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THE TRADITIONAL BLACK AFRICAN THEATER:

PROBLEMS OF CRITICAL EVALUATION

by

James N. Anankulor

In Africa we find that there are few pleasure performances which can truly be called dramatic and only seldom out of their many dances can one be found in which even a simple incident is carried through to a conclusion.

— Loomis Havenmeyer, 1916,
The Drama of Savage Peoples.

Drama in Africa is not typically a widespread or developed form (but) there are certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena to be found.

—Ruth Finnegan, 1970, *Oral Literature in Africa.*

It is true, as Ruth Finnegan has observed, that with a few possible exceptions, there is no tradition in Africa of artistic performances which includes all the elements which might be demanded in a strict definition of drama - or at least not with the emphasis to which we are accustomed. Drama in the accepted sense of the term, as a situational interaction expressed in dialogue between characters, is found in a number of rudimentary forms, in simple comedies, and in puppet plays. (My emphasis)

--E.T. Kirby, 1974, "The Indigenous African Theater" in *(The Drama Review, Vol. 18, #4).*

The above quotations on the indigenous or traditional African theater and drama speak for themselves. They are symptomatic of the vagaries with which the indigenous African theater has been regarded for over half a century, up to contemporary times. From Loomis Havenmeyer in 1916 to E.T. Kirby in 1974 is a long period, during which Western critics of the African culture should have known more about the peculiarities and uniqueness of indigenous African peoples

and their culture. Within these years nothing appears to have changed so radically in Western eyes. Rather there appears to be consolidatory restatements concerning indigenous African arts, *with the emphasis to which we are accustomed*. This paper seeks to reassess critical evaluation of the traditional African theater and to explore the artistic realities of African traditional dramatic art within contemporary African society. It proposes that different critical criteria ought to be applied when looking at this oral dramatic form as opposed to the written dramatic forms available in the theatrical centers in the East and West. In this regard, not all the definitive attributes of drama as used in the West, including enactment, actor representation, imitation of persons and events, linguistic content, plot, interaction of several characters, conflict, specialized scenery, music and dance, would necessarily apply. The illustrative examples I have used throughout this paper are heavily drawn from among the Ngwa sub-culture of Igboland in Nigeria where I was born, and where I have researched the indigenous dramatic festivals.

The emphasis on an antiquarian methodology towards art in a changing Africa is most disturbing. Unmindful of the passage of time in history, of the change that has occurred in traditional societies through cultural mutations, Western theater historians and critics have behaved as if Africa is still the same monolithic "dark" continent they assumed it to be on the eve of the scramble and partition. There are scholars who have found it increasingly difficult to admit the authentic uniqueness of the unwritten drama of many African traditional societies. They are either not interested in investigating the rich field of the continent's traditional drama and theater, or have been hoodwinked by the sketchy reports of anthropologists, who themselves, lacking any formal theater training, have merely concluded that any available dramatic performances were designed to placate the gods and ancestral spirits through the so-called "sympathetic magic".

Some scholars have referred to the traditional African theater in terms of ritual, some call it masquerade, dance-drama, story theater and ceremonial performance, and in each case either the critic is quarreling with the purpose being didactic and ritualistic and so not for entertainment and delight, or else he may be dissatisfied with it as entertainment because there is no dialogue or dramatic conflict. None of these theater forms have been found satisfactory to Western aesthetics except some "comedies" such as those of the Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa for example. But what the investigators have so far refused to see and accept is that the traditional African theater, like the other traditional arts, is reflective of the culture of the traditional peoples of Africa, and that any analysis of it that is not based on its culture of origin is not only misleading but futile as well.

If by "contemporary art" for example, Michael Kirby includes indigenous art, I should say he is wrong to talk of an "international style". The latter type of art though contemporary is very regional and nationalistic, and unless universality, which is always perceived in terms of Western concepts of theater, is modified, the traditional African theater will remain conceptually inarticulated or confused.

