soul culture" (Joseph 1997) circulating between African youth and African America. It informs the ambivalent representation of gangster figures in fiction and in newspaper reporting (Haffajee 1998a) and on television. The second season of *Soul City* (1996)—along with the graphic novel, *Body and Soul*, based on the TV script—attempts to grapple with this ambivalence.²³ In the Sophiatown era, as in the present, this glamour framed a thoroughly masculine scene in which women were either mothers or "cherries" (girls reduced to the trophy of their virginity). It uses the ambiguous

but undeniable power of gangsters and other outlaws as a point of departure for a narrative exploration of the options facing young people in South African cities. Whereas gang culture had a shadowy presence in the margins of the domestic and clinic settings in the first season, it takes the limelight in the second episode, framed by shady dealings at the Golden Peacock. At the center of this season is a young man, Stanza, torn between the example of his brother, Simon (Vusi Khumalo, seen internationally in the remake of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, among other films), a musician and ex-gangster, and the appeal of easy money and machismo apparently offered by the Scorpion gang and a young woman, Dinana (Kekeletso Mphuthi), who has to struggle not only with Stanza's affiliation with the gang and his attempt to rape her to prove his manhood but also with an uncle (another musician) who expects sex in exchange for paying her school fees and with prospective employers who doubt that a girl could be a good mechanic.

This shift of thematic emphasis away from the matriarchs of the first season to the youth acknowledges the macho elements of youth culture and its imitation of outlaw glamour. It also represents a formal shift away from the didactic theatre-for-development reiteration of key health messages in the first season to embedding the messages more thoroughly into the narrative, thus encouraging audience identification with the problems characters face but also raising questions about the links between this identification and outlaw glamour. As members of a band, Simon and Stanza both participate in a masculine culture reminiscent of the Sophiatown era, but Simon's more egalitarian relationship with Lizeka (Tsholofelo Matseke), Ali's daughter and Dinana's friend, offers an alternative to gangster bravado while maintaining the glamour of musical performance. While in the first season community radio is treated as a natural extension of households, where older women meet to educate others, in the *Body and Soul* episodes, the technology of radio as well as its capacity for mass dissemination play a central role in the action and the lives of individualized characters: by means of a hidden microphone attached to the system broadcasting her uncle's concert at the Golden Peacock on community radio, she broadcasts her story and exposes him to shame. Although Simon aids and abets this act of revenge, his appeal to the audience stems as much from his status as a musician (and the glamour of the actor's persona) as his sensitivity to women, and the serial offers no other black male role model except Ali to match the serial's stalwart black female professionals, Lerato and Bettina. While the all-male band and its ambiguous association with gang life reflect the actual pressures on young men with few prospects as well as the historical association of music and the underground economy, it is the struggles of the women that highlight both the long-term aspirations and the difficulty of realizing those aspirations in a society still grappling with the legacy of apartheid and the local deformations of global capital. The student workbooks in the *Soul City Life-Skills Packet* return to those moments in the television narrative that draw attention to the added burden of communal gender discrimination despite the constitutional right to full equality, but in highlighting the personal success of Simon

(and his glamorous interpreter), it ducks a direct confrontation with the discrepancy between (mostly) male aspirations to individual showbiz fame and the real unlikelihood that underskilled youth will find satisfying work in a society whose leaders have moved away from collective social programs to neoliberal exhortations of individual entrepreneurship, especially in service sectors such as entertainment and tourism. While the fourth season (1999) returned young women to center screen in the persons of Dinana and Lizeka, it relocated them to modern apartments and the relative affluence of white-collar work in the city, closer to the environment of the popular but shamelessly commercial soap *Generations*. While this central urban location took the characters and target audience farther from the informal-settlement and township setting of the earlier seasons, it also acknowledged that the television audience remained predominantly urban. Further, the shift away from an explicitly didactic presentation of health information toward a dramaturgy that stages conflict among characters reflecting different social positions suggests a growing affinity with locally enlightening but not explicitly educational new serials, such as *Gaz’Lam* (2002; lit.: my blood; fig.: my family), which depicts the complex lives of young urban South Africans in the edgy neighborhood of Yeoville, home to local as well as migrant Africans (Temkin). This development could be hailed as a more generous version of educational television or treated with skepticism as a loosening of an earlier commitment not merely to educating spectators but to the interactive spect-action that characterized the first season and the graphic comics produced not only by professionals but also by students writing their own lives. By contrast, the sixth season’s emphatic return to the township dwellers and to didactically discrete health messages instead of a more dynamic narrative seems like something of a retreat, although this season has allowed for complications in the lives of the series’ most beloved characters: Dube’s Sister Bettina, now executive director of the clinic, suffers from depression but takes four episodes to own up to her condition by joining a support group (Krouse 2003a).

While the telescoped conclusions of 50-minute episodes remain perhaps too pat or too “soapy” in comparison with longer-term projects among students who have read, produced, and reenacted more complex stories about their own gender socialization in graphic form (see examples in Kruger and Watson Shariff 2001), these series and other graphic story projects and the arguments they have provoked suggest that the tensions between young men and women struggling for place and agency in the new South Africa and the persistence of discrimination, uneven development, and unequal distribution continue to postpone their moment of arrival. While no television serial can solve these problems, *Soul City’s* attempt to portray them in a way that engaged active audience spect-action (observation, commentary, and suggested alternative scenarios, if not immediate social action) complemented a range of other local efforts from community arts to employment self-help as well as national projects and helps to further ongoing debate about the relationship between central state directives and particular responses on a community scale or between a globalized profit-driven culture industry and the local refunctioning of globalized

cultural forms as commodities and cultural products in *glocal* markets.²⁴ This relationship is ambiguous, to be sure, but its undecided character leaves open a space for renegotiating the definition and practical application of “cultural identity” and the “public good” in an increasingly transnational South Africa.

Notes

1. Especially in the interregnum (1990–1994) and under the Mandela presidency (1994–1999), South African society was best described as “post-anti-apartheid,” since the government still wanted to harness the resources and personnel of the anti-apartheid movements to redress past wrongs and their present legacy through an official program of reconstruction and development. Under Thabo Mbeki (1999–), neoliberal promotion of the interests of capital has overshadowed reconstruction and development and the commitment of community NGOs (known locally as “civics”) to social transformation has been deflected by a state characterized both by appeals to neoliberal rationalization and the actual inefficiencies of patronage rather than a commitment to social and economic equity and redress for the injustices of apartheid. For a summary of the costs of normalization, see Deegan 2001.
2. South Africa’s population became more than half urban (53 percent of 41 million) in the 1990s (Central Statistics Service [hereafter CSS] 1998). According to the 1997 *Green Paper on Broadcasting*, South Africa had about 4 million television sets out of a total of 12 million in the entire African continent (DPTB 1997).
3. The Independent Broadcasting Authority, mandated by the interim parliament in 1993 to “regulate broadcasting activities in the public interest,” published its report in 1995 calling for a maximum of 20 percent of foreign ownership in any medium and for local-content goals of 50 percent or more in news, documentary, and children’s and educational programs; in short, in all programming except drama and entertainment for adults. Arguments for the contribution of documentary to building a democratic South Africa have been made since the 1980s (see Gavshon 1990 and Maingard 1997), and the local-content goals supported by IBA’s successor, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA), were reiterated in the 1997 Green Paper despite their failure in South Africa’s poorer neighbors—Zimbabwe, for instance, imported more than 50 percent of its programming in 1994 (Bourgault 1995, 106). In 2002, the contradictory tendencies between the rhetoric of nation-building and the practice of commercial revenue-generation were exacerbated by the Broadcasting Amendment Bill, which was reiterated in the speech of Communications Minister Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, in which she referred to the role of the broadcasting system as “educator, enlightener and purveyor of spiritually and intellectually uplifting information.” To the alarm of ICASA and FXI, though, the bill called for the separation of the public and commercial arms of the SABC and thus threatened to curtail the cross-funding that had supported at least some public-interest programming. For the minister’s position on

- this bill (as yet unacted in February 2003), see Matsepe-Casaburri 2002; for a critique citing input from FXI and ICASA, see Matlou 2002.
4. Modleski's study is the *locus classicus* for the redemptive reading of soap opera as "an alternative kind of narrative pleasure experienced by women" (1992, 108). Rogers claims that the "fragmented form of soap opera . . . reinforces stereotypical behavior" (1991, 29). Rabinowitz critiques the presupposition that underlies this binary opposition; she notes that viewer's responses cannot be read off the text and argues instead for the analysis of "economically overlapping and converging institutions in television [and] print media" (1992, 275–276).
 5. I use the term "urbanizing" to emphasize the accelerating migration to South African cities as well as the precarious position of new arrivals. For the popularity of soap operas such as *The Bold and Beautiful* among urbanizing audiences, see Tager 1997 and Flockemann 2000; for commentary on comparable populations in Trinidad, see D. Miller 1992.
 6. Although some U.S. critics prefer to reserve the term "soap opera" for daytime serials, whose complicated sentimental narratives apparently appeal to women, and to call evening serials such as *Dallas* "television melodrama" for mixed audiences (Allen 1991), viewers from Britain to Jamaica ignore this distinction. South Africans call these serials "soapies" regardless of the screening hour and whether they come to a provisional conclusion at the end of the season, as do Brazilian and Mexican *telenovelas* (Kottak 1990, 36–45) or not, as do U.S. daytime serials.
 7. The half-hour episodes of *Soul City's* first season were watched weekly at 6:30 P.M. by ca. 4,300,000 mostly urban and peri-urban viewers; the second and third season aired at 7 P.M.; the fourth, at fifty minutes per episode, aired at 8 P.M. and targeted a more upwardly mobile young black audience. The dialogue favored English supplemented by subtitled vernacular speech. The quarter-hour daily radio serial *Healing Hearts* (*Lerato le Fodisang*; Sesotho) or its equivalents in isiZulu (*umThombanhliziyi*; *Humble Heart*) or isiXhosa (*Nhlizi yo yami* [*My Heart*]) reached over 3 million listeners, 44 percent of whom were rural (IUPHC 1996a, 15–25; trans. modified). The report (IUPH 1996b) was prepared by the Community Agency for Social Equity (CASE). South Africa has eleven official languages; native speakers of isiZulu constitute the largest single language group at 9 million plus; 7 million speak isiXhosa (also in the isiNguni group); 5.9 million are native speakers of Afrikaans; 3.9 million speak Sepedi (also known as Northern Sesotho); and 3.5 million speak English as a first language. Actual usage complicates (or simplifies) this classification: apart from native speakers, 15 million or so use English in capacities ranging from near-native fluency to basic comprehension, and the differences between mutually intelligible languages (such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and siSwati or Sepedi, Sesotho, and Setswana) are slighter than apartheid-era separate development policy implied.
 8. By producers, I mean first the IUPHC personnel—physicians Garth Japhet and now Shereen Usdin, who directed the project and hired administrative, medical, and artistic collaborators—and second the institutions responsible for the series, whether formal—IUPHC, SABC, and the Department of

Health—or informal, such as the theatre directors and actors, theatre-for-development experts, and community-radio workers who contribute to its production.

9. “Development-oriented” soap opera began airing on Jamaican radio in the 1960s (Cambridge 1992) and on radio in Africa at the same time (Bourgault 1995). Its appearance on African television is rarer, since television targets an urban elite, although the Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation showed a Kiswahili serial on social issues called *Tushauraine* (*Let Us Discuss*, 1986–) (Bourgault 1995, 126–127). Usdin (1994) cites as influence *telenovelas* promoting literacy in Mexico and the frank discussion of AIDS on the British serial *EastEnders*.
10. On the tensions between new rich and old poor created by the ANC’s policy shift from Reconstruction and Development (the ministry was dissolved in 1996) to the neoliberal Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), see Duncan 2001. Veteran journalist and ex-IBA head John Matisonn argues that this shift began already in the early 1990s even before the ANC was elected to govern in 1994 (1998a).
11. Audience responses suggest that viewers absorbed in the drama were more likely to absorb the instruction within it (IUPHC 1996b, 15–51). Women viewers’ identification with particular characters (43–49) encouraged the producers to fund and publish graphic fiction (“comics”) about popular programs, such as *Nonceba’s Story*.
12. This distinction between “First World” and “Third World” viewing patterns draws from the ethnography of television in Nigeria (Lyons 1990), comparative remarks about television and radio in Zambia (Spitulnik 1994), and specific comment about *Soul City* (IUPHC 1996b; Usdin 1994 and 1998). Although these distinctions are complicated in the case of *Soul City* by the fact that domestic servants watch in their employer’s homes or at community centers, the relative rarity of television sets in informal settlements (*Soul City’s* target audience) with erratic electricity makes television viewing more of a social occasion than it tends to be in more affluent contexts. As the IUPHC report acknowledges, women have less control over household television sets than men (1996b, 27), as is true elsewhere in African (see Spitulnik 1994, 74–75 and Lyons 1990, 417), but the report also indicates that of the 8.1 million (half the adult black population) who watched the first season, 53 percent were women (1996b, 15), which suggests greater autonomy for women viewers than might be expected.
13. Although books by Kerr (1995; on Malawi and Botswana) and Mda (1993; on Lesotho) do not comment on theatre for development in South Africa, they offer lucid explications of key terms and controversies as well as analytic accounts of their practice on the ground. Accounts out of South Africa, including Mda’s later article (1998), tend to be piecemeal.
14. In October 1998, in response to the launch of e-tv, South Africa’s first “free” private commercial television broadcaster, SABC’s lineup changed once again, with SABC1 as a competitively commercial channel, SABC2 as an “African Renaissance channel” responding in part to the social obligations reiterated in the 1998 White Paper, and SABC3 once again as the highbrow channel (Haffajee 1998b), but the national broadcaster remains beset by

- charges that managers continue to shift resources from programming to administration and to award programming contracts as favors to friends (Duncan 2001, 163–190).
15. See Louw 1993b for analysis of market censorship through the withdrawal of advertising in South Africa. While the 1997 Green Paper still paid homage to the tradition of public broadcasting represented by the BBC, its drafters hailed the United States as the “most mature commercial market in the world” (DPTB 1997, chapter 1). Although U.S. research suggests that reliance on corporate sponsorship tends to exclude controversial material (see Barnouw et al. 1997), the Green Paper addresses government regulation but not market censorship. I quote from the Green Paper, a public discussion document, rather than the White Paper, the more systematic preamble to a parliamentary bill, because the rougher document acknowledges tensions between the commercial and public interest dimensions of the SABC, which the later one attempts to represent as a practical matter of “regulation” intended to “restructure the SABC in order to achieve . . . separation of the commercial from the public broadcast activities” (DPTB 1997, chapter 1).
 16. Duncan’s (2001) and Matlou’s (2002) critiques of managerial waste at the SABC may not cite the theorists, but their investigations provide empirical evidence for the better-known theories of the “politics of the belly” and postcolonial expenditure by Jean-François Bayart and Achille Mbembe.
 17. While BP’s cooperation with the apartheid government and ongoing exploitation of oil in underdeveloped countries and the World Health Organization’s (WHO) censure of Nestlé in the 1980s do not automatically taint contributions to *Soul City*, this legacy acts as a reminder of the transnational economic exploitation the ANC resisted during its years as a liberation movement. Nestlé was subject to an international boycott from 1977 to 1984 for aggressively marketing infant formula under “improper conditions”; it distributed free samples of infant formula to mothers and incentives to medical personnel to promote formula in places where poverty and lack of clean water made breastmilk substitutes dangerous. It ceased the practice several years after the establishment of WHO’s International Code for Marketing Breastmilk Substitutes (1981–1891): see Nestlé (n.d.) and *Multinational Monitor* (1982). During the apartheid era, BP sold fuel to the South African army despite an international embargo and, even after the ANC was unbanned in 1990, cut funding to U.S. organizations supporting change in South Africa (see *Multinational Monitor* 1992).
 18. Theatre for health education in South Africa has its origins in work with black nurses rather than patients. Barney Simon (1974, 85), who used role-playing and skits to break down barriers between educated health professionals and their clients in rural Transkei before he went on to direct the Market Theatre, and David Kerr (1995, 159), who has worked in theatre for development for two decades, note that African development professionals are often impatient with what they dismiss as the “backwardness” of rural clients.
 19. Fifteen thousand reported rapes a year are perpetrated on prepubescent children. Many rapists are young men with no prospects who appear to wish to “punish” women (and their children) who are doing better than they (Marilyn Donaldson, clinical psychologist, Tara Alex Clinic). Some

- HIV+ men appear to believe that sex with a child will cure them (Sister Rexina Maruping, Baragwanath Hospital) (A. Johnson 1998, 8). Although nationwide unemployment for African women remains higher (52 percent) than for African men (42 percent) and more African women than men work in unskilled jobs, the percentage of African women in managerial positions (18 percent) is higher than that of African men (11 percent) (CSS 1998). This fact may encourage those young men who have abandoned education for the struggle to believe that they have been discriminated against in favor of women. (Note: unlike U.S. figures, South African unemployment figures include those who are “not economically active”; that is, those who have given up or are unable to seek work.)
20. By the time IUPHC developed the *Soul City Life-Skills Packet* for schools, including the graphic story, “Body and Soul,” a facilitator’s guide, and four workbooks inviting students to write their own dialogue for scenes of crisis or major decision, Ali was represented exclusively as a “caring and responsible” “father and community worker” (IUPHC 1997, 4:10). While his television persona certainly includes these traits, they are subordinated by the dramaturgy to the comic aspects of his character.
 21. Although the season ends with the romance intact, it proved too much for some viewers, even though interracial couples are more common among young professionals; Robertson (played in the second season by Stephen Jennings as a jocular and decidedly unintrospective departure from De Lancey) was killed off as he attempted to uncover the drug-smuggling in the clinic.
 22. Commentary on Sophiatown varies from systematic analysis to unabashed retro-tourism and includes the memoirs of exiles and returnees, photographic essays, interviews, critical analysis, museum displays, films, and several plays; see Kruger 1999, 86–99.
 23. The same ambivalence permeates newer efforts in this genre. *Yizo, Yizo* dramatizes the impact of gangsterism, drug and sexual abuse, and “teacher/pupil ‘don’t care’ attitudes” on students and teachers in township schools. It is sponsored by the SABC and the Department of Education’s COLTS (Culture of Learning, Teaching, and Service) campaign and has been on air since 1999; it has been praised for candidly depicting these problems and denounced for glorifying gangsterism (Garson 1999). The print material in the *Soul City Life-Skills Packet* was purchased by the Department of Education and thus has a potential audience of several million students. However, it draws substantially on the example and personnel of smaller NGOs such as the Storyteller Group, which has produced graphic fiction in collaboration with urban and rural students since 1990 and whose chief storyboard designer, Peter Esterhuysen, also designed *Body and Soul* (Kruger and Watson Shariff 2001).
 24. In “The Mammon Quest,” Eric Swyngedouw (1992) uses the term *glocal* to refer to the intersection of global and local concerns in cities that function both as national or regional capitals and as destinations for transnational migration of peoples, markets, and cultures. In this context, South Africa and specifically Johannesburg have become glocal centers of cultural production in the immediate Southern African region as well as for markets elsewhere, such as the Caribbean.

13 Literacy, Improvisation, and the Virtual Script in Yoruba Popular Theatre

Karin Barber

Aspiration to the Condition of Writing

In Africanist literary criticism, a faint aura of romanticism still lingers around the notion of “orality.” It is a highly value-charged term, one that can be accorded almost talismanic authority. Oral modes of expression, underlying and breaking through into anglophone or francophone written texts, are what is said to give such texts their distinctive Africanity. Eileen Julien has brilliantly exposed the tendency in francophone criticism to claim oral effects as a guarantee of “authenticity” (Julien 1992), and the same tendency can be seen in anglophone critical discourses. Orality is treated both as a source—the origin and precursor of “modern” literature—and as a resource—a rich heritage or fund of themes, motifs, images, and techniques upon which the “modern” author can draw. According to Abiola Irele, the “distinctive mark” of written African literature in European languages is “the striving to attain the condition of oral expression, even within the boundaries established by Western literary conventions” (Irele 1990, 63).

But Yorùbá popular itinerant theatre, which flourished in western Nigeria from the 1940s to the early 1990s, displayed exactly the opposite tendency. It was a form that in actual fact and practice appeared predominantly oral, in the sense that the plays were improvised, unscripted, and collectively produced by the collaborative interaction of performers with each other and with audiences, drawing on repertoires of accumulated idioms and strategies of characterization. But it aspired to the condition of writing and was deeply internally configured by this aspiration. The presence of literacy as a point of orientation in this theatre—in its organization, its preparation, and its actual performance—was much more than a polite bow in the direction of the better-educated. It was a clue to the project of the theatre and to the constitution of a whole field of popular Yorùbá cultural production of which the popular theatre was an important part.

The Yorùbá “intermediate classes”—who are neither the mass of farmers nor the highly visible elite—are most often described by lists of occupations: tailors,

bricklayers, motor mechanics, drivers, petty traders, clerks, primary-school teachers. In the colonial period and after, it was these categories of people—who were mobile, entrepreneurial, and struggling to better themselves—who created new genres of popular expression to speak of new experience. Almost all the genres they created were directly or indirectly associated with school education, the church, and “modernity.” All addressed larger, more anonymous, and often more dispersed publics than older genres such as masquerade, festival drama, and oral poetry. Circulating between live performance, electronic media, and print, themes and motifs gained wide dissemination in multiple forms. The popular theatre was a central site in these fields of mutating discourse, feeding on histories, novels, newspapers, street talk, oral anecdotes, sermons, and tales for its sources and supplying magazines, television, records, radio, films, and video with materials to recirculate. The audiences that crowded to see them tended to be conversant with all of these discourses and would even supply suggestions and materials for their elaboration.

Yorùbá Popular Theatre

Yorùbá popular theatre’s starting point was in the church, where choir-masters and choirs collaborated to produce “native air operas”: sung dramas on biblical themes that were performed in the church itself and designed to attract converts and raise funds to build more churches. However, from the very beginning another cultural strand deriving from popular music and imported vaudeville shows was entwined with the biblical materials, and very quickly, groups of performers responded to a voracious audience demand for entertainment by moving into secular, folkloric, or contemporary themes and into secular performance venues such as town halls, hotels, and schools (Jeyifo 1984). By the 1970s, many of these groups were becoming fully professional, commercial touring theatres. By 1980, there were estimated to be over a hundred of them. The most popular played to large audiences wherever they went, at times filling entire football stadiums. But in the mid-1980s, economic catastrophe and a growing preference for film and video began to undermine the live theatre, and by the early 1990s most of the theatre companies had more or less stopped performing on stage. Some closed down; the more successful or fortunate ones put their efforts into making films, video dramas, and television shows. The performances and conversations discussed here date from the high point of the theatre, the 1980s.