Ruth Finnegan's recent admission that indigenous drama in Africa is not an easy question should be seen as the typical dilemma which most Western scholars face in the attempt to distinguish what is, or is not, drama in Africa. However, Finnegan makes the dangerous generalization that *drama in Africa is not typically a widespread or developed form* although she admits that *there are certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena to be found.*² The areas in which these "dramatic and quasi-dramatic" forms are to be found include the geographical region of South East Nigeria inhabited by the Yoruba, Ijo, Ibo and Efik peoples. The only exception as to real drama she makes in the West African region is that of the Mande-speaking peoples (some of them) whose plays include all the necessary dramatic qualities that I have enumerated earlier. These plays, all comic, and

intended for realistic portrayal of the characters and the faults of everyday life...CAN BE CALLED DRAMA even though it is drama enlivened by music, dance, and mime as well as spoken conversation. ³

Concluding, Finnegan comments that although the African traditional drama, (using the West African masquerade example), possesses elements associated with drama, it offers quite different emphasis from that of modern European drama because the linguistic content where it exists, is only secondary to drumming and dancing.⁴

I have drawn heavily from Ruth Finnegan because her book *Oral Literature in Africa* and the conclusions it contains are the result of her study of the prominent anthropologists who have studied traditional African societies and have arrived at certain conclusions satisfactory perhaps to anthropology but far less so for dramatic art. Her critical criteria are heavily pro-West even though she fails to use equivalent Western examples. They exhibit the dangers of looking at literature and art strictly from the Western viewpoint. This same critical error is made by Gilbert Victor Tutungi in his examination of the works of Tawfiq Al-Hakim where he concludes,

*Judged from the point of view of Western Literature, Al-Hakim's work displays many weaknesses that would prevent a critic from placing him in the ranks of the greatest writers. From the point of view of Arabic literature, however, he is the man who made the novel and other literary genres an integral part of his nation's literature.*⁵

Such critical criteria should now become obsolete because they pre-suppose Western artistic excellence and the immaturity or naivety of artistic effort in the so-called "primitive societies" found mainly among the Third-World countries. If traditional African drama were to imitate that of the West then it would lose its identity as a unique form. Not even "forcing ritual to yield its story, to cut through the overlay of ceremony to the primary events of the mythos" and "do what the Greeks did" as proposed by Dr. M.J.C. Echeruo for Igbo ritual⁶ would necessarily provide us with a uniquely African drama. African dramatists may quickly become copycats of Western theater dressed with trappings from tradition, neither here nor there.⁷

Traditional drama and theater in most African countries may be said to have been "nipped in the bud" with the arrival of colonialism and hotly pursued by the evangelization doctrines of the Christian missions and Islam. These forces together determined for the indigenes of Africa the course of worship, social entertainment and cultural practices best for them. And with their conversion to either Christianity or Mohammedanism, their traditional religion and rituals associated with it were abandoned to a handful of old men and women. But what the imported religions could not successfully achieve was to force the people to abandon their cultural year festivals also. Thus we can say that in contemporary African societies something irresistible draws the populace together to celebrate and display their fine arts at certain times of the year. This irresistible factor cannot be unconditional loyalty to religious ritual, even though this might have been strong in the past, but the desire to "satisfy their fun-seeking instincts" through dance, song, mimetics, and the general communal exhibitionism of their costumes and of the plastic arts. In addition there is the affirmation of their sense of community and all the values attached to it. Enough credence is given to this conclusion by looking at any traditional society in Africa in which the population is nearly a hundred percent Christian or Muslim but which religiously sticks to its drama through the cultural festivals.

Whereas the rituals that informed these performances may have been totally forgotten or remembered by a few people only, their dramatic or theatrical qualities are ever expanding. As Oyekan Owomoyela correctly observes:

*It can be stated without the need for a supportive argument, that theatrical sketches are just some of the accretions that festivals incorporate from time to time as they become elaborate.*⁸

Thus, such fears that "ritual is and has always been, a dead end"⁹ which cannot grow, are not the result of a consideration of the actual performances of certain dramatic festivals over the years but of the consideration of ritual as being the controlling factor in the traditional festivals. In fact, and in practice, one observes that drama through improvisations and expanding *mimesis*, leaves ritual behind. The ritual informing the *Quem Queritis* medieval drama has not changed a bit since then, but the dramatic performances which grew out of it quickly took on a contemporary character when it burst out of its ecclesiastical precincts.

The *Ekpe* Festival among the Ngwa of Igboland in Nigeria is an example of a dramatic festival which has maintained its ritual core but which, at the same time, quickly turned into a secular dramatic performance. In spite of its lack of elaborate linguistic content or dramatic dialogue (except in the songs) it contains a core story, a dramatic conflict which reaches a climax, and a resolution. In this festival, especially as it is performed among some of the villages in Nsulu-Ngwa, the sacrificial goat or bull is an "actor". It has replaced a human being who used to be sacrificed publicly long before the colonial days. In such days when human beings were used as sacrificial victims, it is evident that some dialogue must have passed between the chief actor, who does the sacrificial action, and the victim. Today, however, the goat is the mute symbol and the details of the tension is stored up in the minds of spectators and performers. The conflict is resolved in the sacrificial act which comes with the successful severing of the victim's head from its trunk by a single strike of a machet. Thus a happy resolution is reached. If the sacrifice is unsuccessful, an unhappy atmosphere is created. Formerly, the sacrifice was the main event, but in contemporary times young men and women improvise short skits on the sidelines, hunting scenes are effectively mimed and the traditional dance steps are being recreated through influences from outside the culture area. The result is that whereas ritual remains in a state of stasis, a load of dramatic and other artistic changes is constantly being made or modified in the same way as traditional theaters of Southeast Asia where "audiences think of the theater in terms of specific presentational forms rather than specific stories".¹⁰

The same historic or ritual purposes may be served in traditional festivals among many Igbo peoples, but each village improvises or modifies the presentational aspects including the songs, dances, mimetic actions, music and speech, thus making every production artistically unique.

It is generally agreed that the dance is an indispensable feature of African traditional life, hence it is also the main vehicle of action in the dramatic festivals. The pervading influence of dancing in the life of the African people has been summarily stated by Geoffrey Gorer:

*Africans dance. They dance for joy, and they dance for grief; they dance for love and they dance for hate; they dance to bring prosperity and they dance to avert calamity; they dance for religion and they dance to pass the time.*¹¹

For the spectator with the untrained eye and ear, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the pleasurable dance, and the dance to express grief. Each is marked by drumming, singing, dancing, and in most cases, mimetic action. Their functional merits tend to be lost in or confused with their structural pattern. But the indigene, for whom these dances form a continuum of his daily or seasonal activity, ritual and culture, there can be no confusion. Music and dance for pleasure is immediately distinguished from such others as those for burial ceremonies, war or ritual propitiation. Thus among the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Lele or the Ashanti, the reaction of the audience watching a certain dance will depend on the mood of the occasion, and, in spite of any mimetic action present, the spectator distinguishes between dance for such formal occasions as birth, death, and initiation from dance in which the emphasis is on its dramatic possibilities. Such dances may occur during the celebrations marking the end of the farming season, or the appearance of the new farm crops. The distinction becomes very necessary because it would be misleading to say that all African traditional dances belong to the traditional dramatic art. On the other hand, most of Africa's dance-dramas are not properly assessed and recognized as the people's legitimate traditional drama because of the inability of separating mere dance from traditional dance-drama.

Dr. Loomis Haveneyer's pertinent remark about the inadequacy of investigations concerning what he calls "the drama of savage peoples" would still be operative in this field of research especially concerning traditional African peoples. He writes:

*Historians of the drama have not been trained or informed along the lines of research that reveal the simpler, more primitive stages, and anthropologists and sociologists have paid less attention to this part of the social field than they have to the evolution of societal forms more closely connected with society's major and inevitable interests. When they have indicated the importance of the former, it has been in passing.*¹²

When investigations have been made at all, they have been directed to traditional religious investigations as Frazer does in *The Golden Bough* but when they touch on matters closely connected with the drama "it is nearly always another point of view than that of the dramatic".¹³ Melville J. Herskovits in 1944 admitted that the subject of drama in the so-called primitive societies has been little studied although he distinguished between two forms, religious or ritual drama, and secular drama which is the formal recitation of prose narratives, probably through folk tales.¹⁴ And summing up the views of anthropologists on drama in non-literate societies, John C. Messenger says:

*It may be admitted that theatre in our sense appears to be rare in the non-literate world, but it is found among the Ibibio-speaking peoples of South-eastern Nigeria, where the "arena theater"... professional actors, plots with memorized dialogues, rehearsals prior to public presentation and props, costumes, and make-up are present.*¹⁵

John Messenger's conclusion is similar to those of Ruth Finnegan and others. He sees Ibibio secret society drama, the *Ekong*, as similar to drama as it is known in the West. It would, however, be wrong to say that this type of drama, the *Ekong*, is "rare" in non-literate societies. Irrespective of their preoccupation with dance, drumming and singing, the African traditional drama has definite production procedure and structure sometimes more elaborate than what obtains in the so-called legitimate theater. And even though few schools are prepared to support its course, and the majority have placed undue emphasis on scenic investiture and scripting,¹⁶ the intellectual and sometimes highly abstract approach of the African traditional drama easily conceptualized by the indigenous spectator and rarely by the Western observer, is something the "civilized" world has been trying unsuccessfully to achieve. Visionaries like Antonin Artaud have called for a return to drama with both community and spiritual system of relationships, while others, including Jerzy Grotowski, have struggled to give their productions extra meaning beyond mere bourgeois realism and reaction. Artaud's contact with the Balinese and