In its self-presentation, this theatre was determinedly modern, deliberately distinguishing itself from older forms of drama such as *egúngún* and *gèlédé* masquerade shows by its use of space and equipment. The popular theatre always played on platform stages before an audience seated on chairs in rows. They always used stage scenery (usually a backcloth, two or three sets of flats, and a curtain), electric lighting (usually a combination of spotlights and bundles of fluorescent strip lights, laid horizontally along the front of the stage), and a system of amplifiers and microphones, around which the actors choreographed

their exchanges and projected them to the noisy audiences. In their espousal of modernity, they reproduced the performance spaces of church and school. Newer developments in Western theatre—theatre in the round, mobile multi-space performances—were out of the question, for they represent the West's attempt to reclaim theatrical uses of space which the masquerade theatres of Nigeria had never lost. Similarly, the Yorùbá theatre companies clung to a rather old-fashioned Western dramatic form—the temporally linear narrative drama with well-defined sequences of action, realistically presented characters, and formal coherence and closure—for this distinguished them from the aggregative, segmented style of the older theatrical forms in Nigeria.

But in its techniques of rehearsal, in the creation and performance of a play, the popular-theatre groups did not use the “modern” Western method of producing a play from a written script. One or two theatre leaders published versions of plays they had performed as another outlet and a further source of revenue, but these texts existed in parallel with the performed play rather than being antecedent to it. Nor can the theatre of the 1980s be seen as a transitional stage in a progression from “traditional” orality to “modern” literacy, for if anything, the improvisatory character of the production process intensified over the years. The early native air operas, which were almost entirely sung, were memorized by the cast from written song sheets. Several such texts of Hubert Ogunde's early 1940s plays exist. It is significant that when passages of spoken dialogue occurred, these were merely indicated in the text with a stage direction: it was not thought necessary to write them out. Over the years, the songs in all theatre companies' plays were gradually reduced and the amount of spoken dialogue increased. This was partly a result of the influence of television, in which a number of theatre companies became involved almost from its inception in the Western Region in 1959. Television producers demanded a more naturalistic style of presentation, which in due course affected the live stage plays as well. The plays became more improvisatory, and the use of a written song-text was dropped. By the 1980s, most theatre companies had substantial repertoires of plays, all unscripted, which they could keep in existence for many years through the exercise of collective memory and re-creation.

Education and the “Intermediate Classes”

By the early 1980s, when the popular theatre was at its height, a huge category of people with primary-school education had been created as a result of the Action Group's policy of universal primary education, undertaken on their election to the Western Region government in 1952. Pupils who completed Primary 6 left school more or less literate in English and Yorùbá; conversant with English dates, times, and counting systems; and familiar with some of the large body of Yorùbá-language written literature that had been produced since the 1940s. A tiny minority of these children were able to progress to grammar school; a somewhat larger proportion managed to get into a modern school

which offered a less-prestigious three-year secondary course intended as preparatory to teacher training. Much of the popular theatre's audience, and many of its actors, belonged to the category of pupil who left school after Primary 6 or at best modern school. This was certainly true of the Oyin Adéjòbí Theatre Company that forms the main subject of this discussion. In the 1980s, the company had over twenty members. All had been to primary school, but only five had proceeded to modern school, and only one—Adéjòbí's own daughter, who was not a full-time member of the company—had been to grammar school and taken her WAEC (equivalent to O-level) exams. In general, then, it could be said that the theatre-company members had had some schooling but certainly did not belong to the educated elite. The jobs that many of them trained for after primary school, before they joined the theatre, were typical of the artisanal informal sector as described by Fapohunda (1978) and Berry (1985). They included welding, truck and taxi driving, mechanic, "rewire," "radionic," "tailoring" (done by men), "sewing" (done by women), "ward-maid" in a private maternity hospital, clerk to a trader, and petty trading.

The theatre was implicated in the world of schooling. Many of the actors had entered the theatre as a profession because of a liking for drama formed in the course of doing end-of-year plays at primary school. Boarding schools were visited by itinerant professional companies who performed in the school hall at cut rates. John Adéwuni, one of the leading actors in the Oyin Adéjòbí Theatre Company, described his participation like this:

What encouraged me [to become an actor] was that, when I was at school, anything to do with singing, acting, I was very interested in it. Drumming, I was very interested in it. If a theatre group came to perform for us, I would be the first person to go and find out what it was they'd come to do. And if we were doing an end-of-year play, as we used to do in primary school, I would be at the drums, I would drum. I would be the person to play the biggest role in all the school plays, and from that time on I decided that if I didn't work as a singer, I would work as an actor. [My translation.]

As actors, they continued to maintain the link between educational institutions and theatre by their frequent performances in boarding schools, colleges of education, and technical colleges.

The cultural world associated with primary-school leavers was constituted, in part, by novels and plays published in Yorùbá; by neotraditional poetry that was rendered, simultaneously, as published texts and oral performances disseminated via radio, television, and records as well as live events; and by magazines, including the fortnightly *Atóka*, a "photoplay" magazine that represented actual popular stage plays by means of sequences of staged photographs, with bubble captions added. The pages of *Atóka* included many letters from young people asking for pen pals and consulting the Agony Auntie, and they, like the theatre-company members, described themselves as welders, drivers, tailors, and clerks as well as school pupils.

Writing, Improvisation, and the Production of a Play

The only piece of writing that normally entered into the actual production of a play in the 1980s, when I worked with the Oyin Adéjòbí Company, was a synopsis. The idea of the synopsis came from television: the TV producers demanded plot outlines, in advance, of every proposed episode of the theatre company's unscripted comedy series such as *Kòtù Asipa* and *Ilé-ìwòsàn*. When they were rehearsing, this synopsis, written by Oyin Adéjòbí himself and typed up by a young girl acting as secretary, seemed to be referred to only once: at the first meeting, when Adéjòbí—glancing occasionally at the typed page—explained the story of the play to the assembled company.

What happened after that was the following. The synopsis, which was usually partially but not fully divided into scenes, would be taken over by Alhaji Kàrimù Adépòjù, Adéjòbí's manager since the 1960s and his right-hand man. Alhaji worked on the story in order to realize it as enactable sequences marked by exits, entrances, and scene divisions. He would explain the sequence of events in each scene to the actors. The experienced actors would sometimes make suggestions and additions, but the overall direction of the dialogue was always guided by Alhaji. There were sequences that were carefully orchestrated and rehearsed so that a pattern of statements and counterstatements culminated in an extremely well-controlled, often humorous—indeed hilarious—effect. There were “landmark” phrases and sentences that endured over the years even when substantial changes in characterization and plot had occurred. There were “set pieces”—usually monologues, where one actor took over the microphone and assumed complete control—and also fluid passages between set pieces, where actors navigated their way using the key phrases as landmarks. The actors themselves, especially the more experienced ones, contributed much of the actual dialogue. The play, they say, becomes “fuller” in performance, and the process of filling out was always fueled by audience response.¹

Large-scale changes could occur, altering the whole shape of a play. This could happen gradually, over a long period, as with *Èkùrò Ọlójá*, where a very popular component—an episode where an adulterous wife was caught red-handed by her husband's best friend—expanded in response to audience approval, while other elements in the narrative were correspondingly truncated or even dropped altogether. But big changes could also be installed overnight—as when, in 1983, Adéjòbí and Alhaji became dissatisfied with the ending of their new play *Ọkọ Ìyàwó* and decided to reinforce the moral by adding a whole extra scene in which the anti-heroine, a domineering “cash madam,” is punished by being driven irreversibly mad.

The plays were also structured to accommodate continuous smaller-scale changes. Many sequences consisted of repeated episodes involving a series of characters: a landlord's tenants, patients in a clinic, and a conclave of chiefs, each of whom speaks in turn. This structure lent itself to accretions and dele-

tions. When a new performer became available, Adéjòbí and Alhaji were inventive in creating extra parts on the spur of the moment: an item could be added to a series without significantly altering the structure of the narrative and could also be easily unhooked if someone dropped out. The structure of the plays facilitated and positively invited additions and alterations in these relatively free-standing repeated dramatic “slots.”

The play, then, was structured to be flexible and to accommodate additions and switches—both spontaneous and planned. No two performances were exactly alike, and over a longer period the accumulation of changes could transform a play entirely. The very popular plays that lasted longest in the repertoire tended to become gradually more and more elaborated, sometimes to the point where they got too long, and entire episodes had to be lopped off to cut them down to size again. The “filling out” of the play happened mainly through the actors’ desire to expand their roles, fueled by the audience’s response. They were highly attuned to the key phrases in the dialogue—the colorful or “weighty” expressions that were potentially available for elaboration and creative repetition (see Barber 2000b). Whenever audience response warranted it, they would expand on these elements and milk them for all they were worth, sometimes introducing new material of their own on the spur of the moment. Thus the plays were organized in such a way as to draw upon the creative potential of improvisation. At every level, from the overall structure of the narrative to small details of the dialogue, the theatre company’s practice was open and responsive to collaborative re-creation.

The Imagined Script

When they talked to me about the production process, however, neither Adéjòbí nor Alhaji nor the other actors stressed the oral, improvisatory, collaborative, and expansive aspects of their work. Instead, they all insisted on the idea of authorship and writing.² The start of the production of a new play, according to Adéjòbí, began with his own solitary reflection upon a story he had heard, read, or otherwise acquired. In the case of *Èkùró Qlójà*, he said:

The story was first told by my late father. I was then still going to school. Because my father used to tell stories—especially when matter happens—that dealt with the necessity for somebody to be loyal, to be sincere, to be truthful. When my father was addressing people generally, or his children, he first told me—told us—told the story, not told me or any other person—he first told the story and I listened well to that story, what he was saying. Then, I never thought I would become somebody who would be writing plays at all. But the story interested me so much, and I was thinking all the time about it. “So, it is possible for a man to think of something that does not belong to him or her! *Á-à-á!*” So, but it occurred to me that I should write a play, about twenty years ago [i.e., ca. 1968] then I kept off myself from the house, I went somewhere, I sat down, I took my paper and biro, and I first wrote up the story. It was the story I wrote down I started to read over and over and over again. So, after—when I got the play, I assembled my people and

told them the story, I told them that I would plan it out. I planned it out, and I presented what I planned out to them.

Adéjòbí's father originally told the story orally, then, and Adéjòbí's creative process culminated in his retelling the story orally to his company: but the emphasis in his account is on the intervening stage, when he closeted himself, alone, with "paper and biro," and subjected the story to intensive writing, reading over, and ratiocination.

Alhaji said, "Baba [Adéjòbí] gives me the story, and I turn it into a play." I asked him how he did this, for I had often been impressed by the way he seemed to have an inner vision of the entire complex sequence of action and dialogue that made up these three-hour dramas. Alhaji's first response was "I cannot explain that much because I can say it's God's gift." However, he went on to talk about the way he saw the process:

Let's say I have got an idea now, and let's say Baba writes the play, he tells me the story, immediately he's telling me the story I started to read it in my head, and I was seeing it, the way how to direct it.

Alhaji thus combined, with perfect harmony, ideas of telling and ideas of writing. He used the words synonymously. Baba "writes the play," which is to say he "tells me the story"; as he tells him the story, Alhaji starts to "read it in my head," which enables him to "see it, the way how to direct it." He then thinks over what he has been told, working on it in his head:

This is the way I did it. Let's say I was told the story, and I left that place immediately. On my way to anywhere I'm going, I started to remember, think over, "How can we do this?" Before I go round and come back I should have collected the way we can do it and how we can do it, that it should be publicly well.

Alhaji thus saw himself as assembling a comprehensive scheme of dramatic dialogue and action on his own, before he began work with the company. When he took the actors through the play in rehearsal, he certainly seemed to be referring to a mental script. With the experienced actors, he would give them key sentences and organize the order in which they were to make their points; with the inexperienced ones, he would sometimes teach them what to say sentence by sentence. During actual performances, I would sometimes see him walking up and down behind the scenery, correcting actors and giving them cues in a penetrating undertone.

The actors were clearly aware of the enormous importance of their own improvisatory collaboration: they all stressed the value of "experience" and suggested that only people with certain reservoirs of personality can undertake certain kinds of part: "You have to be strong to play the *Iyálóde*; she's a tough character, not just anyone can do it." But when they described the production of a play, they overwhelmingly used the vocabulary of instruction and correction. They all took it for granted that there is a blueprint, a right way to do it, and that a good actor is one who can quickly "catch up," as one actress said,

and who does not insist that his/her own way of doing it is better. Abíòdún Qdèjìnmí, a small-part actor on the fringes of the company, explained that actors ought to “correct their mistakes,” when told to do so, “without arguing.” Emily Adéjòbí, one of Adéjòbí’s wives and an actress of fourteen years’ standing, spoke in terms even more strongly redolent of the schoolroom:

Before we go to the town where we’re going to perform, we’ll first assemble on the premises [Adéjòbí’s house] in Òşogbo, the boss will tell us which play we’re going to do. The Manager will teach each of us. If he teaches us in the morning, from about nine o’clock to twelve, anybody who still doesn’t know his own [part], they’ll tell us to meet at five o’clock in the evening. We could still be there till seven or eight, they won’t let us go until we know it. [My translation.]

All the participants in the production process, then, talked as if there were a text. It is a text that can be improved and filled out over time, in response to audience reactions. Some people—Adéjòbí and Alhaji—have a more complete grasp of this text than the others, and their role is to “teach,” “tell,” or “explain” this text to the actors until they “know” it. Actors who get it wrong will be “corrected” and made to repeat sequences until they are “perfect.” These improvised plays, then, did seem to be constituted in relation to an imagined script.

Writing and the Running of the Company

This central but incomplete function of literacy—an absence that oriented all that they did—was played out in the entire operation and organization of the theatre company. The actual written texts that intervened in the production process—as opposed to the imagined script referred to by Adéjòbí, Alhaji and the company—were apparently peripheral to the drama, but they were given great prominence in the company’s own accounts of the process of staging a show. They included the tour itinerary, which was typed up by the secretary with several carbon copies; the letter of invitation, usually delivered in person by the representative of a social club or other elite group that wished to invite the company to perform; and the posters, which were taken to the towns on the itinerary a few days in advance to advertise the forthcoming show. The letter of invitation was often given prominence in Oyin Adéjòbí’s introductory remarks. Introducing the play *Qlániyònu* once, he said:

Welcome to this evening’s entertainment. I don’t know what name I ought to give it [i.e., the play], but as far as our theatre company is concerned, “all snakes are for eating.” I’ve noticed that three different plays have been publicized [lit.: “are on paper”]. One play is mentioned in the letter of invitation. Another is advertised in the public posters. But the one that they [the Inner Circle Club] told us about, and which we wanted to refuse to do—why? because it’s bigger by far than the other two—that one is *Qlániyònu*. [My translation.]

Note that in the act of foregrounding the letter and the posters—announcements that are “on paper” and that involve him in a world of literacy—Adéjòbí shows

that these written documents commit the company to very little. The suggestion which was actually effectual was the one that they “*bá wa so*”: told us about in speech. The company, however, often talked as if the posters were the most crucial component in the whole business of preparing a new play. I once asked how a new play was coming along. “When will it be ready?” “It’s almost ready,” Emily replied, “we’re just waiting for the posters to come from the printer.” But once, when they could not afford to print a new set of posters, they simply changed the title of their current play so that they could use up an excess stock of old ones. Word of mouth informed the audience what the play would actually be about, and as the company’s touring itineraries were very varied, there was little danger that the audience would have seen either of the plays anyway.³ Similarly, venues and even dates announced on the posters were sometimes changed if bookings fell through or other problems arose, and it was taken for granted that the would-be audience would easily find out the new venue or date by asking around.

Written documents were also given a central position in the company’s practices of recruitment, remuneration, and rehearsal. An aspiring actor was expected to write a letter of application to Mr. Adéjòbí, which appeared to function primarily as a proof of the applicant’s familiarity with formal uses of literacy, for it would be followed by an oral interview in which the important issues were settled—the applicant’s town and family origins, personal character, and degree of commitment to the theatre.

The members of the company were paid a monthly salary at a fixed level, which was gradually raised as the actor gained experience and “long stay.” The payments would be made formally, and the actors would write receipts for the management. This emulation of bureaucratic practice was a source of pride to some of the theatre-company members, though others found it hard to get used to. Similarly, the rehearsal schedule imitated the timetable of office work. It was important to the actors to be seen to be working at a regular and respectable profession. They would be required to assemble at the Adéjòbí house every day at 9:00 A.M. even when no rehearsal was planned. As John Adéwuni put it:

You see, now, when we who aren’t natives of this town, who are not natives of Oşogbo, when we’re in the house, those of us who are living together in the house, each one will say s/he is going to his/her place of work, and if you don’t say you too are going to your place of work, won’t they despise you for that? [laughs]
Every day, at nine o’clock, we have to be here. [My translation.]

Non-natives of a town, people who live as tenants, are usually people who have been posted there as teachers or minor civil servants and who observe formal-sector hours and discipline. As these remarks of Adéwuni’s indicate, there was more at stake than just the usefulness of literacy and bureaucratic regimens in the company’s operations. What was at stake is association with a distinctive social sphere, access to which was normally determined by level of education.

Enlightenment, Tradition, and the Public

What, then, does this theatre tell us about the nature and constitution of public culture in colonial and postcolonial western Nigeria? It is clear that the audiences were only to a limited extent a “reading public” but were, more comprehensively, a public informed by the idea of reading. We do know that the domain of popular entertainment is one that provides oral performative correlates of many written texts. Themes and motifs circulate in and out of print. Some popular plays, for example, were based on stories taken from the famous series of Church Missionary Society (CMS) school readers, *Ìwé Kíkà*. One of the Adéjóbí Company’s most popular plays was *Kúyè*, based on a Yorùbá-language novel of the same name by J. F. Ọdúnjọ. Conversely, orally generated dramas found written representation as photoplay stories in *Atóka* and sometimes as published plays intended to be read as literature rather than acted. You could read *Kúyè* as a novel, see it on stage, watch it on television, and read a version extrapolated from the stage play in *Atóka*. You could listen to Dúró Ládiípò’s *Oba Kò So* on LPs, watch it on video, or read it in a bilingual edition.⁴ You could read his main source (a text by Hethersett in the early CMS reader *Ìwé Kíkà Ekerin*), and you could hear variant forms of the *oríkì* (praise poetry) and *ofò* (incantations)—which constitute much of the text—performed outside the popular-theatre domain altogether, in festivals and ceremonies in northern and central Yorùbáland.

Adéjóbí himself placed emphasis on the idea that the theatre offers a powerful and accessible alternative to print media:

Theater is so important to the people of our country—especially Yorùbáland—because I regard the practitioners as practical journalists. If you are a journalist you make the report in the paper. Not many people read the paper, and if they read it, they read it for reading’s sake. But just imagine putting on the stage the story of an Oba who misused his position—you see—so there are messages that our people collect from our plays.

The point, then, is not just a historical or genealogical one about the way the theatre grew out of the church and the schools, with their deep commitment to literacy. It is also a point about how the theatre understood and defined itself. The theatre, in its organization, its practice, and its individual members’ self-conceptions, projected and understood itself as part of a culture of “enlightenment” defined by literacy while still accommodating high levels of semi-literacy or illiteracy. “Not many people read the newspapers,” and the strength of the theatre was that it offered an allotrope of written media. It was a genre that aspired to the prestige of the literate world without actually requiring the practitioners and audiences to read and without sacrificing the flexibility and living immediacy of speech.

Virtual literacy was an excellent platform from which to undertake the selective recuperation, amalgamation, and transformation of ideas available in

“traditional” repertoires. In the idiom of a “writing” that did not constrain, popular genres could recycle and give a new lease on life to the long-existing narratives, poetic forms, and performances now classified as *àsà ibílè* (“traditional customs”). They could provide a space in which *òrìsà*, diviners, witches, and the ideas and genres associated with them could be denounced or celebrated and either way given the oxygen of a new publicity. Real drummers would be invited on stage to drum; apprentices who had learned incantations or *ijálá* from real oral masters could use them on the popular stage. “Writing” these traditions in the medium of the theatre elevated and sanitized them: they became instances of “our Yorùbá heritage,” requiring serious investigation and research before the play could be staged, rather than the “pagan superstitions” of “raw illiterates.” At the same time, it allowed the theatre people to select which elements of “tradition” they would endorse and which they would exclude or denounce. In this, of course, the popular-theatre producers were following in a long tradition of “writing culture” which had been pioneered by the Lagosian elite of the late nineteenth century, particularly by clergymen such as James Johnson, Samuel Johnson, and E. M. Lijadu. In the act of celebrating local, indigenous traditions, the popular-theatre people could thus align themselves with a class perceived as superior by virtue of its close links with Western colonial culture. They could also go one better. If “writing culture” involved “editing culture,” in some ways the virtual writing of the stage was a more powerful and flexible editing tool than the actual writing of the educated elite. The theatre company saw themselves as professionals and as practitioners who had remained close to and conversant with the beliefs and practices which they were now engaged in editing. They were confident that they not only knew what their audiences wanted but also knew how to edify and enlighten them. The idiom of virtual writing simultaneously permitted the authorization of old practices and the claim to be producing something new, something modern and progressive—something that transcended and superseded the very traditions they restaged which provided an editorial standpoint outside them.

Literacy stands for “progress” in a double sense. It facilitates an individual’s *ìlosiwájú*—“moving forward”—in a career, securing better jobs and higher status. But it also represents *òlajú*—“enlightenment”—in the more general sense of modernity. *Òlajú* is usually used positively to evoke a decent, well-run society, with electricity, hospitals, schools, Christianity, and so on. Literacy or, more generally, schooling is thus often used as a metonym for an entire cultural and moral order.⁵ Claims to superior enlightenment are a powerful weapon in the struggle for social standing. They were particularly useful to the theatre-company members who, as they themselves frequently complained, were unfairly regarded by sections of the public as “vagrants, drunkards, children whose parents have rejected them, smokers of marijuana, people who play while other people are working.” It was partly to counteract this that the theatres laid so much stress on their socially useful and edifying role as “practical journalists” but even more as “preachers” teaching the public moral lessons.