Mexican traditional theaters convinced him that Occidental theater has lost its true *raison d'être* by paying too much attention to a form obsessed "with the defined word which says everything and ends in the withering of words".¹⁷ Artaud's evaluation of the Oriental theater is equally germane of the traditional African theater:

*Oriental theater has been able to preserve a certain expansive value in words, since the defined sense of a word is not everything for there is its music, which speaks directly to the unconscious. That is why in the Oriental theater there is no spoken language, but a language of gestures, attitudes, and signs which from the point of view of thought have as much expansive and revelational value as the other.*¹⁸

Many critics have since dismissed Artaud as mad because he dared set the hands of the clock back by supporting a "primitive" form of theater with emphasis on metaphysical tendencies instead of the Occidental theater sophisticated, and suffused with a gallery of psychological character buildups.

The multi-faceted presentational structure of the traditional African drama-theater makes challenging demands on the spectator. The multiplicity of the masquerades, the variety of the songs and dances, and the brilliance of the costumes and make-up are capable of throwing the foreign spectator off his guard. In the end, he may conclude he has witnessed a beautiful African dance. Or else he may emphasize any part of the performance that happens to arrest his fancy most. To the knowledgeable spectator however, this multiplicity in the presentation can produce effects which can be charming and disturbing at the same time. Moreover, the mind is sufficiently excited and alert so that what appears to be a muddle of complications is resolved through a single perspective, usually the triumph of good over the forces of evil.

Let us take the *Owu* theater of Ngwa people as an example. The *Owu* is also a major traditional theater form among the Ijo of Southern Nigeria. More than fifteen different masquerades representing the spirits and creatures of the river as well as men and animals on land are characters employed during the *Owu* performance. These include *owu dibia* (traditional doctor and seer), *owu umuazu* (small fry masquerades), *owu ofirima* (the shark masquerade), *owu ijrima* (the ram-headed monster), *owu utam* (the satyr masquerade) *owu aguiyi* (the crocodile masquerade), *owu mamiwota* (the mermaid masquerade), *owu nganga* (the proud masquerade), and *owu mgbolo* (the head of all the masquerades). There are also masquerades representing the ante-lope and the dogs which hunt them. What this drama means is a vast representation of life in the river and on land, the two sources of

the peoples' supply of food and blessings as well as sources from which they can expect hardship and calamity. Performed once every three years this festival lasts seven days. During the seven days, the shark, the crocodile and the monster are hunted by fishermen and finally killed on the seventh day. The same case applies to the antelope which the dogs pursue in vain for the six days but succeed on the seventh day. The *owu dibia* and *owu mgbolo* ward off evil during the seven days in order that the festival may pass successfully. Thus the whole myth of the people's struggle for survival is re-enacted through the masquerades, dancing and interacting with other performers and watched by spectators from the neighboring villages and beyond. The place of presentation is the market square of the village fringed with trees and raised mounds on which spectators remain to watch the performance.

The foreign spectator may not understand the relevant myth recreated in the dramatic festival. He may not understand the cosmic significance of the act, its mark on the people's culture, its uniqueness to their existence and the fact that it is irreplaceable by another symbol in place and time.¹⁹ However, this indispensable story may be retold the same way the next year at the end of the farming season, with new songs, dances, more mimetic action and more elaborate costuming employed. Thus in the traditional performance the fugitive nature of dramatic art is observable between one performance and another. But instead of emphasizing an ordered rational story by means of dialogue, the African traditional theater stresses the symbolic images and the presentational aspects of theater and leaves the spectator to piece the story together. It is left for the spectator to resolve "the beauty" and "the beast"²⁰ images as they appear in the drama by characterizing them appropriately.

Another unique characteristic of the African traditional theater is that it takes sometimes more than one day to complete the story. The story of the *Owu* theater referred to above takes seven days to complete, like the story of the Creation. Like the medieval mystery pageants, the audience attends patiently every day for seven days waiting for the drama festival to end. Within the seven days, actors who perform poorly or those who are unable to continue performance due to ill health or accident are quickly replaced by other substitutes, who are readily trained to step in during emergencies. The period covered by the days of performance must be carefully planned well in advance of the performances, and enough rehearsals held to make sure every actor, dancer or singer is artistically in order. These measures are taken to maintain the spectator's interest, and to ensure his attention. Moreover, a poor performance brings shame not only to the individual performer but to his entire community.

Douglas Fraser's and Herbert M. Cole's classification of African traditional art into the three dimensions of *structure*, *function* and *history*²¹ can justifiably be used for the African traditional drama and theater, and although these are inextricably bound together they could be very well isolated for purposes of analysis. I have already mentioned the multiplicity and pervasiveness present in the presentational form. Broadly speaking, the African traditional dramatic presentations may be structurally divided into preparation, presentation and resolution or assessment. As a communal event, the preparatory stages can be divided into the civic and the artistic. The civic stage involves the meeting of elders for decision-making, budgeting, streamlining of artistic responsibilities, arrangements to keep the village clean, formulation and reiteration of the laws guiding the performance. It also includes whatever is necessary, village ancestors and gods and efforts by individual homesteads to make their visitors welcome for the occasion. On the artistic level, preparation includes the carving, huying or renovation of the masks, getting the costumes ready, drumming, song and dance rehearsals, and try-outs. The qualification for working or serving in any of the artistic divisions of the dramatic preparation depends largely on the artistic bent of the individual. Sometimes individual artists come from certain families noted for their particular art in such areas as drumming, carving or costume preparation. I should say that such artistic preparations go on for as long as the period separating one performance and another which usually runs into a year or sometimes years, but they are intensified as the performance period draws nearer. Artists may be imported from other villages to perform such functions as tattooing women's bodies or painting them with fast vegetable juices. Although both the civic and artistic preparations may differ from one performance to the other (depending on the type or composition of the participants), functions are usually distributed to people according to their individual capabilities. What this illustrates is that traditional dramatic performances provide the artistic impetus for creativity in spite of their direct or indirect connections with religion.²²

In most African traditional drama, the presentation or performance is usually done at the village market square. The open stage or the arena represents the commonest theatrical formation. In the *Epeke* and *Owu* plays already referred to, the spectators begin arriving at the square well in advance of the performance, usually as early as twelve noon local time. The performance begins around two o'clock and lasts until about six p.m. or later. Drummers and dancers, and sometimes lesser masquerades (where employed) begin the performance followed by other masquerades in order of importance, as in the *owu* drama. The gradual arrival of the masquerades creates room for dramatic suspense. The climax of most of these plays comes with the entrance of the chief

masquerade. Tension is created and the tempo of the performance increases. In plays where the sacrificial act is incorporated in the performance, as in the *Ekpe* drama, this marks the climax for the entire four hours or more of performance. Although the lesser masquerades provide skits and improvise scenes before the appearance of the chief masquerade, attention is turned towards the latter immediately as he appears. It is the chief masquerade that usually acts out the myth for which the dramatic celebration has been instituted. When the masquerades leave the arena, the end of the day's performance is in sight. Although dancing, singing and drumming may continue, most performers return home to entertain their visitors who are also the spectators of the drama.

Returning home after the performance, people talk about its merits and demerits. It must, however, be borne in mind that the assessment of these dramatic productions is made on purely artistic principles. Such issues as the costume worn by the masquerades and other performers, the performance of the chief masquerades, which masquerades were most creative, the quality of the songs, dance, and drumming, the artistic nature of the sacrificial act, individual dancers and performers, and any incidents which tended to make or mar the performance are discussed fully at dinners given in private homes, at drinking gatherings, and along the streets. Faults by one village constitute a unique artistic boost to another which at some time may create scenes mimicking the former, or may be motivated to mount a better performance. It is important to note that these discussions are not centered on religious ritual, but on dramatic art which incorporates all the other fine arts. It is not unusual to find spectators paying compliments for a beautiful production of a dramatic festival or expressing dissatisfaction with a poor one.

History and function are hardly separable in traditional theatrical performances. Invariably, every performance has a legend, myth, or story behind it which determines the time selected for performance, the nature of the performance, the artistic decisions made, and the functions the performance is supposed to accomplish. The function of the *Okonko* festival in Ngwaland is to initiate men into responsible adult life with all rights and privileges of manhood within the culture and sometimes outside it. Thus uninitiated persons suffer the social inferiority of exclusion from gatherings which require confidence and secrecy. However, the initiation ceremony contains several stages. The public performance by the *Okonko* masquerades and the members is without doubt what spectators look forward to. From their point of view this dramatic performance constitutes the climax of the celebration, whereas for the initiate the final admission into the *Okonko* secret chamber marks the climax of his expectations. In the same way, the *Ekpe* annual drama is performed to mark the end of the

farming season which links it directly with its ritual function of placating the gods and thanking them for their gifts during the past year. But what the performers and spectators look forward to is the public dramatic performance in the market place which comes to a climax with the sacrificial act.