The powerful, if unstable accommodation achieved within this framework

of *àsà ibílè* and *òlajú* generated cultural effects of remarkable impact. The intermediate social sphere within which the popular theatre operated was notable for its simultaneous sense of incompleteness or lack—expressed as a regret at not having more schooling—and its extraordinary, vital self-confidence. It was out of this sector of the population, marked by its thwarted desire to go to grammar school and to university, that there burst a gigantic explosion of creativity—a hundred theatre companies, dozens of “*ewi* exponents,” a hugely successful outpouring of popular music, hundreds of Yorùbá-language novels, and volumes of drama and poetry. The theatre revealed its creators’ wish to transcend the limitations of the social milieu in which they operated. But alongside aspiration, there was a confidence in existing cultural practices and a certain mockery and distrust of the educated elite. The concept of *òlajú* itself was sometimes used, apparently without irony, to denote the forces that destroyed “respect for tradition” (see also Peel 1978)—an indication that the amalgamation of ideas about progress and tradition was always unstable, leaving room for contradiction and internal criticism.

The representation of literacy and enlightenment was, then, in some ways an ambiguous and contradictory one. But there is no doubt of its powerful pull. The nostalgic affirmation that makes “orality” the guarantor of “tradition,” “authenticity,” or “identity” was not shared by the performers and audiences of Yorùbá popular theatre. They talked about the value of “our traditions” and even “our Yorùbá heritage,” but not about the value of “orality.” It was as if the Yorùbá heritage actually appeared to better advantage in the guise of virtual writing.

Notes

This is a revised and abridged version of a paper entitled “Literacy, Improvisation and the Public in Yoruba Popular Theatre,” published in *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales*, ed. Stewart Brown, Birmingham University African Studies Series no. 4 (1995): 6–27. The issues raised here have been discussed in more detail in my book *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). However, I hope that there will be some value in re-presenting the material and arguments in a more condensed form. I am indebted to friends and colleagues at Northwestern University for their comments on the original paper during a year that I spent at the Institute for Advanced Study and Research in the African Humanities there. They include Keith Breckenridge, Catherine Burns, Catherine Cole, Stephan Miescher, Sandra Richards, and Virginia Stewart. Thanks also to Paulo Farias for his invaluable suggestions.

1. For a detailed account of the process of “filling out,” see Barber 2000a, 172–203.
2. Just as those who were fluent in English preferred to use English in interviews I recorded with them (though we spoke Yorùbá to each other all

the time otherwise), it is quite possible that they stressed the importance of writing in these interviews more than they would have done in other contexts. I was from the University of Ife and was writing a book about the theatre company, which may have made people feel they should present their work in as “progressive” and “educated” a light as possible. However, the very fact that I, an academic, was eagerly incorporated into the company and that my participation was announced and advertised at every opportunity was indicative of a positive orientation toward the sphere of education. Mr. Adéjòbí was enthusiastic about the idea of having a book written about him and his company and also wanted the texts of his plays to be published. It is also important to note that the foregrounding of the idea of written texts did not occur only in interviews with me: it went on in many dimensions of their actual theatrical practice, as will be seen below.

3. This was only possible with new and relatively unknown plays, however. Some of their older plays—especially those that had been shown on television—were so famous and so beloved by audiences that they could not possibly have used their titles for other plays without causing disappointment and outrage among their fans.
4. Ládíípò was exceptional in being supported and sponsored by Ulli Beier and then by the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan University. The publication of *Oba Kò So*, *Obá Wàjà*, and *Obá Mórò* was undertaken by the Institute and the transcriptions and translations of the texts were prepared by institute staff. However, this exercise in publication was in no way an alien “scriptocentric” intrusion. Many theatre companies aspired to publish versions of their plays; Adéjòbí himself said he had two ambitions: to make a film and to publish some of his favorite plays.
5. In J. F. Odunjo’s *Omo Oku Orun* (1964), for example—a novel whose plot the Adéjòbí Theatre borrowed for their play *Itoju Kunle*—there is a greedy, unscrupulous, and cruel stepmother character who worms her way into the household of a widower who moves in more educated circles than she does. The novel suggests that her lack of education makes her not only lazy, vulgar, and unkind but also incompetent at housekeeping! Cleanliness, godliness, and common kindness are here conflated under the sign of education.

14 “How *They* See It”: The Politics and Aesthetics of Nigerian Video Films

Akin Adesokan

The diversification of the media of expression for the Traveling Theater troupes no doubt reflects, among other things, the commodification of popular artistic and cultural expression in order to exploit the cultural and psychological needs of the newly citified masses for entertainment, diversion and even escapism.

—Biodun Jeyifo (1984, 76)

KKK is the unselfconscious popular abbreviation of *Kodun, Kopo, Kope* (*Beautiful, Surplus and Lasting*¹), the title of a Nigerian video film² released in June 2002. It is the two-part (as of December) story of Chief Rhodes, a multimillionaire who wills half his wealth to the child of his pregnant daughter. The shock of her father’s sudden death results in Mope losing her baby. Desperate for a child, Tunji Daniels, an otherwise supportive husband, engages in extramarital affairs, with unforeseen consequences for Rhodes’s legatees as well as his extended family. *KKK* advertises itself as a “super modern Yoruba film,” is subtitled, and engages an eclectic cast that pits Alhaji Kareem Adepoju, the famous Baba Wande of Yoruba traveling theatre, against Shan George, who speaks accented Yoruba and has appeared in English-language video films. It is so cutting edge in topicality that a character would, for an outrageous example, invoke Osama bin Laden and America as a metaphor for the tension between himself and his mistress.

These, then, are two distinctive features of Nigerian video films as an extremely popular art form: an imaginatively willful, even reckless stitching together of extensive references to local and global events, personalities, images, and—not the least in this particular case—the abbreviated popular title, *KKK*, which blithely references a traumatic historical event abroad—an equally willful ideological ambivalence. I underscore this shortcoming only to the extent that it enables a more productive viewing of the films. The ambivalence represents a paradoxical space for critiques of power, as Karin Barber (1986, 27) sug-

gests regarding Yoruba popular theatre (one of the form's antecedents), but it is also being productively explored in a distinctly artistic manner in some of the video films. I will examine the socioeconomic context of the form's emergence and discuss how this context is responsible for the political and aesthetic choices that frame the films as artistic products.

In the early 1990s, popular drama, hitherto presented on the stage, television, or the cinema as the work of actor-producers of the Yoruba traveling theatre (excepting English-language teledramas), took on a new life as films that were shot on video and digital cameras, exhibited, and mass marketed. Offspring of the traveling performers still constitute a major force in the video film practice and their works still retain fragments of the troupe character, but the hitherto crucial system of guild association has given way to "caucuses," a different form of organization that acknowledges competition and collaboration with Igbo traders and English-language filmmakers.

Reflecting on the economic environment that impoverished the celluloid film but accelerated the explosion of the video film, Bernard Belasco ponders the enormous power of international finance capital under which the local entrepreneur had to work. It was a context in which the imperatives of global oil demand short-circuited the role of the entrepreneur in Nigerian development (Belasco 1980, 193). Although Belasco does not directly address the theatre troupes, the position the groups occupied as entrepreneurs and their close association with the world of urban masses as actors on the margin of externally controlled economic systems framed them into the picture. Filmmaker Ola Balogun had been drawn to collaborating with traveling-theatre artists (Hubert Ogunde and Adeyemi Afolayan) by the popularity of the genre in which they worked; there was a ready market for their supernatural stories of devious witches, magical transformations, and sundry Manichean themes and, to all appearances, a film industry was taking root in Nigeria. It still constitutes what is often referred to as the golden era of the Nigerian cinema, roughly the period between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, during which, to varying results, trained filmmakers such as Balogun, Francis Oladele, Eddie Ugbomah, and Ladi Ladebo shot feature films in Yoruba and English in 35mm and 16mm formats.

Popular though they were, the films of this period constituted little more than "filmed theater," "characterized by a purveyance of mediocrity as genial art . . . a practice [that] negates the original code of traditional Yoruba traveling theater" (Ukadike 1994, 149). Apart from tending to a conservative thematization of Nigerian realities,³ these films were notorious for importing the structure of the traveling-theatre tradition into cinema largely unmediated. Traveling theatre reposed control of a specific troupe in the hands of the founding producer, and in the new medium, troupe leaders variously transformed theatre companies into film companies and assumed the position of the director, but mostly in name.

Ukadike's critique is valid to the extent that it addresses the limitations of Yoruba theatre, but it also confuses thematic and cinematic concerns. Like most

academic analyses of cultural production in Africa, this critique reveals a bias for “quality work” and “artistic integrity,” phrases mobilized in reference to the concerns of Third Cinema and the more dominant trend in francophone African cinema. This dominant trend, from the films of Ousmane Sembène to those of Jean-Pierre Bekolo, is uneven in its own way, but it is notably preoccupied with political representation of African global experience in a manner mostly absent in Nigerian (and Ghanaian) works. These two aesthetic directions, one populist, the other largely elitist (but not entirely so), point to the distance the cinema in Africa has to travel to attain self-sustenance. I shall return to this point in the concluding part of the chapter. Although the growth of Nigerian films in the 1980s was driven by the urge to satiate Yoruba audiences, the films, especially those made in the latter half of the decade, were more than “filmed theatre.” The entry of directors and cinematographers such as Bankole Bello and Tunde Kelani had begun to enrich the medium’s potentials, and the problem was less an inability to use the film medium than an inability to raise the requisite capital.

Commercialization and privatization were some of the basic tenets of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed on Nigeria in the mid-1980s to regulate the economy. The program cut subsidies in public corporations, and in the television sector, then being managed as a government parastatal, this precipitated the mass departure of producers of soap operas. But it again coincided with the phenomenal success of television serials such as Jimoh Aliu’s *Arelu* (1987) and *Yanponyanrin* (1989), both titles suggesting communal turmoil; Zeb Ejiro’s *Ripples* (1988) and *Fortunes* (1992); Amaka Igwe’s *Checkmate* (1991/92); and Yekeen Ajileye’s *Koto Orun* (1992) and *Mama Mi P’Eko* (1994). The first two and the last two of these serials were produced by Yoruba theatre groups and served accustomed menus of “juju contest,” village squabbles between a conclave of witches and vulnerable masses. Conversely, before the advent of privatization, the English-language soaps had an established reputation as dramas of middle-class values in a society from which such values were just disappearing or had not quite developed. In the socioeconomic context of the SAP years, this genre fulfilled a mass desire for wealth and power. The glamour absent from daily life pervaded the television screen. With filmmakers unable to fund films in the celluloid mode,⁴ the idiom of performance was undergoing a rapid and profound change. It only required opportunistic proliferation, motivated in Nigeria by sheer survival, to crystallize into a popular form. This is the economic basis for the emergence of the video film as an “aesthetic of man-must-wack.”⁵ Wole Ogundele has written of the practice developed in the late 1970s by Hubert Ogunde of inserting filmed episodes into his plays: “Such insertions usually involved fantasy actions or elements (transformations of human beings [in]to animals, for instance) which were meant to convey the supernatural dimensions of Yoruba cosmology, but which could not be convincingly done on the stage” (1997, 49). Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala) opened some of his performances with similar episodes and, according to Jeyifo, the practice started with the comedian (Jeyifo

1984, 10). These reflections suggest that the supersession of stage performances had other inspirations beyond the economic.

The real impetus for the proliferation of video production came with the release of an Igbo film, *Living in Bondage*, by Kenneth Nnebue of NEK Video Link in 1992. Nnebue had been producing films in Yoruba since about 1988, in the video drama mode that developed when economic and technical vagaries got the better of the romance between traveling theatre and the big screen. The film tells the story of Andy, a jobless man who satisfies his yearning for wealth by sacrificing his devoted wife, Merit, to a secret cult. He becomes rich but soon finds that the demands of the cult are endless and the ghost of his wife haunts him. He breaks down, enters a Pentecostal church for recovery, and is saved by Christ. The video film was an instant hit, quickly going to a sequel with an innovative touch: it came with subtitles, clearly an edge over the Yoruba films in the multicultural context of Lagos. The politics of this film, released when Mike Bamiloye's *Aghara Nla (Mighty Power)* was a television hit, resides in the figuration of spiritualism, the resolution of conflict through religious deliverance, and it has an important consequence for the management of extra-materialist spectacle in the video films. It was a matter of months before the "logic of the popular" (Ukadike 2000, 258)—a phrase I find apt in discussing the aesthetics of the films—caught up with the trend thus set and brought the full energy of actors and independent producers migrating from the television and the theatre in the incipient sector. Films were now being released with astounding regularity. All of this happened against the background of diminishing production in the celluloid format.⁶

The network of traders between Lagos, Onitsha, and Aba (in the East) and its importance to the commercial success of the early video films comes up as an issue in Haynes and Okome (1997, 30–31). The influence achieved by video marketers resulted from the buy-and-sell orientation of this network. The centrality of the marketers to the industry comes from the ordinary fact of filmmaking as business, but that is not all. The marketers began first as investors, mainly because the independent producers who weighed in after the success of *Living in Bondage* needed funding. But the alleged dishonesty of funded producers and the resultant need to maintain control in this obviously unorganized field led investors to transform themselves into producers who hired directors, followed cast and crew to locations, and gave out money when needed. Indeed, they soon began to decide who would act in their films, and it did not take long before they also became directors. The centrality of marketers to the business has been suggested as a main factor for the surfeit of themes bordering on the occult.⁷ When the "industry" decided to go on a recess in March 2002, it was marketers who sounded the call, comparing their initiative to the Hollywood shut-down of the 1920s.⁸

It is important at this point to examine a few of the films for the aesthetic choices that constitute them. These choices turn on the logic of the popular and the endless proliferation of both films and their specific aesthetic modes. These,

in turn, are engendered by the perception of the video film as business and also as a medium of cultural representation. As must have become clear by now, this chapter focuses on Yoruba-, Igbo-, and English-language films. If Nnebue's NEK Video Link was the first to realize and exploit the commercial possibility of the video film, Tunde Kelani's Mainframe Productions moved ahead by imbuing a story shot on video camera with robust cinematic images. And he did this on the discursive template of Ifa divination in a manner markedly different from the general visual representation of the occult in Nigerian video films. *Ti Oluwa Nile* (1993–1995), the three-part story of Chief Otun Asiyambi, a reprobate who colludes with others to sell ancestral land for a petrol station, relates to Yoruba culture with more respect than irony. Otun and his cohorts reinvent the town's founding myth and successfully defend their version in court. They soon begin to die one by one, and Otun flees in order to forestall his own death. The moral of the story, suggested in the repetitive chanting of an Ifa verse counseling against land speculation, is built into the story as a series of disclosures, cinematically counteracting Otun's duplicitous moves and often-painful adventures. The film extensively employs extradiegetic music, cross-cuttings, and dream (or nightmare) sequences, totally dispensing with the infra-kinetic pace of the television drama common in English-language films. This is not the first time an Ifa priest appears on video, and Kelani's deployment of this form of disclosure, although culturally specific, should also be seen in the wider context of the presence of spiritualism in the Igbo/English-language videos and the importance that Yoruba theatre and television productions have given supernatural forces as an aesthetic norm. There are ideological as well and aesthetic consequences for this choice: it plays to the expectations of an audience already familiar with certain popular images while also foregrounding a constructive approach to the representation of such images. The move challenged the usually competitive Yoruba filmmakers with fresh formal possibilities.

One of these is the innovative structuring of the means of arbitration that Yoruba theatre had formalized in its traveling and television-studio phases. The figuration of the Kabiyesi (the king) and his palace, the family gathering, the police station, and the court as sites of arbitration in *Ti Oluwa Nile* bears comparison with such diverse works as Oyin Adejobi's *Kootu Asipa* television series and Awada Kerikeri's 1987 film *Omo Orukan*. In order to focus a play's plot, Yoruba theatre artists often deployed these sites as narrative techniques. These means of arbitration have been used to effect twists in the plot of *Iyawo Alhaji* (2) (Dudu Films, 1999), a film whose narrative template as a court case is suggested from the arrest of the wife-murdering Alhaji at the end of part one. The family gathering underlines the open-endedness of plot in *Ile Oro* (Oyedele Films, 2002) after the sudden death of Akintunde (Lere Paimo) during his housewarming ceremony; and in the two court scenes in *Makan* (Fowora Films, 2002), the plot is discussed further and a witness is called to effectively damage Chief Makan's character. There are hints in these moves of a paradoxical fascination with hardly effective political institutions, and it is the empty space of

such institutions that the populism of extra-materialist imagery often fills. Stunned by the inscrutability of a social code, films gesture to the Pentecostal substitution of a parapolitical order.

Perhaps because the Igbo filmmakers lack an antecedent performance idiom comparable to the Yoruba traveling theatre, there have been attempts to find a thematic kindred spirit for their films (which are increasingly in English) in the famous Onitsha market literature. Writers such as Adewale Maja-Pearce (2001) and Onookome Okome (2002) have made this connection, citing the films' preoccupation with themes of love, money, and the cruelty of the city as points of intersection with the Onitsha pamphlets. Okome indeed returns to the city novels of Cyprian Ekwensi as a paradigm for appraising the aesthetic currents in the video films, a paradigm that turns on the opposition of citiness to rurality (2002, 8–9). Maja-Pearce thinks that the artisanal method of producing the pamphlets has been intensified in the often-shoddy workmanship to be seen in any number of the video films. These references to Onitsha market pamphlets require a broader context to be convincing.

The aesthetic direction of Igbo films (and much of English-language productions drawing on this setting) compels a comparison with the momentous screening of a television adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1985. This production, which lasted a season on the Nigerian Television Authority, strives toward a cinematic reconstruction of the world in which the story of Okonkwo unfolds. The career of the actor Pete Edochie in later Igbo films relies on his masterly depiction of the aggressiveness of the flawed hero of Achebe's novel, and this characteristic, often depicted in English-language dramas with Igbo setting, has been interpreted to stereotype the Igbo person as an embodiment of aggression, economic and otherwise. It is this personality which, according to Hyginus Ekwuazi, most Igbo films are geared to rehabilitating (1997, 81). I refer to this screen adaptation partly because it is televised drama, a genre closer to cinema, and partly to relate it to some images in a fascinating Igbo film, *Ikuku (The Hurricane I and II)*, Andy Best Productions, 1995).

The video follows the search by the community of Abanubi for a priest of Ikuku to revamp the shrine of the god and stem the terrible hurricane ravaging the town. The two eligible brothers, Dr. Raymond and Osuofia (Nkem Owoh), are inadequate; the one is alienated by his education and "civilized" pretensions—wearing gloves to handle kola nuts, speaking English to Ikuku; the other is just a dissolute drunk. There is extensive dramatizing of this helplessness, but the spirit of the oracle may reside in Stephen, who was illegitimately fathered by Osuofia. In the final scene in part two (directed by Zeb Ejiro; part one was directed by Owoh), the boy appears at the shrine and is ravaged by spiritual tremors, suggesting his embodiment of forces that neither the Ezigbo family nor the rest of Abanubi are able to comprehend. The suggestion of cultural dislocation at the heart of this film can be read against the condition of Igbo people in contemporary Nigeria. The stereotype of an aggressive industriousness among the Igbo in Nigerian cities is often the flip side of the corporate

distrust of the Nigerian state since the end of the civil war. It is a society in which the Igbo are said to have no political power, and the film further suggests this lack through its constant referencing of an international space.

A political attitude, in the specific sense of a concern with the distribution of power in a social situation, is only lately present in the video films. What has long exerted a powerful presence is a different kind of ideology, spiritualism, whose mode of exposition often results in a compromise of the demands of film as a technical medium. Spiritualism is often presented as spectacular “rituals,” Pentecostal exorcism, or supernatural resolution. The films are explicitly narrative; the story is fast moving, with swift intertitular devices such as “One Year Later,” “Seven Years Later,” heading for the final moment of confrontation between the Devil and Christ. This approach, reflecting the technical crisis of establishing narrative formats that are nonteleological, has begotten a different aesthetic. This is the aesthetic of serialization, in which the televisual pace of soap opera reconstitutes the form of a story as an acknowledgement of the partial origin of the video film in the television medium. It has resulted in a predilection toward sequels, with the promise that the story is “to be continued.”

With most films focusing on the Herculean task of surviving the prevalent economic conditions—the everyday trauma of producers and actors alike—it is not hard to see why the mutually reinforcing presence of otherworldliness and social anomie should command such popularity. It is in this sense that the epigraph, Jeyifo’s observation about commodification of mass fears and insecurities in urban settings, finds credence in current popular identification with the video film. Commodification is the fuel of the extreme proliferation in the field, and following the logic of the popular, it explains the films’ fascination with topicality almost to the point of journalistic immediacy. This condition is a far cry from the cultural identitarian investment of the cinema in West Africa outside of Nigeria and Ghana, against which representational authority the video film seeks to maneuver (Ukadike 2000, 258). The concerns of the Nigerian filmmaker, who speaks disdainfully about films “appreciated from the point of cultural curiosity,”⁹ appear different from the favored program in Ouagadougou. Not forgetting that the cultural institutions involved in the francophone region are also lining up to offer their support in Nigeria and Ghana,¹⁰ the challenge of this form lies paradoxically in the deceleration of the logic of the popular, in how it is able to strike a balance between the expectations of its enchanted audiences and the progressive social dynamics of the celluloid cinema.