What seems to be a latent function of the dramatic festivals, judging from their historical origins, has increasingly assumed an overall importance as the quest for spectacle and art receive greater priority. There is no doubt that the religious procession in honor of the Greek god Dionysius lost its religious immediacy as spectacle and showmanship gained importance when the Dionysia became more and more elaborate. The performance of the traditional African drama is an act of communal cooperation and community assent. Thus accompanying the artistic functions of a performance are other latent functions including the improvement of local sanitation, increased economic activity through selling and buying, or exchanges in preparation for guest entertainments, and costuming needs; increased peaceful social interaction, festivity, and sometimes the relaxation of certain rigid social codes of conduct. Historical considerations like those of religion, remain fairly static in traditional dramatic performance while the latent functions are always changing and evolving into new patterns around which the interests of the performer and spectator lie and grow.

Of great importance to the performance of the traditional African play, as it is with all drama and theater, is the audience. The audience is so central to traditional drama that without it so much time would not be spent by communities in the artistic preparation phase of the festivals. To impress the spectator is the immediate aim of the performer, and under appropriate circumstances such as the example Professor Ottenberg gives concerning Afikpo masquerades the spectator talks, moves about his seat, shouting comments, and sometimes dashing out and giving presents.²³ Dr. Ottenberg confesses his earlier mistake which is also the mistake made by many Western spectators of African dramatic performances:

I had focused on the masked players themselves, the events of the performance, the costuming, the preparations before the public appearance and the de-escalation afterwards, yet I did so without much reference to the audience.²⁴

But the question of the "high level of audience player interaction in festivals" must be pursued cautiously because it is as complicated as the appearance of too many masquerades all at once giving "confusion" to a performance. The audience composition is an ever changing factor in traditional dramatic art. For example,

in the *Ekpe* festival among the Ngwa-Igbo of Nigeria, every member of the celebrating village is a performer hence all the audience, which runs into five thousand or more spectators²⁵, is drawn from the nearby villages and even beyond. Such spectators may have their own *Ekpe* tradition but they may not interfere with the progress of a performance going on in the host village. This audience is usually quiet, intent on enjoying the performance, noting innovations and assembling critical comments. Performers may dance along the fringes of the arena, seeking interaction with members of the audience known to them, instead of the spectators taking such an initiative. Attempts at bold interaction by spectators in this regard could be viewed as an act of bad faith and malicious intentions. For this reason a concoction of chalk and other fermented vegetable matter is used during *Ekpe* to prevent charm holders from getting too close to the performers, especially the chief masquerade. This concoction when sprinkled toward the audience satisfies the medicine man's intentions as well as serves to hold the audience farther away from the performers. In contemporary *Ekpe* performances, this concoction is still used, but chiefly to keep the spectators in check.

The dramatic performances of *Okonko* secret society and those of the *Dibia* associations are also watched by relatively quiet and cautious audiences. However, unlike in the *Ekpe* festival the composition of these audiences is made up of a mixture of people from the performing village — women, children, non-initiates and others from the neighboring villages. The audience-performers interaction here is caused by the runner-masquerades chasing non-initiates into the nearby bushes and flogging them, the "women's friend" masquerade performing sexual mimetics with the women and the animal masquerades arousing fear and awe in the spectators by performing some aggressive mimetics. When the chief masquerade of *Okonko* performs such interactions cease and attention is focused on him. If I may describe a term for this audience, I should call it an audience of non-initiates watching the drama of initiates and keeping their distance. Finally, during fertility, birth or burial festivals, the performers are usually few, mainly drawn from a particular lineage and members of their extended families but the spectators comprise the rest of the village and a few from outside it. Here the interaction is highest, to use the Ngwa-Igbo examples. If it is a birth festival the woman in whose honor it is done receives presents indiscriminately from the spectators. Any man or woman willing to do so can greet the performance and grind the ceremony to a temporary halt. However, care must be taken in including such festivals as drama because in most cases only dancing and no mimetic improvisations can be observed. The burial ceremonies of old men are, however, suffused with rich symbolic mimetic action dramatizing their lives and how they lived them. Instant audience critical reviews are prevalent in these festivals especially in assessing the quality of the performance and the richness of the costumes.

The sitting or standing arrangement of the audience depends on the nature of the performance. In the *Ekpe* theater nobody sits down except the master drummer. The audience forms a frieze around the performers with women usually standing on the raised mounds surrounding the arena behind the male spectators who usually absorb the first shocks of a push from the performers. Little boys climb nearby trees from where they command a clear view of the audience and performers. In the *Okonko* drama, women usually stay in the corner of the arena because they are more easily protected this way than mixing with boys and non-initiates for whom the running masquerades provide fun and sport. This is the same standing arrangement as in the *Ekong* drama among the Ibibio of Southeast Nigeria.²⁶

I do not know the basis of Professor Ottenberg's observation that among the Afikpo-Igbo of Nigeria, females sit "in designated places, usually in less comfortable and less shaded areas."²⁷ Except to prove his thesis of women's inferiority to men in Afikpo area, I do not see the basis for this sitting arrangement which places women in the sun! Some explanation is necessary to determine the cultural validity of such an audience distribution which to me looks like stretching the woman's inferior position in the society to rather unnecessary and far-fetched conclusions.

Audience reaction and interaction in the traditional theater can therefore be seen as the product of factors related to the performance, the nature of the play, the composition of the performers, the physical environment in which the production is taking place, and the occasion for which the play is being staged. In one performance alone, take the *Ekpe* for instance, spectators follow the performers side by side during the route movement from the command squares to the market square. However, once in the market square, the spectators take permanent positions from which they could observe the day's drama. And, whereas the audience might assume the manner of complacent familiarity with the performers during certain routine dances of burial or birth ceremonies, it reacts to the *Okonko*, *Dibia* or *Ekpe* dance-dramas with a certain mixture of fear and joyful excitement. When the masquerades threaten, or the orderlies charge, fear grips the audience, uncertain fear of what might happen and also fear for personal safety. Yet there is happiness in taking a full view of the performers and contemplating the ugliness or beauty of the masks. What is common, whatever performance is going on, is the mutual conversation by the audience as it discusses any aspect of the performance in rather hushed tones. Big mouth, open and adverse comments from outside spectators while in the arena, result in occasional fights but such situations are heavily discouraged because the period of the dramatic festivals is a period of peace and hospitality rather than one of hostility and strife.

The attitude of the audience to the masquerades in contemporary traditional societies of Africa is changing rapidly from total religious inspired beliefs that they are gods or ancestral spirits to a veritable dramatic "suspension of disbelief" attitude in the realization that the players are the characters they represent as long as they have their masks on, but that these same players would soon resume their human activities among the people. In the *Ekepe* drama, the chief masquerade and hero of the play is congratulated while he is still in the mask by direct money gifts made by the spectators and later in his home by citizens and visitors bringing more gifts to show their appreciation of the hero's artistic efforts in dance and sacrifice. In ceremonies involving initiation, however, the traditional distance still exists between the masquerades and the non-initiates while the initiated members maintain the artistic truth of their performance by treating the masquerades plausibly, each according to what it represents.

One can say, without the fear of contradiction, that in today's traditional African societies the dramatic performances have been heavily de-religionised. Although there are ritual religious ceremonies still performed by a few village priests which maintain the ancestral traditional religious concepts, these are, however, in the minority, very private in most cases, and unwatched by audiences of any size. Contemporary performers do not even think of this ritual stage of the performance. The religious principles which informed the traditional dramas of today are remotely present in the people's collective unconscious but their entertainment and artistic values are increasingly all-important. Recent writers and observers of the traditional dramatic performances have made references to this changing phase. Of the *Nupe Elo* masquerade of Northern Nigeria, Phillips Stevens Jr. comments: "The masquerade...is now regularly performed only on Muhammad's birthday."²⁸ While this looks like keeping the performance still close to a religious event, it could be seen that such is not the case from another comment of Stevens that "the major function of *elo* and *gugu* is quite obviously entertainment".²⁹ Mr. Onuora Nzekwu makes a similar observation regarding the masquerades of contemporary Eastern Nigeria:

*Today masquerading has lost most of the religious ideas which brought it into being and sustained it. Yet, at first sight it still appears to give all the essence, vitality and prestige which characterized it long ago.*³⁰

The characteristics Mr. Nzekwu is referring to are not only the entertainment and play-acting aspects of masquerading which are yet vigorously pursued in all traditional societies, but their mystic and fear inspiring qualities. Continuing, Mr. Nzekwu adds:

These non-religious, "purely aesthetic" values which keep the art going nowadays were extremely important even before traditional religion went into decline. Before the great changes of outlook brought about during the Colonial period, people like the Kalabari recognized that masquerading, as ballet and drama, had an intrinsic value quite apart from its worth as a means of coercing the gods. So much that by the nineteenth century some traditional performances had reached the stage where rites addressed to the gods connected with them had become mere precautions against accident or bad weather marring the play.³¹

The transformation from religious to theatrical importance of the festivals could once more be seen as crucial to our critical approach to the art of traditional drama. Like medieval drama, already referred to, these traditional performances should be the concern of dramatic critics and not the exclusive concern of social and cultural anthropologists.