Notes

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1. My preferred title would read *Good, Plenty, and Lasting*.
2. The terms used to describe the films vary. English-language filmmakers call their works “movies,” suggesting a fascination with Hollywood, while Yoruba filmmakers often say “films.” The term “video film” has been adopted mostly by critics and scholars, pointing to the hybrid nature of the form torn between television and film and shot on video.
3. Ogunde was asked in 1981 why he, who began his career with socially engaged plays such as *Bread and Bullet*, *Tiger’s Empire*, and so forth, did not think of a play on contemporary issues of political relevance (such as the artificial shortage of food). He answered: “To me, I think the shortage of rice is not as universal a problem as the problem I tried to solve in *Aiye* and *Jaiyesimi*. To me, the shortage of rice is a locality.” See Jeyifo 1981, 221–222.
4. “By the time my partnership with Wale Fanu of Cinekraft came to an end, I had come to the conclusion that we could never fund films originating from the traditional chemical-based celluloid and that it was time to start looking for alternative technologies” (Tunde Kelani, e-mail communication).
5. After using “The Art of Man-Must-Wack” as the title of an earlier survey of the video film industry in *Glendora Review* (3, no. 2 [2001]: 98–106), I came across Ukadike’s adoption of Haynes’s “aesthetic of hunger,” which use he says conflicted with Glauber Rocha’s original conception of the term. My choice is closer to Haynes’s sense of the term but goes beyond his perception of the films as “shoddy” to reflect on the spirit of invention motivating the survival strategy. See Ukadike 2000, 260n3.
6. “From an average of four feature films per year in the last decade, production plummeted into one feature film in 1990, raced up to four in 1991 and dropped a notch into three in 1992, when Brendan Shehu’s *Kulba na Barna* was released. The record for the year 1993 was nil. And in 1994, Ladi Ladebo shot and released the only celluloid feature film of the year, *Pariah*, sponsored by the UNFPA. Not until two years later did another feature film, *Oselu* by Bankole Bello, hit the screen” (Adesanya 1997, 15).
7. This complex development, including responses to it from other sectors, has been well captured in many newspaper articles, but perhaps the most detailed account is to be found in Husseina’s “Keep Your Money” (2002).
8. The move to go on recess was geared toward arresting the glut in the video market and addressing the issues of piracy, illegal film rentals, and the proliferation of films, as well as a perceived lack of government patronage and shrinking market. It lasted from 1 March to 21 June.
9. When interviewed, Kelani and Igwe, two of the more focused filmmakers, both spoke rather dismissively of the dominant trend at the biennial Festival Pan-African du Cinéma et de la Télévision d’Ouagadougou in Ouagadougou while also bemoaning the unwillingness of this festival to grant Nigerian filmmakers equal opportunity for screening.
10. From 10 to 13 July 2002, the second Lagos International Forum on Cinema, Motion Picture and Video in African took place. It was organized by the

Independent Television Producers' Association of Nigeria in collaboration with the Embassy of France and the Nigerian Film Corporation and five other co-sponsors, including Canal France International. Participants came from Nigeria, South Africa, France, Ghana, Benin, Zimbabwe, and the "European Union."

15 Modernity's Trickster: "Dipping" and "Throwing" in Congolese Popular Dance Music

Bob W. White

During a recent trip to Kinshasa, I was surprised to see a high-level minister in the newly formed Kabila government walking around the airplane shaking hands and chatting with the other passengers. When he approached my seat, I stood up, introduced myself and my wife, and told him I was returning to Kinshasa to continue my research on popular music.¹ "Popular music? Wonderful!" he said, turning to my wife. "Madame, you must be careful, you know. Keep a close watch on your husband, because as soon as he sees the *dombolo* he will never be the same." The minister's marital advice did not reference the fact that this highly eroticized widely commercialized dance step had been banned in other parts of Africa for "political reasons," but it did echo the growing fear in Kinshasa that the dances and shouts of young musicians represent the final assault against African "traditional" values; popular ways of speaking about the moral crisis in the Congo have gone from an emphasis on "démocratisation" to "dollarisation" and now "dombolisation." Who is to blame for this state of moral decay? No one knows. In fact, no one even knows what *dombolo* means, except, of course, the *atalaku*.

The contagious sound of Congo-Zairian popular dance music has made it in some sense the *musica franca* of much of sub-Saharan Africa (see Ewens 1994).² Over a period of more than fifty years, this peculiar cultural commodity has imposed itself in local markets throughout Africa, and in many places—not only in its place of origin—it is clearly attached to local notions of "Africanness" (see White 2000). Outside of its place of origin, Congolese popular music is variously known as *soukous*, *rumba*, and Congo Jazz, but within the Congo it is simply referred to as "*la musique moderne*."³ This label distinguishes popular dance music from various types of religious and "traditional" music (in Lingala, "folklore"), but it also speaks to a modernist aesthetic implicit in the music that manifests itself most visibly in the form of electric guitars and music videos, expensive cars with cellular phones, declarations of romantic love, and European high fashion.⁴ People in Kinshasa often say that popular music and the city

“grew up” together and that their special relationship constitutes an important part of what it means to be urban and “modern.”⁵

The *atalaku* is the musician in Congolese popular music who creates and strings together the seemingly random series of short percussive phrases known as “shouts” that drive the fast-paced dance sequences of contemporary Congolese popular music. Although only scattered sentences have been written about the *atalaku*, they all in one way or another capture the contradictory nature of his persona. The *atalaku* rarely appears in music videos, and despite the fact that most people are familiar with his “song,” he is not classified as a singer. He shares the spotlight with some of the biggest names in the Kinshasa music scene, but he is stigmatized relative to his fellow band members. People criticize him for his crass behavior on stage and for his uglification of the fluid sentimentality of old-school *rumba*, but he has somehow become the necessary ingredient to every Kinshasa dance sequence. Given the *atalaku*’s ambiguous position in society and also given the humor and embarrassment that often surround his persona, is it possible to see the *atalaku* as a kind of living, live-time trickster? If so, what does this trickster status reveal about the way that “tradition” is objectified within an African “modernity”?

The few book-length studies about Congolese popular music either were written before the emergence of the *atalaku* (see Lonoh 1969) or, for one reason or another, fail to see the phenomenon of *atalaku* as sociologically significant (see Bemba 1984a; Tchebwa 1996). Of the dozen or so articles published on Congolese popular dance music, only two make any reference to the *atalaku* (Biaya 1997; Nkanga 1997) or the use of shouts, and this despite the impact that his presence has had on the structure and style of the music.⁶ I want to argue that the *atalaku* deserves closer attention for at least two reasons. First, his contribution to Congolese popular music—the “traditional” art of shouting—is arguably the most conspicuous feature of this “modern” musical style and clearly one of the aspects that has led to the music’s increased integration into regional and international markets. Second, most *atalaku*, despite a prominent place on stage and in the recording studio, are marginalized within band hierarchies and within Congolese society as a whole. It is the counterintuitive nature of these two observations that leads me to believe that the *atalaku* may be part human, part trickster.

Tricksters seem to be as common in cultural analysis as they are across cultures.⁷ It is not only the trickster’s outrageous presence but also his role as social provocateur that has attracted the attention of scholars since well before the turn of the twenty-first century.⁸ Some scholars have warned against the dangers of reducing the trickster’s multiple meanings to one (see Pelton 1980) and have argued that the use of the trickster as a universal category is misleading and problematic (see Beidelman 1993).⁹ Even where trickster tales are common, they do not necessarily constitute a locally recognized narrative or cognitive category (see Beidelman 1993; see also Basso 1996). The few studies that have examined tricksters in the realm of popular culture either provide little

in the way of historical or social context (Baker 1994; Sekoni 1993 and 1997) or are mostly concerned with fictional or mythological characters (Cosentino 1989). By calling up the trickster figure in a discussion of real people and popular music, I want to suggest that tricksterliness evokes a set of human traits and practices that are socially relevant beyond their status as either structural or narrative conventions.

The *atalaku's* outrageous stage presence adds to the tension and pleasure of the live concert experience, but it also reveals how he mediates between musicians and between musicians and various types of fans. As the primary praise-singer of the band but also the buffoon, the *atalaku* is constantly in the position of reinforcing power and then subverting it. The material he uses is inspired by urban "traditional" music, and his creative borrowing offers clues about how "traditional" forms of cultural knowledge are put to use in the world of popular dance music. Perhaps less obvious is what the *atalaku's* presence reveals about local ways of understanding and maneuvering within a uniquely African "modernity."¹⁰ Thus, it may be possible to show that the *atalaku* plays the role of a human trickster, but the real challenge is to demonstrate what this observation reveals about culture and politics in a contemporary African setting. Before addressing these themes, however, it may be helpful to provide some information about the political and performative context from which the *atalaku* emerges.

The emergence of the *atalaku* in popular dance music was clearly influenced by the various forms of political performance and display in the early years of the Mobutu regime (see Nkanga 1997). The elaborate propaganda machine of the Zairian state used "traditional" music, dance, and theatre as means of rallying support for the one-party state and its official ideology of "authenticity" (see Kapalanga 1995). The *animateurs* who organized the theatre and dance troupes that performed for the political rallies of the MPR (Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution) probably served as a model for the *animateur* of popular music. In fact, musicians in Kinshasa use the terms *atalaku* and *animateur* interchangeably.¹¹ But the emergence of the *atalaku* must also be understood in the context of a popular music industry that began in the 1970s to suffer from the widespread sale of illegally produced audiocassettes and for which the spectacle of choreographed dancing represented a potential means of recouping lost revenue through increased ticket sales and live concerts.¹²

The majority of Congolese popular songs before 1970 had a structure that resembled that of most contemporary Western popular music. Verses and choruses alternated, and during solo sections the intensity of the improvising instruments (especially the guitar) led to a sense of excitement among the people in the audience. In Congolese music of the 1950s and 1960s, this solo section, usually referred to as the *seben*, would be extended and elaborated in order to encourage people in the audience to dance and musicians (especially guitarists) to display mastery of their instruments.¹³ In the early 1970s, many young music groups, sensing that their audience had a preference for performative dance sequences, began to place the *seben* at the end of the song and extend its

length. This change was profound not only because an extended *seben* created a space for singers to demonstrate their skills as dancers but also because its new position at the end of the song led to a clearer separation between words and dance. In fact, almost all music produced after 1975 adopted this new two-part song structure, a slow lyrical section filled with words (verse and chorus) and a fast-paced dance sequence (*seben*) with choreographed dance moves and the *atalaku's* unmistakable *cris de joie* (shouts of joy).¹⁴ Although shouts of various kinds have always existed in Congolese popular music, it was not until the emergence of the *atalaku* that shouts became used in any systematic way: "The shouts that are heard in almost all of the 'youth' music produced throughout the 1980s up to the present day . . . are indispensable, if not unavoidable in today's music; hysterical shouts without which there would be no true ambience in a song, on the dancefloor . . . in our hearts" (Tchebwa 1996, 208, my trans.). Before the *atalaku*, it was common for musicians to shout out the names of fellow musicians (as in the early recordings of the 1940s and 1950s) or the names of new dances as they were being exhibited (a practice that became common in the 1960s and 1970s), though these shouts were much less complex and did not constitute a structural aspect of the music as they do today. The explosion of international interest in Zairian *soukous* music in the mid-1980s was due not only to changes in the political and economic environment at home (which forced many musicians to leave Kinshasa) but also to the visible presence of the *atalaku* and the increased emphasis on dances and shouts as a part of live performance.¹⁵ While the *atalaku* has been central to the international (albeit imperfect) commercialization of this "modern" music (see White 2000), historically his presence is linked to the growing importance of urban "traditional" music, especially from the area of Kinshasa known as Kintambo.

Kintambo is an urban zone located on the west end of Kinshasa and is one of the areas of earliest settlement in the Pool Region of the two Congos. Kintambo still carries with it the image of a "village within the city" and is often referred to as the "cradle" of urban traditional music and the "birthplace" of the *atalaku*.¹⁶ Under the supervision of Kumaye, a Kintambo-based businessman and local community figure, Bana Odeon was one of the first neighborhood folklore groups to manage an administrative office and personnel for its activities. Taking inspiration from the elder (predominantly Baumbu) musicians of Kintambo, Kumaye and his assistants brought together a large number of unemployed local youth and began to train them in the arts of traditional dancing and music. In 1978, the music section of Bana Odeon began to play in local bars, attracting the attention of "modern" music fans with folklore-inspired dance steps and shouts. In 1980, they were named the best new group of the year (*révélation de l'année*) and in the same year were given the award for the year's best dance, *zekete*.

It was perhaps this exposure to Bana Odeon's particular brand of modernized folklore that led a member of Zaiko Langa Langa to approach one of Bana Odeon's percussionist-singers with a proposition in 1982. From my notes:

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“The day that Sonnerie came to my house,” remembers Bebe, “he said to me: ‘Bebe, you have to come play with Zaiko. Dress nice and bring those maracas of yours.’ I remember that day. They came to get Nono too, we started just playing maracas. We had our own microphones and I was so proud to play with such a big group. It was the biggest day of my life.” (Bébé Atalaku, February 3, 1996)

Bébé and his Bana Odeon colleague Nono (along with a third Bana Odeon musician named Manjeku) soon became permanent members of Zaiko Langa Langa, and their folklore-inspired shouts and dances soon became Zaiko trademarks. The first shout they popularized (1982) was the same shout from which the public eventually drew the name for this new musical role:

<i>Atalaku! Tala!</i>	Look at me! Look!
<i>Atalaku mama! Zekete!</i>	Look at me, mama! Zekete!
<i>Zebola ka zebola, na</i>	Zebola, zebola and
<i>Zebola dance!</i>	The zebola dance! (Bébé and Nono Atalaku [Zaiko Langa Langa])

Reaction to Zaiko’s innovation was mixed at first. There were those musicians and fans, perhaps purists, who believed that the introduction of folklore would compromise the rich tradition of “modern” *rumba* for which Kinshasa had become known. They viewed folklore as music that was appropriate in a ceremonial or ritual setting but not worthy of sharing the stage with Zaire’s “modern” music. Some fans claimed that Zaiko had gone too far and deserved to become the laughingstock of the capital. Others, however, especially younger fans, saw the arrival of the *atalaku* in a more positive light, since at some level it challenged the hegemony of the musical “elders”:

Zaiko had been playing pretty much the same music for ten years. We brought a breath of fresh air to the music. At first they said all we did was scream and shout, but now they respect us. We were proof that the older generation was dead and buried. (Bébé Atalaku, February 3, 1996)

Bébé remembers with pride the series of shouts that he and Nono made famous during their early years working side by side in Zaiko: “The shouts we came up with were the rage in Kinshasa.” Seeing the effect that this innovation had on Zaiko’s record sales and concert attendance, many music groups began to follow Zaiko’s lead, and today the *atalaku* is an indispensable part of every self-respecting band in Kinshasa. In fact, some bands keep as many as five *atalaku* on hand at any one time. Just in case.

Due to the frenetic pace of musical production in Kinshasa, the most popular shouts and dances are constantly changing. Only a very small number earn the distinction of staying on the market for more than a few months and even fewer are considered good enough to be picked up and used by musicians other than those who create them (*moto*, *kibinda nkoy*, and *dombolo* being the most recent examples). Apart from improvised shouts, there are probably no more than about one dozen easily recognizable shouts that circulate around Kinshasa at any given time.¹⁷ Almost all bands draw from this common pool of shouts to

complement their own repertoire, but as a general rule borrowed shouts should not surpass those created by members of the band and in most cases those borrowed are adapted to reflect some original contribution.¹⁸ Given the acute economic crisis of the 1990s and the resulting decrease in concert attendance, many musicians feel pressure to include some or all of these well-known shouts and accompanying dance steps in their live repertoire in order to hold on to an increasingly fragile fan base in Kinshasa.

The magic of the *seben* in Congolese popular music is due in part to the fact that it tends to creep up on the audience. After the singers have finished the last lines of the chorus, the lead singer will step away from the microphone and raise his arm, sometimes looking around to make sure all the musicians are prepared for the change. The lead guitarist then kicks off the *seben* with a guitar riff that is slightly accelerated and is soon joined by the drummer's snare, the *atalaku's marakas* (now acting as a rattle), and a random scream from somewhere off mike. It is in this space of about thirty seconds that the song changes from words to motion, with the guitarists playing fast paced nonstop and the singers falling into a formation of choreographed dance that will continue until the end of the song. Throughout the *seben*, the *atalaku's* job is to encourage people to dance, a feat that he accomplishes by stringing together the shouts (*cris*), sung shouts (*chants-cris*), and various other vocal gymnastics that make up his bag of performative tricks.¹⁹ This is when the *atalaku* becomes a trickster.

The *seben's* particular mood of controlled frenzy is sustained in great part by the *atalaku*, who—often with devilish satisfaction—takes the microphone from the singers as they switch from singing to dancing. But the *atalaku* does more than shouting. He is an instrumentalist, playing a spray-can shaker that accompanies the driving rhythm of the snare drum.²⁰ He is a vocalist, using the microphone to both sing and shout. And he is a dancer, sometimes leaving aside the microphone and the maracas to join the front dance line or to join the female dancers in the *avant-scène*. In order to do all this and maintain the energy required by extended *seben* over a period of four to five hours, the *atalaku* must have incredible stamina.²¹ He is on the microphone for at least two to three times as long as the singers, and during technical problems such as instrument changes or blackouts a good *atalaku* will continue shouting even if his microphone stops working.

Although it is commonly believed that the *atalaku* is responsible for “calling” dance steps and shouts, this is rarely the case. The succession of dance steps during the *seben* is determined by a number of factors over which the *atalaku* has relatively little control, and thus his prominence during this part of the song is ultimately deceptive.²² In actuality, the only time that the *atalaku* has complete freedom with regard to the choice of shouts is during the extended dance solos that are usually intended to showcase the group's mostly female dancers, or *danseuses*.²³ After their arrival on stage, individual dancers can break away from the group to perform solos, wandering into the audience to tease spectators and solicit money. Never afraid of offending, the *atalaku* uses suggestive language that frames the dancer's presence as an object of male desire: “*Tala*

santé oyo” (Look at this health, i.e., “full figure”), and “*Aza na charme!*” (What charm!). Like Legba the “divine linguist” (see Gates 1988), the *atalaku* uses language to mediate between social categories, in this case, between female dancers and a predominantly male audience: “*Mami Mami e-eh oh, tala Mami Mami e-eh oh!*” (Mami, Mami! Would you check out Mami, Mami!) or “*Jeancy! azobina! aza danzé! azobina!*” (Jeancy! She’s dancing! She’s dangerous! She’s dancing!).

The *atalaku* mediates not just between men and women but also between musicians and various types of fans and/or sponsors. He puffs up each of the singers and guitarists by filling in the blanks of his preconfigured shouts with their names. He uses his voice like a spotlight, shifting the focus of attention temporarily to his colleagues on stage. Spectators use the opportunity to learn the names of their favorite performers, but before this important information is committed to memory, the *atalaku* is already scanning the audience in order to recall the names of those people who agreed to give him a *mwa petit geste* (a small gift of money) before the show. He shoots from the backstage to the backline and ricochets forward to the space between the lead singers and the first layer of fans, returning with members of the audience who will show their appreciation of the singer by “spraying” him with money. His trick is simple: if the singers get “sprayed,” he might get “sprayed” as well and thus his mischief, like that of Ananse the spider (see Hecht and Simone 1994) is grounded both in speech and in space.

The *atalaku*’s presence increases the tension and pleasure of live performance. Unlike the singers in the band, he is not restrained by the need to keep dance steps synchronized, though this never stops him from joining them momentarily to add a lewd variation of the latest dance step or poke fun at the stoicism of the instrumentalists. He has a joking relationship with the entire band, and by provoking his colleagues he feeds the audience’s need to see musicians with their guard down, laughing among themselves, sometimes losing their concentration. The *atalaku* is clearly a star (the word is used in both Lingala and French), since he shares the stage with “stars,” but he is still not famous. Despite the fact that his voice constitutes a kind of musical signature for the band, he often remains completely anonymous. He is a nameless everyman, “a face from the audience that enters on stage.”²⁴ If his shouting and dancing resembles the trickster’s “metaphysics of delight” (see Pelton 1980), it is not only because of the tubular quality of his voice but also because of the way that he puts shouts together and draws them out, ensuring that no one in the audience or on stage tires and that the dance floor stays full.

Most shouts are sung in a language that is heavily coded, either using obscure expressions from one of many local languages in the region (usually Kikongo or Kumbu) or drawing from creative forms of urban idiomatic expressions and slang.²⁵ According to T. K. Biaya, the *atalaku*’s role is to “hold the audience spellbound by shouting out words in unknown languages and by dancing on the bandstand, all of which lends a hysterical quality to the performance” (1995, 9). Thus the *atalaku*’s use of mystified language is ultimately a gesture of trickery,

since he borrows words and rhythms from unidentified sources of “traditional” knowledge and in some cases people dance to his words without knowing what they mean. In other cases, however, his multiple meanings are not lost on the audience. When he sings of things lewd and vulgar, the language is metaphoric but the audience is clearly in on the joke:

Mutuca munene oyo ekangi nzela (This big truck has blocked the road, i.e., a large-bottomed woman is passing by). (Beevans [Quartier Latin])

Enki! Enki! Enki! Enki! [the sound of a creaking bed?] *Etuta ntuta!* [two objects crashing together] *Soso amona nzambe, ndeko!* (The chicken has seen God, brother, i.e., has seen the promised land). (Lidjo [Big Stars])

Etutana! Etutana! Etutana! Yango na yango! Yango na yango! (Bang them [genitals] together, Bang them together, This and that, This and that) *Ahhh . . . ça c'est bon ça!* (Oooh . . . that's good). (Zaiko Langa Langa)

Likewise, when the *atalaku* sings about abandonment—and he does so often—the audience hears veiled references to bad leadership and neglect on the part of elites and elders. The well-known 1995 shout “*Kibinda Nkoy*,” despite the humor that is usually associated with its performance, evokes the existential questions of life in the postcolonial city and makes an implicit plea for the *responsables* to act responsibly (see Appadurai 1990):

Kibinda, Kibinda, Kibinda Nkoy, Na ko lala wapi-eh? Na ko suka wapi-eh? (Where will I sleep? Where will I end up?) (Nouvelle Image)

Shouts are a “desperate cry for justice” (Nkanga 1997, 6), and very often they reference children as the worse victims of political neglect:

Eh Mandundu talaka bana-eh! (Oh Mama Ndundu please take care of the children!) (Ntsangu [Super Choc de Shora Mbemba])

Mama na pain-oh, pain-oh, pain na pain (Oh mama, nothing but bread [to eat]) (Delta Force)

Na zelaka mwana akola, akoma munene (Waiting for my baby to grow big)
Na zelaka mwana akola, akoma makassi (Waiting for my baby to grow strong) *Na koma kobanga, Kinshasa sanga* (Now I'm afraid, Kinshasa is full of *sanga*)²⁶
Cimitiere ya Kintambo a zela ye (The cemetery in Kintambo awaits . . . is waiting for him) (Zaiko Langa Langa)

The abuses of those in power are exposed and lampooned (see Mbembe 1996) and through the safety of laughter, power is temporarily turned on its head:

Lui de finesse . . . j'ai vu Fantomas . . . Il a fuit, il a fuit, il est passé par ici (Oh Smooth One [Kabila] . . . I saw Fantomas [Mobutu] . . . running away, running away, he passed this way). (Kaludji [Wenge Musica BCBG])

Music has a power of its own that dismantles the soldier's discipline, exposing his lack of self-control and his tendency toward excess:

Soda azo ko preparer la guerra, Soda ameli masanga alingi kobina (The soldier is getting ready for war, the soldier drinks beer and just wants to dance).²⁷ (Theo Mbala [Big Stars])

The *atalaku* “pulls the chair out from under the system” (see Pelton 1980) as in the shout in which a young street urchin steals and resells the slippers of a West African merchant who is praying inside a local mosque (“*Bayanquis bayibi mapapa ya Wara*” [the streetkids stole the West African’s slippers]) or when he ridicules the lackeys of the regime because they sacrifice everything—even their head—in order to stay in the good graces of those in power (“*tiya mutu bakata*” [stick your head in so they can cut it off]). But the most subversive of the *atalaku*’s language games is the one in which he seems to say nothing at all. He endlessly repeats the short percussive phrases that become ecstatic anthems of meaninglessness, sacrificing substance for form, compelling all of Kinshasa and beyond to dance his discovery: *dombolo, dombolo, dombolo, dombolo-eh, dombolo*. Yet the shouts he throws at the audience are clearly part of a performative logic since “[t]he verb and proverb as a mode of rhetorical creation are conjugated with dance to make the music’s power explode” (see Nkanga 1999). Through his wonderful nonsense he has tricked us into ecstasy.

The Lingala term *ko bwaka* (lit. to “throw” someone) is used to describe what musicians do when they cite the names of people during a song or a performance.²⁸ The names of friends and sponsors can be cited at different points in a song, but by far the greatest number of names are found during the *seben* and are uttered by the *atalaku* himself. In Congolese popular music, it is not uncommon for entire songs to be dedicated to individuals, although even important sponsors are rarely cited alone. People whose names are “thrown” come from a wide variety of social and professional backgrounds, and individual names can be sung, spoken, or shouted, depending on where they fall in the structure of the song. Some artists are more active than others when it comes to citing people’s names in their music, and some artists are known to write songs that will receive titles only when a potential sponsor has agreed to pay for the song.²⁹ For outsiders and non-Lingala-speakers, “throwing” often goes unnoticed since names of people and lyrics tend to blend together. Congolese audiences, however, and musicians in particular, pay a great deal of attention to the names that are cited, especially those that occur on a regular basis.³⁰ In a concert setting, the *atalaku* will choose the names he “throws” according to whom he sees in the audience, but people in positions of high influence are sung even in their absence (or on albums) since it is generally assumed that word will get back to them. Mobutu’s (now late) son Kongolo—alias Saddam Hussein—probably the most often-sung figure in 1990s Kinshasa, was rumored to have individuals who informed him on a regular basis of which well-known bands were singing his praises and which were not. Those not singing his praises could be threatened with physical violence and faced with serious obstacles to their professional activities such as having the plug pulled mid-concert and being denied access to promotional networks (on Kongolo and violence, see Biaya 1997).

According to one *atalaku* with whom I spoke, “*Si tu le chantes pas—donc le passeport!*” (If you don’t sing his name, he’ll have your passport!)

By playing on the vanity and the emotions of existing potential patrons, musicians are able to improve their access to various social networks and financial resources. In effect selling space on their records and in their live performances, musicians have turned shouts and songs into a form of social advertising:

“Kin Service Express”, a mailing enterprise, certainly gets high returns on the money they paid Koffi [Olomide] to loudly mention their name in a number of songs, adding sentences such as “En toute confiance” [‘service you can trust’]. Songs as billboards. (Grinling 1998, 2)

Unlike the mythical trickster, the *atalaku*’s relationship with authority is conditioned by the fact that he depends on sponsors of various sorts for his livelihood. His relationship to power is not one of overt opposition or resistance—for this would cost him his job—but a dialectic one in which he attempts to capture the attention and the goodwill of the powerful for his own personal advancement and satisfaction.³¹

The trick in this case lies in the *atalaku*’s ability to lure money from the pockets of the rich and powerful through the performance of flattery. As with mythical tricksters, he often plays tricks for the sake of playing tricks and so that he can later tell the tale. By pronouncing someone’s name, whether it be on record or on stage, the *atalaku* offers the promise of immortality. At the same time, however, he violates the moral order of social exchange, singing the praises of people whose social status comes not from their lineage or their level of education but from the fact that they have money and are willing to part with it. The *atalaku* is criticized for seeking out this type of mercenary arrangement and turning the “sacred” practice of praise-singing into a profane means of generating income (see Diawara 1997; C. Miller 1987), probably because he too, like the trickster, is outside the order of the lineage system. And yet his animal magnetism, his voice of sandy brass, and his uncanny ability to drive us to dance—all of this makes the gesture of giving money to the *atalaku* a source of profound pleasure.

The *atalaku* represents a paradox in part because, despite his place in “modern” dance music, he is still closely associated with traditional musical styles or “folklore.” In fact, most *atalaku* explain what they do by referring back to the “traditional” music they say serves as an ongoing source of creative inspiration in their work. The most common way for the *atalaku* to create new shouts is by attending funeral ceremonies (*matanga*) and other events with “traditional” music in the hopes of hearing phrases, proverbs, or rhythms that can be adapted for use in “modern” dance music; this activity is usually referred to as “dipping” (in French and Lingala, *puiser*). “The inspiration comes from traditional groups,” explained Yoto Star, one of the co-founders of the band Swede Swede. “Zaire has many dialects, many traditions. I usually go to the *matanga* to get new ideas and then I take it and arrange it. As musicians we always have to do something new” (August 14, 1995). Thus, the most important trait for an

atalaku—and arguably one that defines the trickster of African folklore—is resourcefulness: “Me and Nono we were the first ones,” explained Bébé. “We used to go around like this . . .”—he makes a gesture like someone sneaking around, two hands picking something out of the air with his eyes wide open. To be a good *atalaku* is not necessarily to be creative *ex nihilo* but to borrow in a creative way.

Djuna Mumbafu, *atalaku* and showman extraordinaire of the late Pépé Kalle’s Empire Bakuba and now leader of the splinter group Delta Force, draws from a deep knowledge of “traditional” music and instruments. From my notes:

“To be a good *animateur* you have to know the *tumba* [drum]. If you don’t know the *tumba*, you won’t go far at all.”

“So ‘traditional’ music is important to ‘modern music’”? I asked.

“Oh yeah, especially when it comes to animation. If you know traditional music, then you can improvise from there. I take all of my stuff from folklore.”
(April 21, 1996)

According to T. K. Biaya, the *atalaku*’s inspiration is clearly rooted in African ritual and sacred performance, since he draws from a variety of “traditional” rites, festivals, and dances (Biaya 1995, 9). But the *atalaku* also takes ideas from the irony of “modern” life in the city. One shout tells the story of an elderly man who amassed a considerable amount of wealth as a deputy vice-minister in the Mobutu regime. When, for reasons of political expediency, he was removed from his post, his precarious financial situation became a source of public ridicule as he scrambled to fill up his empty cans and buckets with water from the neighbors’ house:

Luisa bongi bongi! Luisa bongi bongi! Il est temps . . . Il est temps! (Come and get the buckets ready! It’s time [to get water]!) (Bébé Atalaku [Zaiko Langa Langa])

Atalaks have also found material for shouts in everyday urban practices such as driving a car (the motion of the *kwassa kwassa* dance) or peddling pens:

Bic oyo, Bic oyo, Bic oyo CENT! Mayele na mwana na yo, CENT! (Get your Bic pen, it’s only 100 Zaires! To make your children smart, 100 Zaires!) (Ditutala Choc Stars)

Thus the discovery of a shout is considered a “coup,” a kind of intelligence or ruse, a sign of human resourcefulness that exists as an end in itself. Whether the discovery comes from the realm of “tradition” (distant villages, remote languages, initiation rites, etc.) or that of the “modern” (a James Brown concert; a Rambo film—see P. Richards 1996; pesticide-spray cans; etc.), most important is the illusion that the *atalaku* is able to create cultural and social meaning through his skills of identification and transformation. He shouts such things at us that we know are tricks, but like his maracas we cannot begin to imagine how they work or where they are from: “[T]he *atalaku*—contrary to popular singers—never reveals the ethnic sources of the words, rhythms, or movements he has borrowed” (Biaya 1995, 9). And though many will criticize the *atalaku*

for not being the source of his own inspiration (people in Kinshasa often say “all he does is dip into folklore”), once faced with the final product and weakened by its charm, they too will lose themselves in dance.³²

Much like Certeau’s urban tacticians, the *atalaku*’s movements conjure up images of human tricksters in action.³³ In this context, the trickster is overflowing with agency, inscribing the self in impersonal urban spaces, writing a love letter on company time. In many parts of Africa, tricksters and tricksterism are common idioms for expressing the contradictions of living in the “modernity” of the African city (see Cosentino 1989; Hannerz 1987; Sekoni 1993 and 1997). Thus, when people in Kinshasa refer to the *atalaku* as a distant relative of the African-American MC or rapper, they are calling attention not only to the fact that he shouts in a highly percussive manner and combines words and song in unexpected ways but also that the space he occupies is expressly urban: “For Africans, the urban bush is the site of new cognitions and spirits, the land of Eshu” (Hecht and Simone 1994, 87), where the “second” economy is actually the “real” economy (see MacGaffey 1991) and everyday acts of survival (*la débrouillardise*) are elevated to the status of art (see Biaya 1997; Jewsiewicki 1995).

If the *atalaku* is trickster-like, it is in part because he leads a liminal existence and seems to enjoy it. While he is not an animal, he does display certain animalistic tendencies: bodily release through performance and a voracious appetite for food and sex. He is not a witch or magician, but with his microphone he mystically activates something in our collective torso (see Biaya 1995). He is not well educated, but his shouts reflect a sophisticated understanding of the contradictions of “modern” life in Kinshasa, where people are drawn by the promise of a better life abroad and are disillusioned by the reality of a decaying post-colonial state (see DeBoeck 1998). Most important, however, is the *atalaku*’s ability to maneuver within this world of contradiction, and this “resourcefulness from a position of powerlessness” is what makes him most like the trickster of African folklore (see Beidelman 1980). It is in this sense that the study of human tricksters can contribute to knowledge about African mythology and African experience. The *atalaku* is neither rich nor poor, neither dangerous nor docile, neither “traditional” nor “modern,” but all of these things; he is “bricoleur’s delight” (see Cosentino 1989) or, to borrow a term from Allen Roberts, “Mr. In Between.”

In the end, however, the question of whether or not the *atalaku* is a trickster is less interesting than looking at what his trickster-like quality reveals about popular culture and performance in an urban African setting. Although he is accused of wreaking havoc and disorder in the very structure of classic Congolese *rumba*, a new performative order has coalesced around his presence, an order that places increasing emphasis on extended dance sequences, the spectacle of live performance, and the ecstasy of youth. But the conviviality of Kinshasa’s specific brand of ambience, which is in part fueled by the *atalaku*’s gesticulations, can also lead to rupture and excess (see Nkashama 1992). The *atalaku* is a threat to the social order not only because of the shameless way that he solicits money and advertises female sexuality but also because of the way he dips into

“tradition” for very “modern” purposes. It is in this sense that the *atalaku*'s tricksterliness is most relevant. Much like the tricksters of African folktales, he dips from the sacred and pours into the profane. He makes music by poking holes in the aerosol can of “modernity,” removing its head and filling it with the seeds only he knows how to find.³⁴

The *atalaku* is shaking things at us and shouting, but what is he saying? Like the street criers and charlatans in Rabelais's world (see Bakhtin 1984), the *atalaku* is praising those who put bread on his table, “throwing” their names into the Kinshasa night through rented PA systems and dented microphones.³⁵ At the same time, sometimes in the same breath, he is insulting everyone else, especially all the people who hold power over him in one form or another: politicians, soldiers, “free” women, rich foreigners, and jealous rivals.³⁶ His shouts, which are just as humorous as they are desperate, reveal the irony of a social order in which he is both a “star” and a social pariah. “Throwing” the names of politicians and businessmen is a tactic that enables him to keep the self intact and make the most of a bad life situation. By “dipping” into folklore for ideas and inspiration, the *atalaku* extols the virtues of “traditional” culture while at the same time putting it to use for the purposes of a fame and fortune he will probably never attain. His creative borrowing shows us not how creative he is—though we see that too—but how elements of “traditional” aesthetics are implicated in the complex and often-parallel processes of commercialization and political decay.

Notes

I would like to thank T. K. Biaya (the “T” is for trickster) for the initial inspiration to write this chapter, Reiko Yoshida for her assistance with preliminary research on the topic, and Mary Jo Arnoldi for putting me in the right place at the right time. Gilles Bibeau, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, and Blair Rutherford offered valuable comments on earlier drafts of the chapter, and Cory Kratz's close reading of a later version helped clarify my thinking on the subject considerably. I would also like to “throw” the names of some of the people that facilitated my research in Kinshasa, especially General Defao Matumona, Manda Tchebwa, Maneko Kongomane, Serge Makobo, and John Grinling.

1. Field research was conducted for approximately fourteen months in Brazzaville and Kinshasa (1995–1996, 1999) with financial assistance from the Centre for the Study of Society, Technology and Development (STANDD) at McGill University, McGill Associates, the McGill Graduate Faculty, and the Zeller Family Foundation. The Zeller Foundation also provided funding for a return visit in 1999.
2. I refer to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as “the Congo” or “Congo-Kinshasa,” in order to distinguish it from the Peoples' Republic of the Congo, or “Congo-Brazzaville,” which has also played an important role in the evolution of the musical style. When I use the term “Zaire” or

“Zairian,” it is to refer to the particular period after independence but before the arrival of Kabila’s forces to Kinshasa in 1997, when Mobutu was removed from power. I use the term “Congo-Zaire” to refer to the country as a whole, without particular reference to historical period or political leadership.

3. In this chapter, I use the term “popular” in two ways: first, as a generic term to distinguish a particular type of commercialized dance music from other musical genres (primarily “religious” and “traditional”) and second, to refer to something that is appreciated by a large cross-section of the population. In grappling with the question of “the popular” in Africa, I have found the work of Karin Barber (1997) and Johannes Fabian (1998) particularly helpful.
4. Lingala, a Bantu language from the equatorial region of the Congo, is the language of choice in Kinshasa and also the language used in most popular music. French is used among educated elites and civil servants, though it is very common to hear French words and expressions in everyday spoken Lingala.
5. By placing quotes around the terms “traditional” and “modern,” my intention is to question the status of these categories as spatially and historically fixed, something the *atalaku* does naturally, as I hope to show throughout this chapter.
6. I use the pronouns “he” and “his” advisedly, since to my knowledge there has never been a female *atalaku*. I will also refer to the *atalaku* for the most part in the singular; this is out of expediency as much as it is a conscious attempt on my part to portray the mythical aspect of the *atalaku*’s persona.
7. For a good summary of the literature on tricksters, see Pelton 1980.
8. Bremond (1975) and Paulme (1975), for example, use systems of coding and analysis that emphasize the formal characteristics of trickster tales, an approach that fails to account for variations in the production and reception of stories about tricksters (see Basso 1996; Pemberton 1975; Sekoni 1993) and that fails to see aspects such as humor and irony as sociologically significant (see Pelton 1980). Beidelman’s extensive work on trickster tales among the Kaguru (see 1980) illustrates the way that folktales not only reflect the structures and tensions of social organization but also constitute moments of agonistic play and individual agency (see 1993). Though Gates’s discussion of orality in African-American literature (1988) can be criticized for privileging a hermeneutic reading of African trickster tales, his discussion is rich in historical detail and is one of the few texts to locate African tricksters in a historically global time and space.
9. While this chapter was being prepared for press, Dieudonné Mbala Nkanga brought to my attention an essay in which he makes an explicit link between the *atalaku* and the pan-Kongo trickster figure most often known as Monimambo (see Nkanga 1999). Though I remain somewhat skeptical about the idea of making a direct comparison between the *atalaku* and the trickster figure of African folklore, it does seem that the two share certain key characteristics: they enjoy playing tricks, they mediate between different social categories, they reveal contradiction, they expose the abuse of power, and they make creative use of language. As I will argue later in this chapter, the most important trait shared by the *atalaku* and the African trickster fig-

- ure is their degree of resourcefulness in situations of scarcity and from positions of powerlessness.
10. For many African intellectuals, there is nothing shocking about the notion of a “modernity” that is structured and experienced in distinct ways from that of the West. Writing on mythology and the theatre of healing in the dramaturgy of Wole Soyinka, Gilles Bibeau argues that Soyinka’s work introduces “a whole set of cultural presuppositions relative to the role that Yoruba mythology—and other mythologies—could play in the remaking of a modernity in today’s Nigeria” (1996, 36; my trans.).
 11. Since the time of the MPR’s *animation politique et culturelle*, the meaning of the word *animation* has become generalized in its usage. In the context of popular music, *l’animation* (a word used in French and Lingala) has at least three different meanings: 1) the fast-paced dance sequence at the end of each song (see below); 2) the action of encouraging people to dance and have a good time—this is the work of the *atalaku*; and 3) the emotional state that results from this action, a kind of live excitement or state of pleasure that under certain circumstances can lead to a feeling of release or “ecstasy.”
 12. Popular accounts of the *atalaku* also relate this phenomenon to the shouting and dancing of James Brown, whose visit to Kinshasa as part of the Ali-Foreman “Rumble in the Jungle” in 1974 had a considerable impact on youth music and dance in the 1970s (see Nkashama 1979). On several occasions it was explained to me that the *atalaku* phenomenon emerged because young musicians did not have enough money to pay for the horns that were commonly used by musicians of the older generation. According to these accounts, the *atalaku*’s voice was in fact a substitute for the brass section. Compare with Keil and Feld’s discussion of the way that James Brown’s voice resembles a horn (1994, 26).
 13. According to musicians in Kinshasa, the term *seven* comes from the English word “seven.” Early Congolese musicians picked up the term by observing the palm-wine guitar style of the West Africans who had migrated to the region for work during the colonial period and whose music made generous use of seventh chords, a variation that creates a tension in the music that is believed to encourage dancing. Other descriptive terms are used to designate this section of the song (*chauffée*, *l’animation*, *partie saccadée*, *partie dansante*, *ambiance*), but of these, *seven* seems to be the most enduring and the most common.
 14. There are nonetheless examples of songs from this period that do not follow the two-part format, especially ballads (as in the early music of singer Koffi Olomide) or crossover projects (such as Papa Wemba’s album *Emotion* or the more recent work of Lokua Kanza) as well as the music of older generations of musicians that see themselves as “protecting” old-style *rumba*.
 15. Outside of Congo-Zaire, generic terms for Congolese music in the 1980s were often taken from the names of particular dance-shout combinations in vogue at the time. When I first arrived in East Africa in 1988, Zairian dance music was commonly referred to as *kwassa kwassa*, a popular shout and dance step from the period. A similar process occurred with the *soukous*, a dance-shout that first became popular in Kinshasa in the late 1960s and through various transformations in the 1980s became the name by which

- most Congolese popular music would be known in Europe and North America.
16. Given this history, it is perhaps no coincidence that Kintambo has produced a disproportionate number of folklore or “urban-traditional” music ensembles, most notably the Swede Swede family of music groups that took Kinshasa by storm for the first time in the late 1980s, with their suggestive tradi-modern dance craze, *sundama*. Kintambo also produced a large number of individual musicians who would later go on to work as *atalaku* on a professional basis (the most well-known being Choc Stars’ Ditutala, Empire Bakuba’s Djuna Mumbafu, and Wenge Musica’s Robert Ekokota).
 17. This tendency to draw from a common pool of material and the fact that the same dances/shouts are often used in different songs is one reason that Congolese music is often characterized as repetitive or monotonous. As much as possible I have tried to indicate the authors or executors of shouts (with the name of the band in parentheses), especially since within the music industry *atalaku* are acknowledged as performers but almost never as creators.
 18. There are of course some exceptions. Nostalgia groups such as Afrique Alliance and Mathieu Kuka’s Afrique Ambience who specialize in music from the classic *rumba* period make little or no use of choreographed dances and their accompanying shouts. Although Bana O. K. has been influenced by the two-part song structure and *animation* of post-1970 youth music, the dances they use are often of their own creation and reflect the taste and age of their mostly older audience. Another important exception is the music of Papa Wemba’s Viva La Musica, the only group to my knowledge that systematically refuses to use other group’s dances and shouts: “We want to do something different,” Wemba told me in an interview (7 January 1996). Informal observation suggests that less well-known groups (*petits orchestres*) are more likely to use dances and shouts of their own creation, probably in an effort to make a name for themselves and create a following.
 19. Some observers have commented on the recent practice of crooning shouts with “care” (*atalaku ya soin*) or “charm” (*atalaku ya charme*), which is increasingly being done by lead singers instead of *atalaku*. This phenomenon is not surprising given the increased visibility of the *atalaku* in recent years and given the aspirations of many *atalakus* to become singers themselves, factors that certainly exacerbate tension between the two.
 20. The most common form of maracas is made of an emptied-out insecticide can—of preference Mobil™, but Kilit™ or Raid™ are also acceptable—which is perforated in consecutive vertical lines and filled halfway with hardened red seeds from a special kind of tree that grows primarily in wealthy neighborhoods in Kinshasa.
 21. Songs usually last from twenty to forty minutes in concert. The two- and sometimes three-part song structure which lasts five to eight minutes on prerecorded material is lengthened primarily in the final part of the song, the *seben*.
 22. In most bands, the most senior singer will take on the role of dance-line leader. In this capacity, it is he who decides or “calls” the next dance step that in turn signals the next shout. But his decision is constrained by a number of factors, most important of which is the structure of the song.

- Partitions within the *seben* correspond to motifs from the lead guitar and thus partition length and transitions between partitions are usually determined by the lead guitarist.
23. Female dancers were first used in “modern” music by Tabu Ley Rochereau, who along with his Rocherettes conquered the Olympia Theater in Paris in 1970. Since then, female singer-dancers have become for the most part female dancers, and their now-ubiquitous presence (both in videos and in concert) plays upon female eroticism and male desire (Biaya 1995; Chiwengo 1976). In musical groups organized around female singers (Mbilia Bel, Tshala Mwana), *danseuses* are used in much the same way.
 24. “An atalaku is . . . is . . . a ‘présentateur’ who doesn’t leave the stage, a screaming poet who joined the band, a gimmick like a pedale wawa, a griot who forget the song” (Grinling 1998).
 25. On the early Kinshasa youth slang *hindubill*, see Tchebwa 1996 and Biaya 1997. On the use of “traditional” proverbs in popular theatre in Zaire, see Fabian 1990.
 26. *Sanga* is a sickness that many people in Kinshasa believe afflicts newborn children whose parents break the taboo of engaging in sexual intercourse within a period of one year of childbirth. The sickness is said to be passed to the child through the mother’s breast milk.
 27. Biaya gives a variant of this shout: “*Soda ala kosepela la guerre, mokonzi ala kozela losako*” (The soldier is only happy during wartime, his superior always waits for a salute) (1997, 355). Multiple readings of shouts, especially on the part of listeners, are common. Thus a line from the shout “*ah ah, a tsidi munu kake*” (I’m all alone) I also heard as “*ah, ah a simbi Movate*” (she uses skin whiteners). And this type of versioning is one of the ways that musicians authenticate the shouts that they borrow. For example, the recent shout “*pain na pain*” (nothing but bread) can also be heard as “*plein na plein*” (totally full), meaning the band’s concerts are always sold out. If Evans-Pritchard is right, then “[t]here are no originals, only versions” (1967, 33).
 28. I have chosen a literal translation of the Lingala term because it maintains the sense that people are being mentioned in passing and are not necessarily the focus of extended praise as has been amply documented for praise-singing traditions in West Africa (see Camara 1976; Hale 1994; and C. Miller 1987).
 29. The most striking example I have heard of “throwing” occurs in a live version of Kester Emeneya’s *Enfant de maman* (1993), which, according to Serge Makobo, contains the names of more than eighty different “sponsors” (see Makobo). Most albums produced in the last five to ten years have at least one if not several songs with individuals’ names as titles, suggesting that in most cases the songs were commissioned or purchased by wealthy fans. The money that musicians received in exchange for composing songs depends primarily on the musicians’ popularity. I have heard of individual songs being purchased for as little as US \$100 and as much as US \$3,000.
 30. Some of the most common names cited since the beginning of the 1990s include Adam Bombole (entrepreneur), Saddam Hussein (Mobutu’s son), Manda Tchebwa (music journalist), Bolowa Bonzakwa (music journalist), Achille Ngoy (journalist), Alain St. Pierre (radio announcer), Jean-Jacques

Bayonne (nightclub owner), George Weah (soccer star), Mutombo Dikembe (NBA player), Alain Mbiya (businessman), Eric Kenzo (businessman), Bob Maswa (music producer), Gaby Shabani (music producer), Mâre Kosala (music promoter), Africa #1 (radio station) and Antenne A (private television station).

31. Some scholars have viewed trickster tales as stories that people tell themselves about relations of power in human society. Most African folktale traditions contain stories that fit this analysis, the most common example being stories about rabbits (see Beidelman 1993). Baker suggests an historical link between the rabbit figures in African folklore, African-American folktales about Brer Rabbit, and the contemporary trickster-rabbit Bugs Bunny.
32. An emerging literature on black music and performance has begun to examine repetition as an aesthetic strategy that is especially common in (though not exclusive to) musics of the African diaspora: “sampling” in North American hip hop (see Rose 1994); “versioning” in West Indian, especially Jamaican music (see Hebdige 1987); and the “changing same” of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993). On repetition and “rehearsal” in African performance, also see Fabian 1990 and M. Drewal 1991.
33. “Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally the many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ . . . , clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike” (de Certeau 1984, xix).
34. Corinne Kratz, in a thought-provoking piece on recycled objects in African contemporary art, cautions against reading too much into this kind of destructive creativity: “Does a pragmatic practice of using what is available or affordable, born in part of necessity, necessarily imply the rest? When beer cans are used in toy trucks, do they merge macho associations of drinking and driving, warn against mixing the two, evoke national brewery distribution problems, or are they simply an abundant and appealingly colorful material resource of the right size and shape?” (1995, 11).
35. Shouts can also be a strategy used by musicians to criticize their rivals, both within and outside of the band (G. P. Buse, pers. comm.). The most recent example is Koffi Olomide’s anthem-like shout, “*Ozo ko rondpoint*” (You are always at your roundabout, i.e., going nowhere but in circles), in which he ridicules his main rival Nyoka Longo for never leaving the Kimpwanza roundabout that serves as the base for Zaiko Langa Langa’s rehearsals and concerts.
36. “The cries were not isolated from current events, from history. They were an essential part of the marketplace and street, they merged with the general popular-festive and utopian world. Rabelais heard in them the tones of a banquet for all the people, for all the world” (Bakhtin 1984).

Part Five: *The Social as Drama*

16 Theatres of Truth, Acts of Reconciliation: The TRC in South Africa

Catherine M. Cole

The cataclysmic changes South Africa has experienced in the past decade have riveted the world. Many expected with the formal ending of apartheid in the mid-1990s that the tinderbox created by a racist state, gross economic exploitation, and a decades-long history of human rights abuses would ignite into civil conflagration. Although South Africa now has one of the highest crime rates in the world, it has not, contrary to expectation, exploded into civil warfare. One of the instruments of post-apartheid healing, or at least a vehicle for exposing the magnitude of apartheid's trauma, was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Though the TRC was flawed and partial—an incomplete mixture of courtroom procedure, Christian ritual, and media blitz—the Commission did nevertheless facilitate a necessary and profound process. It functioned as an instrument of psychological healing, a tribunal of public reckoning, a juridical mechanism for granting amnesty, and a symbol of the need for reparation.

The Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, heard testimony by victims who had endured tremendous suffering simultaneous with admissions of guilt by apartheid's worst perpetrators, some of whom were granted amnesty through the TRC. These hearings—held on stages, in front of live and television audiences, and broadcast throughout the country—are an extraordinary example of the theatricalization of traumatic memory on a national scale. The TRC has been described as “exemplary civic theatre, a public hearing of private griefs which are absorbed into the body politic as a part of the deeper understanding of how the society arrived at its present position” (William Kentridge, qtd. in Taylor 1998, ix). Among the key participants in this civic theatre were victims, perpetrators, TRC commissioners, translators, and audiences that the Commission itself constituted and called into being.

The TRC was divided into three branches: a) the Human Rights Violations Committee, which heard testimony by victims; b) the Amnesty Committee, which received applications from perpetrators; and c) the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, charged with making recommendations to the presi-

dent on appropriate measures to be taken to restore the human and civil dignity of victims (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [1998] 1999, 44). From its inception, the TRC was criticized. Its very structure was based upon the premise that there were two clear categories—victims and perpetrators—thereby disallowing the more ambivalent mixture of these that characterizes any society, but particularly one that lived through apartheid. The TRC also only considered gross violations of human rights and therefore did not give voice to the more routine yet no less intensely experienced suffering by the majority of South Africans. The Commission has been further criticized for its propensity to focus on the most villainous perpetrators, thereby diverting public attention from the larger political structures and leaders upon whom responsibility for apartheid ultimately rests. And finally, there was no place in the Commission for those who were merely beneficiaries of apartheid, rather than inventors or direct perpetrators, to be held to account (Mamdani 2000).

Despite its flaws, the Commission's work cannot easily be dismissed. In the human rights area alone, the Commission received statements by 21,290 victims, and of these over 2,000 received a public hearing. Victim testimony exposed information that apartheid had repressed. Audiences learned what happened to people, the scope of the atrocities, the pervasiveness of apartheid's corruption of human relationships. Public hearings were filled with stories of profound and devastating loss. At so many moments, the TRC's whole semblance of a courtroom dropped away. The stories and their mode of telling transcended the mechanism of their presentation. As has so often happened in South Africa, truth outstripped imagination.¹ If presented in a work of fiction, the tales would hardly be believed. Journalists, commissioners, translators, spectators, even Chairperson Desmond Tutu were left at times unable to speak, reduced to tears, overcome by the public airing of unspeakable deeds.

Looking back at the months of TRC hearings, certain moments stand out for their overwhelming theatricality. During cross-examination by his victims, Jeffrey Benzien, the notorious torturer and former captain in the South African police security branch, spontaneously demonstrated his "wet bag" technique, the way he suffocated victims to the brink of death.² When Joyce Mtimkulu faced the man responsible for the torture and death of her son, she held in her hand a clump of her son's hair, which had fallen out when he was poisoned. She had saved this hair for twenty years and would pull it out of a plastic bag whenever it was referred to at the hearings.³ Another moment of high drama was the cross-examination of Winnie Mandela, who was called to account for the abuses of her Mandela United Football Club.⁴ For hours she refused to provide any explanation as to how it happened that individuals died and were tortured in the Club's custody, responding only with rhetorical questions asserting her innocence. But as evidence mounted, her protestations rang increasingly hollow. The faces of the commissioners grew grim and sullen. When it appeared that Mrs. Mandela's hearing would end without any genuine revelation of information or even the slightest indication of remorse, Archbishop Tutu gave an impassioned speech, recounting his close friendship with the Mandela household

and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela in particular. He praised her role in the national anti-apartheid struggle and exhorted her to acknowledge, in keeping with her greatness, that there might be at least one chink in her stonewall: "There are many people who want to embrace you. . . . There are many out there who would have wanted to do so if you were able to bring yourself to say something went wrong. . . . I beg you, I beg you, I beg you, please. . . . You are a great person and you don't know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say sorry, things went wrong, forgive me" (TRC December 14, 1997). Here one heroic icon of the anti-apartheid struggle publicly begged another into an admission of guilt, and the whole nation watched, riveted to their television sets.

An epic theatre of national and international proportions, the TRC attempted to give face to apartheid's orders from above and to give voice to the oppressed from below, all in the full glare of television lights. No previous truth commission (such as those in Latin America or Eastern Europe) had transpired before live and television audiences. Lacking prosecutorial force, the TRC in South Africa was not a trial, so it cannot be rightly classified as a "show trial." But it was indeed a show. Precisely what *kind* of show was it? Was this a theatre of catharsis, in the Aristotelian sense? Or was it a Brechtian theatre of transformed consciousness through "alienation"? Perhaps the TRC can be seen through the rubric of Augusto Boal's notion of a "theatre of the oppressed." In light of Boal's critique of the coercive nature of Aristotelian tragedy, one must ask *whose* interests did the TRC drama serve? And precisely *what* was its cathartic effect meant to purge (Boal 1979)? Michael Ignatieff says that the disparity in the outcomes of the TRC for victims versus perpetrators might imply "that the whole TRC process was a waste of time. Worse, it was an exercise in kitsch, in sentimentality, in theatre, in hollow pretense" (Edelstein 2001, 20). While theatre practitioners may bristle at such a facile and pejorative equation of theatre with "hollow pretense," one has to admit that the TRC walked a fine line between sincerity and insincerity, between authenticity and artifice, between high drama and farce. When truth commissions take on the public, performative dimensions that were so crucial to the South African TRC endeavor, the murky zone between the "truths" of the commission work and the "untruths" of the theatre raise a whole host of analytical questions.⁵

While in some ways the theatricality of the TRC was key to whatever successes it may have made in terms of positive transformation of public consciousness, it is precisely the Commission's theatricality, its staging of confrontation and grief, that some have seen as evidence of its failure, its travesty of true justice. The Commission was a compromise, part of the negotiated settlement by which the National Party relinquished power and South Africa's black majority finally became enfranchised. Though the emotions expressed during the hearings were deeply felt, the Commission was not a public reckoning. Rather, it was a symbol of a compromise that, most significantly, offered the possibility of amnesty to perpetrators who gave full public disclosure.

Even among those who believe that the TRC was an elaborate ruse—a cir-

cumvention of justice through emotional public dramatization—there is general consensus that the hearings had a deeply transformative impact. Especially because of their public, televised nature, the hearings altered public consciousness and memory in ways that have assisted South Africa to make a peaceful transition to a new government. Whereas before many whites could deny atrocities had happened, after the hearings, denial became an “impermissible lie,” and many whites shifted from saying that state-sponsored gross violations of human rights did not happen to saying, rather, “we didn’t know.” While still a long way from a deeper examination of culpability and redress, this shift in white consciousness paved the way for a new political dispensation. For the black majority, the impact of the TRC was more ambivalent. The South African government has agreed to pay a one-time sum of approximately \$3,900 to 19,000 of the victims who testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (G. Thompson 2003). While this sum hardly compensates for victim losses, it is at least a tangible outcome for having participated in the TRC process. For some victims, public recognition, a chance to be acknowledged, to have one’s suffering woven into the national narrative of resistance and triumph over apartheid, was as important as reparations. Customarily at the end of victim testimony the lead commissioner would ask the person testifying if there was anything else they would like to say or would like the commission to know. Marlene Bailey, after her emotional testimony about the execution of her son by a police officer during a public protest, said, “I am grateful to the commission that we can tell our story. That . . . we don’t have to keep it inside. And I can tell you . . . I feel better now that it is out” (TRC November 26, 1996). In the public airing of such intense and painful stories, some found relief. Survivors told of the terror of the invasion of their homes, the trauma of having to identify the body of a loved one who had clearly died of torture, and the anguish of seeing a relative burn to death after being doused with gasoline and necklaced with a burning tire by an angry mob. One can only imagine the cost of “keeping it inside,” as Marlene Bailey did prior to appearing before the TRC. The hearings offered people such as Bailey a means to reclaim traumatic memories, to heal the fragmentation and psychological violence of disassociation. According to Commissioner Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, “Sometimes retelling a story over and over again provides a way of returning to the original pain and hence a reconnection with the lost loved one. Evoking the pain in the presence of a listening audience means taking a step backwards in order to move forwards. The question is not whether victims will tell their stories, but whether there is an appropriate forum to express their pain” (Edelstein 2001, 27). The TRC attempted to provide such a forum, a place where individuals claim their trauma in front of an audience and, it is to be hoped, find in that public airing some kind of release.

Part of what interests me is the performative dimensions of the victim testimony itself. Much of the power of what was communicated at the TRC was nontextual. Antjie Krog, the poet and journalist who covered the TRC for South African Broadcasting Corporation, felt the need to represent nontextual as-

pects of victim testimony in her book *Country of My Skull*. In transcribing specific hearings, Krog describes not just *what* survivors said but *how* they said it: “Pause . . . a sob . . . an audible shuddering,” “cries loudly while interpreter finishes,” or “long silence—sighs audibly before continuing” ([1998] 2000, 53, 56, 71). Like Krog, the translators who assisted with the TRC hearings also felt a strong impulse to represent nonverbal aspects of victim testimony. Interpreters sat in enclosed booths and translated into microphones that then broadcast to headsets throughout the hall. Participants at the hearings could tune in to any of South Africa’s eleven official languages to hear a simultaneous translation. The interpreters spoke in the first person, assuming witnesses’ authorial “I.” Even though the interpreters were not on stage, many reported feeling the impulse to perform the person they were representing, to reproduce through gesture, cadence, and intonation the full range of expression that the victims themselves used. As one TRC translator reflected on his work, “You’re aware that you are becoming an actor. . . . And you didn’t even realize that you were acting—you know, you are just looking at the victim as he is speaking and unconsciously you end up throwing up your hands as he throws his, you end up nodding your head when he nods” (290). The interpreter’s job is technically only to translate the victim’s words. Yet so much of the rhetorical force of that testimony was in intonation and gesture that translators felt compelled to perform.

So the interpreter raised his hands along with the victim, nodded, and impersonated the demeanor of the survivor giving testimony. Yet many wondered about the appropriateness of this. Was it ethical? These stories were told at great personal cost. What was one’s responsibility in retelling the tale? Stories from the TRC are so compelling that they demand to be retold, and yet they are in some ways impossible to represent. Performance, embodied expression in front of an audience, would seem to be the very best mode to represent the fullness of victim testimony, yet performing these narratives is problematic. Theatre artists who have adapted material from the TRC to the stage have all had to confront this simultaneous pull toward and resistance to *re*-presentation by means of performance. There have been two notable theatre productions based on the TRC: One, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, is an adaptation of Alfred Jarry’s absurdist *Ubu Roi* to a South African context. The other, *The Story I Am About to Tell*, was created by the survivor support group Khulumani and featured three nonactors who had themselves given testimony at the TRC. Neither of these productions used actors to portray the victims. One addressed the ethical dilemmas of representation by having puppets play the victims. In the other show, actual survivors who had testified at the TRC represented their own stories.

William Kentridge, who created the visual aspects of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, notes that when he and his collaborators began selecting material from the TRC transcripts, they had to face a whole host of ethical questions: “What is our responsibility to the people whose stories we are using as raw fodder for the play? There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor to play the witnesses—the audience being caught halfway between having to believe

the actor for the sake of the story, and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witness who existed out there, but was not the actor” (Taylor 1998, xi). These stories were so authentic, devastating, and personal that any attempt to represent them on stage risked trivializing the material. The *Ubu* creators decided to foreground the levels of mediation by using puppets to portray the victims. Working in an adapted *bunraku* style, the puppeteers were not disguised in black but were clearly visible. As they operated the witness puppets, the actors stood next to the puppet-victim and assisted, evoking the professional comforters who sat next to and aided victims through the TRC hearings themselves. Another actor sat in a booth on stage and gave a simultaneous translation of the testimony. Thus the puppeteer and interpreter—who were real, live human beings—contrasted with the delicately carved, inanimate puppet-victims. Using such devices, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* dealt with anxieties about representing the TRC material by highlighting the absence of the real person to whom the story belonged.

While I do not have room here to analyze these productions in detail,⁶ I want to highlight some of the questions of representation that surround the TRC endeavor and the artistic productions that have been created in response to the TRC. Does it trivialize the TRC to call it theatre? Does it violate the TRC material to use it in a theatrical production? Or is theatre, in fact, the very best forum to represent and preserve in public memory the evidence these hearings brought to light? It is precisely this tension between the “truths” produced by the TRC and the “untruths” of the theatre that I find compelling. At the center of the Commission’s endeavor are very real experiences of profound human suffering. What forum can do these experiences justice? Both the hearings themselves and plays about the hearings are contrivances. Yet just because they *are* contrivances does not make them invalid. Telling stories of apartheid’s brutality live in front of an audience holds a unique power, one that books, Web sites, videos, and photo essays on the TRC cannot match.

“Show trial,” “kangaroo court” and “victor’s justice” are pejorative expressions used to distinguish politicized legal proceedings from the ideal of a neutral, objective administration of justice. However, a growing number of legal theorists are arguing that a “show trial” is exactly what war crimes tribunals ought to be. Lawrence Douglas, author of *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust*, contends that criminal trials and the judicial process they represent inevitably “fail to grasp the most disturbing and fundamental issues raised by traumatic history” (2001, 4). Hannah Arendt criticized Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem as a show, asserting that it was a manipulation of justice for historical ends. Trials, according to Arendt, are supposed to render justice and nothing else. Yet truth commissions, which have become an international rage in the wake of South Africa’s success, are *not* genuinely trials. And they are about much more than justice. Unlike the Nuremberg trials and international criminal courts, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission privileged the production of information over prosecution. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains: “The Nuremberg option was

rejected by those who were negotiating the delicate process of transition to democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Neither side could impose victor's justice because neither side won the decisive victory that would have enabled it to do so, since we had a military stalemate" (1999, 20). "While the Allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg," Tutu continues, "we in South Africa had to live with one another" (21). Thus, the orchestrators of the end of apartheid and the transition to a new democratic, multiracial South Africa had to invent a space, a forum, a theatre on which to stage the country's transition. Hence the TRC was born.

South Africa invented its own version of the truth commission, one that favored the disclosure of information and had no prosecutorial force. Those who were eligible to "audition" for the victim role could come forward to tell their stories, and a subcommittee of Commission staff served as casting directors, deciding which few stories would receive a public hearing. The demands for the role of perpetrator seeking amnesty were quite different: people who had committed acts of gross human rights violations had to convince the Commission that a) they had given full disclosure; b) their acts were politically motivated; and c) their means were proportional to their political objectives. Since the parliamentary law that created the Commission (the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act) said nothing about remorse, those seeking amnesty presumably had to do less "acting" than they would have had to do had affective persuasion been a criterion for amnesty. And it was the prospect of amnesty that brought perpetrators forward, albeit by no means in droves.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was open and public, with both live audiences who assembled in halls throughout the country and remote audiences who listened on radios and tuned in on television sets. But the Commission's mandate to publish went far beyond this, manifesting in a capacious five-volume report, an online digital record of testimony, and mounds of primary documentation that are currently, though in a disturbingly erratic way, making their way to the National Archives.⁷ In these surging waves of publication, the TRC served as an exhibition, albeit a highly mediated one, limited by time frame and scope, and elaborately orchestrated by investigators, lawyers, Commissioners, journalists, and the procedural rituals of the hearings themselves.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has become one of South Africa's more popular and unconventional exports to the rest of Africa. In the wake of South Africa's TRC, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe have all established truth commissions. Government-sponsored human rights commissions (a cousin of the truth commission) have likewise spread rapidly, from only one African country in 1989 to over half the countries in Africa by 2001 (Takirambudde 2001). As South Africa's TRC and related human rights commissions throughout Africa work in the murky zone between the "truths" of justice and the "untruths" of the theatre, performance studies is particularly well suited to illuminate the ways in which the visions of atrocity produced by such commissions exceed the limits of rational, juridical explanation and must

resort to the rhetorical machinations of the theatre to cope with that excess.⁸ For instance, the TRC can be seen as a textbook example of social drama as defined by performance theorist Victor Turner: a cultural process involving the four stages of breach, crises, redressive action, and reintegration (Turner 1974). Through analysis of speech acts, social drama, theatrical staging, mimesis, and the TRC's rhetoric of catharsis, performance studies may contribute to the way in which traumatic history is assimilated into public memory in Africa, moving beyond the narrow juridical frame of culpability and redress to explore the larger issues of cultural memory and its many guises of performance.

Notes

1. As Njabulo Ndebele states, "The horror of day-to-day life under apartheid often outdid the efforts of the imagination to reduce it to metaphor" (1998, 19–21).
2. For a nuanced analysis of the performative dimensions of this cross-examination, see Payne 2002.
3. See Michael Ignatieff's riveting account of this for the *New Yorker* (1997).
4. For an analysis of narrative time in Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Klopper 2001.
5. This is the subject of my forthcoming book, *Stages of Transition: South Africa's Truth Commission and Performance*.
6. Other scholars have already begun this process: see Graham 2003, Kruger 2000, Marlin-Curiel 2001, and Segall 2001.
7. On the mysterious disappearance of certain TRC files, see Bell 2002a and 2002b. For the online reference to the TRC, visit <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/index.html> (accessed December 11, 2003).
8. For an introduction to performance studies, see Schechner 2001. See especially pp. 177–179 on trials and executions as performance.

17 The Turner-Schechner Model of Performance as Social Drama: A Reexamination in Light of Anlo-Ewe *Haló*

Daniel Avorgbedor

This chapter isolates dramaturgic procedures in Anlo-Ewe *haló* performance and evaluates them along the hypothetical and theoretical ideas of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. The procedures are situated in their significant social and aesthetic formulations and by the manner in which they enhance the communication of dramatic impulse. The influence of the social framework, the deliberate framing or staging (with set rules and procedures), and the competitive engagement of rival groups in *haló* will clarify the notion of “social drama” as propounded in the works of Turner (1968, 1974, 1982) and Schechner (1977, 1983, 1987). I will begin with a summary of the components of *haló*.

Haló is a proscribed performance event that centers around interpersonal and intergroup hostilities among the Anlo-Ewe of Ghana. This event represents a climax and choreographed articulation of conflicts, tensions, and hostilities among performing groups in a village (or from two villages) and among individuals from different performing groups. Individual acts or behaviors that significantly depart from accepted norms (e.g., theft, incest, miscegenation) are often the target of *haló* performances. The collective framework of Anlo-Ewe society and polity promotes the spontaneous engagement of a whole group on behalf of an individual member whenever discord arises between individuals of different group affiliations. Physical encounters occur sporadically as a result of growing hostilities, and police arrests sometimes ensue. *Haló* is staged deliberately to aggravate the existing framework of hostilities, and it discolors relationships among warring groups and individuals for a lifetime. The social significance of this performance tradition is also demonstrated in its emphasis on public display (i.e., *nudede x:>ga me na ame*; lit., “putting mouth into someone’s bedroom” [washing someone’s linen in public]). In addition, rival groups actively travel to promulgate their cause and advertise their antagonists through scheduled performances in different villages. In this way the social fields of aggression widen and gain momentum until the encounters reach levels of attri-

tion or are arbitrated and outlawed by local and government authorities. The performances exact heavy tolls on human lives, as reflected in reports of deaths that are associated with physical and spiritual (i.e., destructive magic) confrontations.

A *haló* performance derives its basic principles and resources from existing practices of music and dance simply known as *vufofó* (lit., drum-beating) (see Fiagbedzi 1977; Ladzekpo 1971; Anyidoho 1982; Avorgbedor 1994a, 1994b). A group may take an existing music and dance such as *Kinka*, assign it a new name, and compose new songs and drum phrases in order to transform it into a *haló-vu* (see Avorgbedor 1994a). The procedures and modes of participation are, however, reinvented or extended considerably. For example, rival groups take turns in performance so that they may take opportunities to audit and evaluate insult songs, an opponent from the audience must show his/her presence by raising a hand or finger or by standing on a chair, audience members should react physically when their insults are being sung, and so on. Performers make special effort to intensify insults by introducing performance ideas that cut across several genres and techniques. The normal song, dance, and instrumental modes are therefore greatly diversified through the strategic integration of spoken forms, mime, and concrete moldings of insults. Performance items are usually precomposed and learned in secrecy, but new forms and contents such as verbal glosses on songs, extended and musical improvisation of insults, and new drum patterns are also created on the spot.

All performance events assume varying dimensions of dramatic design and enactment, and the works of some symbolic interactionists, such as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966), Herbert Blumer (1969), and Erving Goffman (1967), stress and relate the notions of performance, drama, and theatre in their investigations of human interaction in both ordinary and highly structured encounters. However, because of limitations in Western aesthetic and canonical traditions, the significance of drama and dramaturgy in sub-Saharan performance genres and contexts (i.e., indigenous, popular, and academic) has often been overlooked. Today a growing literature is devoted not only to African traditions of drama and theatre but also to the whole area and genres of performance (see Kotchy 1994; Conteh-Morgan 1994a; Euba 1970; Owomoyela 1985; Brink 1978; Ebong 1975; and Kirby 1974). The situation of performance in Africa is also summarized by two important reviews on the subject by Margaret Thompson Drewal (1988, 1991).

In the specific case of the *haló*, the “curtain” opens with one group staging a performance in a public arena. The genre (or “play”) is defined or disclosed through the enactments of real names, personalities, and historical events. The disclosure, which involves the preferred style of *vufofó* is invariably a dramatic statement of aggressive intent and discord. This curtain-riser is soon followed by a counterperformance by the rival group, also in a public arena and before a variety of audiences. The responding group composes and practices its acts in haste, since a social urgency is involved.

The “finished product” is displayed according to staggered time frames (i.e., the two groups perform one after the other on different days). Each group refutes and exposes lies and allegations and opens up fresh areas of challenge and confrontation. When climax builds up, the groups now become traveling troupes who perform before external audiences in different villages. The *haló* platform is indeed a multiple, mobile stage. As the cycle of performance and hostilities continues in the public forum, microdramatic scenes emerge sporadically on the periphery of the vicious circle of acts. For example, individuals engage in verbal and physical confrontations off stage and after scheduled performances. Insult songs and glosses from previous performances are performed as part of the off-stage scenes, and they reinforce both the open-endedness and the social ramifications of *haló* performances. The final stages of this tradition involve a party of actors, pseudo-dei ex machina. They are the judges or elders who arbitrate differences; they also arrange a final, decisive performance involving the two parties. The curtain closes, in many instances, with these elders performing a ritual of cessation of hostilities by symbolically “burying” *haló*. The ritual forebodes ill for anyone who reinitiates the drama.

The stages or scenes do not necessarily involve passive intermissions; the continuation of the drama on and off stage establishes a continuum necessary for the dynamism and social repercussions of *haló*. The argument for a social drama (or sociomusical drama) is further supported by the subtle involvement of off-stage participants who carefully orchestrate their roles. These participants come from a category of audiences highlighted earlier: individuals and groups who are not directly involved in the conflicts but who sympathize with and show support for their favorite actors. These audiences also serve as social props for increasing the momentum of dramatic performances. For example, any supporter could be instantly embroiled in the conflict and is thus inserted in the ongoing acts. The following song-text excerpts illustrate the use of rhetorical devices in achieving this end (i.e., insertion of antagonist’s sympathizers)

EXAMPLE 1: Inserting Off-Stage Participants

A.

Woava w:> dzadzadza

Va yi ae xa la gb:>

Va yi k:> xa aeka

Hek:> ae uu la me

Wo vuvu mo na xa la

Ne woanye

T:> meloe va gbae . . .

Amesi be auatsoea

Woabia XXX se (Excerpt from Anloga, Tape C, item 6, fp.C2; in author’s possession)

B.

YYY dzi ade

De uu fe ha

Amekae yae be adze maaa
Woabia ZZZ ase kp:> (Excerpt from Afiadenyigba, Tape AF, fp.3)

C.

BBB ueue nye ameny:>g:>

Duch yae woch ae abadzi

Numatae

Srɔa med:> egb:> o

Ne egbea,

Na bia CCC

BBB nye adutb/bla

Wotso akpanya vuve he ta nB

Woyi na dzetsia ao ge

DDD yae do ha d aa bena:

“Emagod ao, CCC nye magoao . . . ” (Excerpt from Seva, Tape SV-N)

ENGLISH

A.

He then went stealthily

Went near the crab trap

Then emptied one trap

Into his boat

He tore the face of the trap

To leave the impression that

It was an alligator who did it

One who thinks this a lie

Should ask XXX for a witness

B.

YYY produced saliva [became interested in]

Around drum song

One who thinks I lie

Should ask ZZZ for a witness

C.

Smelling BBB is disorganized

It's urine that she urinates on her bed

That's why

Her husband doesn't sleep with her

If you don't believe it

Go ask CCC for a witness

BBB is urinator [bedwetter]

They costumed her with torn sackcloth*

She was about to dive into the lagoon

DDD then started a song:

“Puzzle, CCC is a puzzle . . . ”

*NB: An indigenous corrective custom (simply known as *Dud:>go*) for young children who continue to wet their beds at night

The use of the formulaic construction “If you don't believe it, go ask CCC for a witness” and its varied forms in excerpts A and B is one of the rhetorical de-

vices employed to both increase the range of actors and intensify the social ramifications of the drama. The off-stage potential actor “CCC” is one who supports BBB and her company, the target of the singer. In order to effectively “put down” BBB, her close friends or relatives must also be implicated or at least be put temporarily on stage.¹ The construction is deliberately self-exonerating in order to distance the singer or actor from the allegations and accusations, which are often unsubstantiated. “CCC” is dramatically and emotionally drawn into the conflict instantly by the manner in which the singer assigns him the role of an accomplice. First of all, the accusation or crime labeled against his relative-friend is unfounded. Second, CCC is introduced as the one who is actually telling this lie against his own relative-friend. The singer is thereby killing two birds with one stone. Exaggeration and the invention of lies and half-truths are central to the practice of *haló*, and the main goal of these fictive designs and rhetorical twists is to widen the circle of actors and thereby increase the level of social and dramatic input.

In excerpt C, there is a skillful enactment of a performance-within-performance. The goal of this metaperformative strategy is to heighten the dimension of drama and hence to persuasively recreate and communicate the scene and progress of the alleged social deviation (i.e., bedwetting). The singer inserts an additional character, an off-stage actor who contributes significantly to the dramaturgical outline and content. This off-stage character becomes a performer who performs his own favorite character (albeit with commiseration) instead of vindicating his relative-friend. The context of this folk tradition expertly depicted by the singer frames DDD as an active witness. He becomes an actor and accomplice, all at the same time. His act and role are well-designed to effectively continue the singer’s own: it is DDD who sings about BBB and not our original actor or singer. In addition, the social significance of this performance-within-performance is explained by the fact that DDD is a real social figure who holds the position of a regent in the town from which the excerpt comes.² In this drama, characters are carefully “chosen,” and audiences pay close attention to why and how VIPs are presented. An introduction of one from a high social rank thus shifts the focus from individuals and families to the entire group (or village, if two villages are involved). In this excerpt, the singer begins with an individual, BBB, and cumulatively involves first her family and friends, then her entire social division. In other words, a social drama (at the level of personnel) is made up of actors who can stand on their own and represent their families or social division. The insertion of noble characters or VIPs serves the purpose of reconstructing the social hierarchy in order to deconstruct it later in performance. In other texts of the same *haló*, DDD becomes the subject of intensive and negative biography. For example:

EXAMPLE 2: Text Centering on VIP

DDD yae tu x:> tie
Mekp:> be ne woa gbāe o
Wots:> agbotfovoa na EEE

Hafi wots:> be ne
Wo kata woo nukpe
Gake DDD b Ie vovo
Enu Ie nyatsa
He Ie rib:>
He Ie lekpe abe (Excerpt from Seva, Tape SV-N)

ENGLISH

DDD built a certain house
He didn't have roofing materials
He gave EEE a ram with scrotal hernia
Before he was given roofing materials
They all felt ashamed
But DDD's is different
A mouth, wide-open-full-of-teeth
Then it's black
Then as big-heavy as . . . ”

In order to simply say that DDD is a poor wretched person, the singer dramatizes the situation by locating him at the center of an unfolding scene. A significant contrast is also introduced in order to establish a social rationale for the discourse. This contrast is shown in the differences between DDD's own comportment and that of his subjects: it would be shameful for them to go beg for roofing materials. The deliberate insertion of this cognitive dissonance is an essential dramatic device that raises the level of audience expectation; it is also a technique of surprise.

In excerpt C, a customary performance is united with a musical genre-song. The custom involves costume and costuming (sackcloth), rhythmic handclaps, and the singing of the following text, which is repeated ad nauseam:

Leader: *Dutbgo* (Urine vessel)

Group: *Yayaya* (Onomatopoeia for the scattering of the urine)

DDD's metacommentary (i.e., song) thus completes the singer's dramaturgical enactment. At the narrative or verbal level, the singer is able to draw together components of drama, theatre, music, and dance in order to impress and challenge audiences' memories with different qualities of a performance. The components and their associated strategies mentioned spell out the dramaturgical orientations in *haló*. In other *haló* contexts, it is normal to further engage these qualities by introducing additional interpretive devices and means, such as the gestural and mimetic renditions of the above texts simultaneously with song, poetic, and drummed modes. In the case of excerpt A, the audience is presented with a kaleidoscope of events through the structured narrative in song. Without any visual props, mime, or costume, the singer allows the audience to imagine and follow the sequence of events. Antagonists' reactions are bound to be qualitatively different from those of the protagonists: laughter, anger, and indiffer-

ence are among the reactions accompanying such portrayals, whether the events presented actually took or place not. These responses are among those that are often associated with Western aesthetic drama, and the wider and the immediate social implications of *haló* examples serve rather to intensify dramatic moments.

Is this an instance of “social drama” from the perspective of the Turner-Schechner model (see Turner 1968, 1974, 1986; see Schechner 1977, 1983, 1987)? Most important, these two scholars have updated their definitions and enriched their examples, as seen in the chronology of their relevant publications. It is also important to note that both have consulted and drawn from the work of the other, and thus they have been able to make strong arguments for their perspectives on the concept of social drama. While Schechner is able to test his ideas in the light of several world examples, it is Turner who extensively develops his arguments and supports them with examples from African cultures, specifically Ndembu rituals and the Ndembu social system. Although Schechner introduces new elements into Turner’s original modeling of social drama, the core of the model remains, and this is why the term Turner-Schechner model is appropriate in this chapter.

The core of the tripartite model borrows from Van Gennep (1909):

1. SEPARATION TRANSITION
INCORPORATION/AGGREGATION
- (For Van Gennep, transition is the *limen*, a period of ambiguity, loss of identity)

Turner’s revision:

2. BREACH CRISIS REDRESSIVE ACTION REINTEGRATION
- (According to Turner, visible *social drama* is between crisis and redressive action)

Schechner’s revision:

- 3a. BREACH CRISIS REDRESSIVE ACTION TRANSFORMATION
- 3b. JO HA KYU

(From the Japanese aesthetic construct *jo-ha-kyu*; *jo* = breach/infinite loop; *ha* = crisis; *kyu* = climax without resolution; infinite loop)

Van Gennep’s model summarizes stages in initiation rites: an initial phase of separation in which the initiate symbolically ceases to interact with society or goes through a change of identity; the liminal/transition stage accompanied by loss of identity; and the final stage of aggregation where the initiate completes the initiation and gains new status and rights. There are often public and private dimensions to this initiation experience: the rites are secretive and a public ceremony may complete the initiation. Turner and Schechner both provide extensive justifications for their revisions, and the *haló* examples presented seem to confirm Schechner’s 3a. Before we draw conclusions, it is necessary to present portions of their definitions of social drama and see how they are validated in the *haló* examples.

Turner: I define social dramas as units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process, arising in conflict situations. Typically, they have four main phases

of public action. These are: (1) *Breach* of regular norm-governed social relations; (2) *Crisis*, during which there is tendency for the breach to widen. Each public crisis has what I now call liminal characteristics, since it is a threshold (*limen*) between more or less stable phases of the social process, but it is not usually a sacred *limen*, hedged around by taboos and thrust away from the centers of public life. On the contrary, it takes up its menacing stance in the forum itself, and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with it; (3) *Redressive action* ranging from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal machinery, and, to resolve certain kinds of crisis or legitimate other modes of resolution, to the performance of public ritual. Redress, too, has its liminal features, for it is “betwixt and between,” and, as such, furnishes a distanced replication and critique of the events leading up to and composing the “crisis.” This replication may be in the rational idiom of the judicial process, or in the metaphorical and symbolic idiom of a ritual process; (4) The final phase consists either of the *reintegration* of the disturbed social group, or the social recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contesting parties. (1974, 37–41)

Social drama is always ancillary to, dependent on, secreted from process. And performances, particularly dramatic performances, are the manifestations par excellence of human social process. (1974, 84)

I regard the “social drama” as the empirical unit of social process from which has been derived, and is constantly being derived, the various genres of cultural performance. . . . My contention is that the major genres of cultural performance (from ritual to theatre and film) and narration (from myth to the novel) not only originate in the social drama but also continue to draw meaning and force from the social drama. (1974, 92–94)

Schechner: Turner locates the essential drama in conflict and conflict resolution; I locate it in *transformation*—in how people use theater as a way to experiment, act out, and ratify change. . . . At all levels theater includes mechanisms for transformation. (1987, 170)

The key difference between social and aesthetic dramas is the performance of the transformations effected. (1987, 171)

An overview of *haló* performance practices provide the following composite model, which combines elements from Turner and Schechner but emphasizes Schechner:

HALÓ Model

BREACH

[Period of insinuations, aggressive gestures, challenges, and interpersonal/ intergroup conflicts, most of which are expressed through the medium of the verbal and performing arts.]

CRISIS

[Direct references to individuals and groups in music and dance contexts designed to provoke aggressive response from rival groups. *Haló* marks the climax of these antagonisms and performance articulation of aggressive behavior. Groups compose, practice, and rehearse performances and take turns to publicly lampoon and challenge one another through performance]

REDRESSIVE ACTION

[The “climax” described above also represents a mode of redressive action; traditional chiefs or elders and government law officials intervene.] Elements of transformation already present here.

RE-INTEGRATION/IRREPARABLE SCHISM/LOOP

[a. “War of attrition”—groups continue till they are totally exhausted; b. Elders/government officials successfully mediate; final performances are arranged and are symbolically “buried” in order to ensure crisis does not repeat, which is not always effective.]

OR:

[Elders fail in their mediation process; conflict/violence exacerbates and repeats in a cycle.]

Elements of transformation present here.

GOVERNMENT PROSCRIPTION (1960)

[*Haló* is outlawed but psychological damages resulting from destructive physical and spiritual machinations endure; interpersonal and intergroup relationships are marred for an unpredictable length of time.]

Transformation is moderated by the ban but continues today in many subdued forms.

While the *haló* modeling of social drama retains many of the essential features of the Turner-Schechner model, there is a significant departure—that is, transformative experience—because of the close linkages between the performance and social-personal consequences. The endurance of hostilities even after official interventions challenges Turner’s idea of reintegration, which suggests normalization (see Turner). Schechner appropriately replaces reintegration with transformation and/or an infinite loop. In the case of *haló*, hostilities through performance can reopen, even after they have been “buried.” The argument in support of Schechner’s identification with transformation is further established by example 1C, the “urine” scene. The public participation in this ritual (performance) involving scatological text and satirical costume constitutes an extreme but effective denunciation of a social deviation. Both the perpetrator and the “crime” are thus out on a stage before a critical public, a painful experience that leaves the subject with permanent psychological “damage.” A definite transformation is initiated, is sustained, and becomes permanent this way. Our singer-actor in example 1C, therefore, not only reenacts this custom for the sake of dramaturgic momentum, but he also draws a conclusion, by means of this performative similitude, about how he wishes his subject to be

transformed (i.e., like that of the “bedwetter,” with permanent psychological scars).

The continuity of veiled attacks in song in our post-*haló* times also suggests that without the official proscription, the tradition would have remained an active one among the Anlo-Ewe. Although much attention is devoted to public display, the performance practice acknowledges private dimensions, as shown in the secretive composing and learning of components of the sociomusical drama. There is a body of rules and procedures, and these help cohere, identify, and heighten the dramatic elements. Finally, plural genres (storytelling, poetic narration, mime, costume, masks and sculptural interpretations, dance, song) and modes of delivery constitute the language and vocabulary of *haló* drama. The skillful employment of language, song, and movement and their related arts in strategic temporal frames suggest that there are no clear boundaries between “aesthetic” and “social” dramas. Open-endedness is an important element in *haló*, as demonstrated in the cyclic engagement of performance and counterperformance. According to Schechner, “[P]erformance is no longer easy to define or locate. . . . Performance is a mode of behavior, an approach to experience; it is play, sport, aesthetics, popular entertainments, experimental theatre . . . open-ended in order to incorporate new work” (preface to Turner 1986). Richard Bauman, in one of his early definitions of performance, also stressed this open-endedness through the use of the term “emergent quality.” According to him, “The concept of emergence is necessary to the study of performance as a means toward comprehending the uniqueness of particular performances within the context of performance as a generalized cultural system in a community” (Bauman qtd. in Herndon and McCleod 1976, 40). For the participants, *haló* is a lifetime engagement, a progressive unfolding of a cathartic drama.

The intense and deliberate social focusing encountered in the Anlo-Ewe examples, however, supports the notion of social drama, which is also reinterpreted in this chapter as sociomusical drama. The “musical” must, however, be understood here as transcending Western parameters of sound and forms to include movement, mime, costume, mask, drama, prose, and poetry in indigenous African performance traditions. The supportive term “drama” emphasizes the multigeneric nature of the examples presented as well as the dynamics of the materials and content of the performance. The social substratum is the constant formative factor that imbues performance with meaning; it also helps structure and restructure the performance. This multigeneric and multisensory character of the performative in African settings thus strongly suggests holistic perspectives, as is now increasingly acknowledged in the literature (see Glaze 1981; J. Johnson 1986; Nketia 1981; Ottenberg 1996; and Stone 1986). The Western notions of script, actor, stage, curtain, and audience and the ways in which they interact have been revised considerably in the light of *haló* drama. These revisions do not take away from the principles of dramaturgy; rather, they enrich our resources and perspective in this area.

Notes

This chapter derives from a paper presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Toronto, October 31–November 3, 1996.

1. The term *putting down* is also exemplified in some diasporic extensions of some aspects of the *haló* tradition. See, for example, Piersen 1976.
2. The town is Seva. The *haló* took place between two wars, or sectors, in 1957.

18 Theatricality and Social Mimodrama

Pius Ngandu Nkashama

Textbook definitions of theatre are often based on “performance” and necessarily limit it to the play. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on the principle of “performance” as the objective and aim of drama. That same definition, however, does not pay sufficient attention to the implications of “scenography.” Unconditional factors deal with the relationship that must be established between the actors, on one hand, and the audience, on the other, through the intermediary of the scenic space. If such facts, however, appear definitive in the case of Western theatre, even throughout its different metamorphoses and mutations, the same cannot be said for African theatre, for the term itself is full of ambiguities, and these are not just due to the perspective brought to bear upon theatricality. The classic manuals often dwell at length on “traditional forms” and are often quite tenacious in seeking correspondences in the realm of the religious, the mythic, or especially the magical. It is possible that the literature on the subject contributes to creating such misunderstandings. The role of successive ethnologies, or even certain postulates advanced by cultural anthropology, must not be neglected in this context. However, the most standard references to the works of Bakary Traoré, dating back to around 1958, allow an a posteriori confirmation of these partial conclusions.

For more than a decade now, prospects for analyzing theatrical productions have become a possibility. Research methodologies have changed, as have the stated desire of authors to arrive at a “theory of theatre” capable of explaining both concrete practices and the various expressions of social mimodrama.

This chapter intends to show the close relationships between what is properly called dramatic art and its permanent projections created in social scenography. The topic will be considered from all perspectives, even venturing beyond the stage itself, but an effort will be made to remain within the limits of “production” and stage modalities as discussed above.

The first part of this chapter presents a consideration of historical tragedy and its resulting dramatic resonances. The second is based upon the prolepses and analepses in the stage play to show how the experience of theatricality produces its own mythologies. The third part touches on the circularity within

which the function of theatre acts, using the model of the *kotéba*, or the concert-party.

One of the most important aspects of African aesthetics is its function of transgression. The term thus designated not only marks an instance of subversion or even a power of catharsis but also refers to a manner of institutionalizing a transitive culture by allowing an actual space of rupture from the modalities of the law. That would mean that the observance of the norm as a moment of legitimation of social (and legal) constraints is necessarily effected through such aesthetic acts of social transgression. In a society where the contestation of paternal authority is met with overly severe punishments, the culture simultaneously institutes exaggerated forms of “challenge.” The *kotéba*, for example, authorizes an appropriation of social discourse by those very persons who are held in total submission by patriarchy’s restrictive “rules.” They can thus “play the father,” debating him or even contradicting him by reducing him to his own social game.

In certain Central African communities where the husband’s authority is intransigent, at his funeral rites, the wife who considers herself thwarted by her dead husband’s behavior can “play” his role before his corpse. She can put on his clothing, strut before him out in the open, and recount their private life before a large audience. The scene can thus be extended in time and space, for it can last as long as the audience wishes or as long as it takes for the wife-turned-actor to experience a sense of release. Indeed, this is implicit theatricality, even if it is also a matter of purification rituals. In my *Théâtres et scènes de spectacles* (1993), other paradigms are offered, for example those of the *bená Mambala*.

The most revealing model can be found in societies that appear highly restrictive in the area of sexual expression. While they violently repress the least deviations from prescribed norms, they simultaneously authorize certain “theatrical scenes” that are often audacious and do so in a public forum: thus, the dances accompanying the women elders’ display of their pestles or tree trunks as symbolic phalluses or parents’ dramatic mimings of mating, which are often quite shocking in their daring. The Mwondo-Théâtre troupe from Lubumbashi (Congo), which has performed many times in Europe and America, staged an interesting spectacle based on the theme of twins in its production of *Buhamba*.

Two observations are useful in understanding the “transgressive” dimension of such a rupture. The first is that it would be better to see in what are commonly designated “customs,” “mores,” or “traditions” contexts by which African society preserves its cultural equilibrium and its true legitimacy. These elements are not the result of processes of imitation modeled upon gratuitous rules but the result of a real experience of history. They are based upon defeats that have been experienced and disasters endured as well as upon political or military conquests, alliances concluded with foreign communities, and pacts and responses to the possession of their land. The second observation is borne out in the interpretation of this same experience of the collectivity by means of

concrete aesthetic practices. The reconstruction of iterative symbols that are capable of restructuring textualized mythologies remains the primordial means for maintaining the group's security and stability.

Analyses of the staging of dramatic tales, such as for *La tortue qui chante* (*The Singing Turtle*), and more particularly of the very modalities of stage syntax, are even more revealing. The time frame of narration—between the rising and the setting of the sun—the space of its fictional performance through enclosure within the “circle of the tale,” and the need for a medial character called “the third agent” are all elements that can lead us to such an interpretation.

The principal argument derives from the fact that these methodological preliminaries become relevant in the mounting of performances. Those involved with festivals in Europe know how difficult it is to ask African troupes to perform “*au moment où la lumière du soleil chasse les esprits et inhibe les masques*” (at the moment when the sun's light chases the spirits and inhibits masks), even for dress rehearsal performances. Only professional troupes accustomed to this kind of performance do so willingly. The rationality of space and time has no bearing on the “logic of the tale,” for it is inscribed within the very criteria of theatre. Indeed, a distinction must be made between so-called traditional theatre and the theatre that has developed since the colonial era, even in its most recent forms. At the same time, it would be useful to retain another determining factor, the mediation of principles whereby theatre appropriated its own space of production, just as it filled its original function of transgression.

It is evident that numerous acting companies had to yield to the strategies of classroom typologies, especially in their most constricting forms, when they were invited to perform abroad or before an audience that was less implicated in that very transgression. In that regard, even when they had had periods of glory with plays recognized in theatre anthologies, former students of schools of “dramatic arts” have likewise expressed their pressing need to return to those topics and original attractions.

Thus, it is not merely a question of listing “genres” or of labeling these “types” of theatre practices. It appears that by raising the issue of transgression, the presence of characters in the performance becomes effective on the stage. That kind of tautology shows precisely how the scenic structure in its turn takes up the cultural economy of a community, to confer upon it meanings that can be expanded. Previously published works on African theatre have retained only contextual derivations such as those that had been operated upon in the substrata of ritual expressions or those based on the iterativity of the gestural performance of the sacred. That fact could have been justified in itself, but in reality it extends beyond the strict framework of a mimeticism, because most often the sacred itself is transgressed through forms of theatricality. Soyinka (1976) had already made that observation when he spoke of a *transe maîtrisée* (controlled trance)—and, one could add, a *panique orientée* (directed state of panic)—and when he noted that the gods themselves can be *mis en cause* (called into question) by means of theatrical discourse.

The rupture in question is not expressed uniquely in thematics; it is part

of the very syntagmatics of theatrical textuality. A study of stage geography could demonstrate this, starting with the precise indications provided by the didascalia, but even more directly, with the action's progression within the circularity that propels it. The fact that the audience is generally seated in a close circle around the actors is not a simple aspect of the matter: it indicates the space of play and especially that of dramatic narration. The elements evoked earlier—that is, time and space—can be mentioned here again to advantage. These determinative factors must be emphasized, and independent of any other didactic aim or even of the principle of social pedagogy. In fact, it is within the indicated boundaries that the most complex conflicts find points of juncture and strategies of resolution. By designating them as such and by prescribing delimiting contours for them, the playwright is able to objectivize them as historical transitions.

Theatre therefore unites within the story seemingly contradictory forms—those stemming from figurality and symbol. The interval of the narrative play is not only a distance with respect to the memory of time but also the symbolic cycle of its convolutions. As for time, for example, it is not only a matter of the chronological as a factor of sequentialization but, first and foremost, a matter of time as primordial function of theatricality. It is common to point out that the play is executed only within the period between the sunrise and sunset. S enouvo Agbota Zinsou has tried to explain himself on this matter each time he has been questioned about it. It truly appears that those speaking with him only understood the argument within its didactic specificity. Yet it goes beyond the correlative of a “lesson” that would organize theatrical discourse.

In the reality of the performance paradigm, instructions indicate an important modality in the enunciation and praxis of the text. As noted in my *Ruptures et  critures de violence* (1997), “*le fait de produire le r cit en dehors de la clart  du soleil d passe le symbolisme de la lumi re, pour s’int grer totalement aux profondeurs de la conscience. La finalit  cathartique se trouve d s lors renforc e, en m me temps que la port e ludique transpose le jeu du je en une transition de l’histoire   la fois individuelle et collective*” (the fact of producing the tale beyond sunlight goes beyond the symbolism of the light to total integration into the depths of consciousness. The cathartic aim is henceforth reinforced, while the ludic scope transposes the play of the *I* in a transition of history that is both individual and collective; 1997, 33).

It is not unimportant to observe, in this respect, that the actor's identity as a character in a play is often linked to the time of the scene. The reasons given by earlier critics to explain why women were excluded from the concert-party, for example, are just as valid for this argument. Likewise the commentaries provided on masks and their ritual processions can be brought to bear here as well.

The same is true for the “beginning of the play,” properly speaking, which is not explicitly indicated within the tale. Foreign observers of such a theatrical aesthetic have often been disturbed by the “slowness of the beginning” in African theatre and cinema. For it is not merely a question of “setting the decor” but much more so a question of coaxing the right moment for both the

narrator/narratee and the addressor/addressee. These times must be in “synchrony” in the wider sense of the term: in the same time frame, in correspondence, in simultaneity, and in an identical manner. For dance as well as for the stage play, it has been noted many times how the ensemble of characters avoid the “focal point” of the tragic circle, as if it contained within itself alone forces that overwhelm or frighten.

The actors of the concert-party, for example, especially when induced to perform in bars, cafés, and concession halls, spend their time “testing” the public through mime, sketches, and dances. An entire set of preliminary gesturing, which consists of “provoking” the time of the play—of invoking it, perhaps—is set in motion until the actors have determined that the public will be receptive to the theatre to come. Those two moments cannot be rigorously distinguished. They are linked together in a coherent syntax, and they are achieved in the same synchrony, since the success of a scene is felt only when the spatial and temporal limits are abolished and the scene dislocated within itself. The audience then loosens the circle of the drama and invades the stage to dance or sing with the actors. The shades and the “spirits” incarnated during the time of the theatrical performance can then retire in complete “quietude” and the humans can recover their physical morphology, having been transformed and metamorphosed through the time of theatricality. That explains why the “play to be enacted” is not a production of the moment and why it cannot be reproduced according to rigid modalities, summoned to repeat itself continually and mechanically. It is true that the macrosequences remain organized according to distinctive procedures. Circumstance, the audience being addressed and told a tale, the underlying context of conflict—these are just some of the parameters that are independent and combinatory variables that can invert the morphology of the theatrical narrative in the dynamic of a discrete circularity.

Spatiality is likewise overdetermined as much by its geographical area as by its material, geometrical dimension. It is important, first, to note that the stage can be transported into a setting of open spaces: the village square, concession interiors, the marketplace, crossroads. All are places that are particularized by their symbolic meaning, for they are often points at which the most diverse forces meet: the living and the dead; real bodies and the spirits of ancestors; the forces of good and the forces of evil. The same may be said of the safety of both the actors and the spectators. There is nothing magical in such considerations: quite simply, these requirements are part of the very morphology of the play. Indeed, the constraints of performance halls often push playwrights to restrain these narrative modalities, much to their regret as they have often indicated, without foreign interlocutors seeing these deficiencies as unavoidable prerequisites.

Second, it needs to be shown that distances are thus abolished (or are capable of being abolished). And the “distantiation” that used to please commentators on school theatre remains beyond the scenographic prerequisites. One could say that the intradiegetic loci and the extradiegetic differences are merged to the point of being mutually annulled in a sort of continuum with no hiatuses or

interstices. In fact, the stage area is thus marked by informational indicators and, from the very start, the circle of characters-audience-narrators. The circumference thus delimited (or the figurative semicircle) is not only restrictive but is set forth as a subject of enunciation. Not only because the audience has the right to intervene directly in the play by cries, ovations, or lamentations but precisely because without the public audience, theatre loses one of its syntagmatic dimensions.

The implications of this pole of reference lead to unexpected consequences, notably that the dramatic space is an ethical and aesthetic no-man's-land. Placing themselves at the center of the geographic zone confers a unique status upon the very person of actors. Actors cease to behave according to their own social attributes and can allow themselves to perform extravagant and outrageous acts that would have been repressed in other circumstances. It is also a space of total inviolability and integrity and therefore has power of impunity to criticize, malign, and contradict confirmed truths. Through the power of its own law, theatre confers upon itself the authority to attack social hierarchies, challenge established rules, and contest political power without anyone else being able to intervene or condemn its pertinence. Guillaume Oyono-Mbia's plays, which are now performed in middle and secondary schools, owe their success to these properties of ideologic subversion.

Theatricality knows no limits other than those it attributes to itself through its own logic. Stylistics and language are subordinated solely to the "grammar of time of the dramatic narrative," even in the use of an audacious lexicon that would be condemned outside this space of narration. Furthermore, the extended time here is equally divided among the stage's narrative sequences, which are modulated principally by a typical character, the *bonimenteur* (the smooth talker). One of the most fundamental subjects in the narrative function is this character, who serves as a moment of transition. Both within the scene and outside the time of enunciation, this character sets its major sequences while preserving the story's logic. This character is found at the intersection of oppositional spatialities and temporalities, those of the visible and the imaginary, the possible and the fictional. He or she articulates the fragments of the narration and is positioned at the midpoint of perceptible distances. Thus, he or she could just as well be called the "medial character," for by and through that character, the two poles of narration cross and come together.

In the majority of cases, this medial character, placed between locators and allocutors, is the one who organizes the stage play, and his or her role is often played by the director or playwright himself or herself. At the center of the theatrical circle, this character stands inside the circumference or even directly opposite the principal narrator, against whom he or she acts as antithetical metaphor. This character appears as space that is structurally indexed, for his or her function consists in noting these indices, thus defining the deictics and methods of the utterances. This character indicates the proleptic or analeptic system of references through the processes of enunciation.

The same may be said of Césaire's theatre, in particular *La tragédie du roi*

Christophe with its “presenter-commentator.” That character, who seems to be positioned off stage, appears for sake of giving definition to the major narrative sequences and acts as if he prefigured its essential articulations. The need for efficacy leads the story toward a coherent syntax, thus conserving for it an acceptable grammar of time beyond the force of fiction and the pleonasm of the fable. This character likewise marks and balances the sequences by anaphoric songs, onomatopoeia, and mimetic segments. He succeeds in entertaining and eliciting laughter, but he also must keep the audience’s attention and ensure that the enunciation keeps its fable-making capacity, or he must reduce the enunciation to the prerequisites of the conflicts that set it in motion in the first place.

We must believe that in the theatre, this character, who is simultaneously a modalizer and intermediary, seems to form a syntagm of focalization. In dance choreography, such an “antithetical metaphor” is represented by the corps of instrumentists-narratees such as that described in *Théâtres et scènes de spectacles*:

[Les instrumentistes] ne sont pas seulement l’orchestre ni même simplement “l’ensemble musical,” mais des corps physiques qui manient des modalités de sonorités, de percussions, de musicalités, de rythmiques cosmiques intégrales.

Ils se transforment et se métamorphosent invariablement afin de devenir des personnes à solliciter qui toutes, d’une manière ou d’une autre, perdent la dimension proprement humaine pour se transposer en une force primordiale: le rythme des tambours, des balafons, des ngoma, des xylophones ou des crécelles. Elles constituent dès lors un type de réalité thématique de la danse, dont il faut pouvoir triompher si le danseur ne veut pas se faire écraser par les “puissances supérieures” du rythme.

[The instrumentalists] not only form the orchestra or even simply the “musical ensemble” but are also physical bodies who manipulate *modalities* of sonorities, percussion, musicalities, integral cosmic rhythmic.

They transform themselves and metamorphose invariably in order to become persons to call upon who all in one way or another lose the *dimension* that is, properly speaking, human in order to be transposed into a primordial force: the rhythm of drums, balafons, ngoma, xylophones, and rattles. They are henceforth a kind of thematic reality of dance, which must prevail if the dancer is not to be crushed by rhythm’s “higher powers.” (1993, 52)

That observation had already been proposed concerning the concert-party. It is true that the scheme was applied to the guitarist, whose primary activity is to regularly reorganize the moments of transition between the narrative sequence, in direct relation to the person who acts as director.

Music is understood here as an element to both moderate and stimulate. It is even solicited to create an exchange among actors or even between the stage and the audience. The pieces that are performed come to the aid of faltering actors, even in the form of a battle of songs that sometimes anticipate the dramatic story itself.

As with the concert-party, the *kotéba*, or popular theatre with the *bonimenteur*, the medial character here represents not only the geometric space of all the relationships but also that form of the “fable’s mirror” through which the audience reproduces the model that is fragmented in narration. The effect of

the “reflecting mirror” comes as a stylistic means by which the audience recognizes itself in the agents’ play, and it in turn takes charge of the play to restore it within a social behavior that follows from the performance.

That kind of interference characterizes the very forms of scenography, in the narration of the story as well as in the gestural signs. Thus, the dramatic tale achieves a material rupture in temporality and spatiality. The sequences dilate or shrink depending on the crowd’s hearty applause or vehement shouts of disapproval and on the medial character’s acts to temper, incite, or increase their response. It will be up to the audience to *end* the “story evening” through total song and through the intervention of a complete mimeticism. A dramatic performance is not a success unless it can be reproduced with the same success by each member of the audience. Children repeat it to themselves in their own fashion, and another teller, perhaps more inspired, will repeat it by sublimating its context or exalting its tragic intensity.

The events that have marked a large number of countries in the past years were foreseen with a unique perception by those in the theatre. The list of those who have had to jump the hurdles of institutional systems is long because these systems have been challenged by the plays that have been performed. The paradigm of the *théâtre de l’empire* established by decree in Central Africa during the reign of Bokassa was taken on in several works. Young actors who had appeared in Guy Menga’s *L’oracle* found themselves under arrest by henchmen in the security forces. In some instances, they were even brought before the authorities and condemned to hard labor. At their insistence, the emperor finally agreed to receive them, and they insisted on performing the offending play in the great hall of the Council, in the presence of all the dignitaries. It turned out that the play targeted “men of the court” rather than Bokassa himself, and the sanctions ended up being placed on those so designated as the guilty parties.

That example is not marginal, and often plays end up with such “illuminations.” Mikanza, Katanga Mupey, or Mutombo Buitshi in Kinshasa as well as Sony Labou Tansi or Abdel Kouvouama and his followers in Brazzaville and Zinsou in Lomé all appear as landmarks along the paths forged by the “men [and women] of the theatre.”

At the time of the sovereign national conferences, tragic mimeticisms often generated acts of war or uncontrolled violence. And not only were official sessions interrupted by dramatic performances, but the theatre practitioners themselves had been invited to program the protocol of the demonstrations or to draw up prospective program of actions. The issue so brutally raised here does not seek to establish an immediate relationship between theatricality and the tragic ruptures that often led to irrational behavior. But it is precisely by beginning with the figures that were dramatized during the periods of conflicts in Mali, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, or the Congo, for example, that one might better explain the primary function of theatricality. The atrocious act of a minister being burned by students occurred as if it were a scene staged on the model of the *kotéba*.

In turn, the end of the dictatorships showed that these had constituted stages

in representativity that were brought forth with dramatic resonances by all the actors in politics. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya had experienced that with his theatre in Gikuyu. That would mean that the play consisted in eluding realities, properly speaking, to use analogical terms, both in the gestural style as well as in an explicit scenography. Following the lines of argument from the first part of this chapter, it appears that the objective of the struggle was the occupation of the space of transgression discussed earlier. Everything happened as if the power of the dictatorship was in a great hurry to occupy that space in order to be able to legitimate the arbitrariness of its violence and organized terror, at the same time trying everything possible to keep the true playwrights from doing so at the risk of destroying themselves from the inside. Having truly understood the significant place of theatricality in this aesthetic of rupture, the dictators had not seen that they would again fall into the trap of something whose nature was beyond the most immediate social structures.

Similar spectacles that were reproduced in several countries, even with a huge choreography, implicitly emphasized the absurd character of a logic that is incapable of contradicting itself, whereas it was in the nature of the methodological principle of theatricality to reach that ultimate point. It is not astonishing, in this case, to note that a large number of these choreographies ended in a sort of plural death: the theme of death that struck the principal characters, the death of the stage that analogically reprises the universe beyond, and especially the death of theatre that ended in a syncope in the course of history. The most concrete example of this remains the figure of Chaka in *Les Amazoulous* by Abdou Anta Ka or *Le Commandant Chaka* by Baba Moustapha. Beyond purely material conflicts or even finances, several companies that are well formed and built on solid bases have seen in this type of death a major reason for their dissensions and their internal instability. Here too, attentive observers have mixed the cause with the consequences that absolutely follow. The study of theatre in African languages, correctly done, would allow us to see that it is not only a question of possible translations but a definite recourse to a different methodology—which explains the violent repressions that have often befallen playwrights; by using the public language, they simultaneously restore to that public its space of transgression. As a result, they designate those places for a reappropriation of cultural identity, and they thus permit a conquest of history.

It is therefore possible to consider that the function of theatre acts in a sort of circular fashion: representivity evokes theatricality on the stage and the dramatic arts reverberate through the other forms of social representation. In no way does that mean that everything is theatre or that political realities are inscribed within a context of theatricality. Such an affirmation would be extreme and would certainly not be supported by arguments from social rationality. But it is through the clear understanding of the methodological principle of theatricality that tautological paradigms can be interpreted most efficaciously.

Thus, what is enacted upon the stage has been evoked on many occasions in terms of theatre's specific modalities. The *kotéba* manages its psychodramas

and collective therapeutics. “Ritual theatre” displays its ambitions for purification by exhibiting giant masks or by insertion into the world of the “dead.” The concert-party develops its avowed intentions of cathartic humor. In this context, comedy as a dramatic genre acquires a determinant resonance, and the experience of the absurd through theatre’s “distance” ends up producing mythologies that attempt to unite the original and originary chaos, whence new myths might be created. The shouts punctuating many finales—“*Liberté! Uhuru!*”—are not merely signs of provocation to censor in political transpositions but become words and voices that call a universe to live, to relive, or to reproduce indefinitely. That is perhaps what would constitute the primary meaning of “representation” in theatricality.

Translated by R. H. Mitsch

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