While we do not know whether traditional dramatic art in Africa would have developed along the same lines as its Greek counterpart (if the growth had not been arrested by colonialism and imported religions) it is evident to me that it would have developed its own unique forms nonetheless.³² It is evolving all the same in spite of the clipping of its wings by the early Christian churches which saw evil and sexuality whenever the African expressed himself through dramatic mimetics and dance.³³ At this stage, however, research has a duty of sorting and classifying traditional African festivals not merely into the dramatic and the non-dramatic only but also into drama and non-drama. Such classifications will depend on the nature and structure of the action, the story dramatized (remote or immediate), the actor (masked or plain), the audience -- its composition, reaction and involvement in the performance going on; and the artistic decisions and involvements called for by the performance. If the traditional African drama is to be given its proper place in the social life of the peoples of the continent, if it is not to be continually confused with mere religious ritual, and if it is not to be seen as an undeveloped or so-called "primitive" form of the advanced western drama, then drama-theater historians must examine the whole field by fresh comprehensive classification. Fortunately the area studies already accomplished will provide the much needed take-off.³⁴ Finally, the exercise would help to expose the ignorance, triteness, and arrogance of statements such as this:

In Africa we find that there are few pleasure performances which can truly be called dramatic and only seldom out of their many dances can one be found in which even a simple incident is carried through to a conclusion...most of their performances imitate the movements of animals, but they do little besides the mere jumping or hopping around, that is, performing the gymnastic dance.³⁵

Such generalizations and erroneous pitfalls can only be avoided if drama-theater historians recognize the uniqueness of traditional dramatic art in Africa and treat it as culturally different and distinct from the contemporary Western tradition. Its growth and expansion do not seek the aid of the written form but an active encouragement for growth from the base culture through youth education.

While I have not advocated the lowering of the rules of Aristotle, I am certainly opposed to the application of such rules to inappropriate cases. This implies that the present academic chauvinism which tends to grudgingly tolerate the discussion of the traditional African theater simply because we are not in possession of the relevant social facts should be set aside. The traditional African theater is relevant to the study of theater history because it is culturally relevant to the societies that practise it, societies whose world-view is fairly homogeneous and whose dramatic performances have suffered identical cultural limitations within the historical process especially by forces brought about by colonialism. To look upon these societies and their institutions as static phenomena or museum pieces would be to continue in the same ignorance shown in the past.

The contemporary complex state of the traditional African society in which lives over 80% of Africa's populations, and where ancestral traditions are constantly being modified to suit new social conditions and realities, deserves intensive examination for so much of the past continues in the present while the present yet serves the past. The "total" or artistic synthesis of the traditional African theater in contemporary times confirms the merger of this past and present. It is a feature already irresistible to modern African theater the importance of which we may not even grasp without an adequate appreciation of the nature and functions of its traditional counterpart. In a word the cyclic philosophy of the African existence continues in operation here.

Footnotes

1. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 500.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 505, 509.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 515.
5. Gilbert Victor Tutungi, "Tawfiq Al-Hakim and the West". Dissertation Abstract, Indiana University, 1966. Reprinted in *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 4 (Spring 1973), pp. 85-86.
6. Michael J.C. Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual", *Research in African Literature* Vol. 4 (Spring 1973), p. 30.
7. The plays of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark (Nigeria) or those of J.C. De Graft and Ama-Ata Aidoo (Ghana) to mention a few are all models of western drama dressed in traditional borrowings. Their appeal is very much limited to people brought up in western theater concepts and practices.
8. Owomoyela Oyekan, "Folklore and Yoruba Theater", *Research in African Literature* Vol. 2 (Fall 1971), p. 123.
9. Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual", p. 30.
10. A.J. Gunawardana, "From Ritual to Rationality", *The Drama Review*, Vol. 15 (Spring 1971), p. 53.
11. Geoffrey Gorer, *Africa Dances*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1962), p. 213.
12. Loomis Havenmeyer, *The Drama of Savage Peoples*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Melville J. Herskovits, "Dramatic Expression Among Primitive Peoples", *Yale Review*, xxxiii (1944), pp. 683-698.
15. John C. Messenger, "Ibibio Drama", *Africa*, XLI (July 1971), p. 208.

16. Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theater*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 93.
17. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, Mary Caroline Richards, translation, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1958), p. 118. Artaud's letter to J.P. dated in Paris, May 28, 1933.
18. *Ibid.*
19. John Knox, *Myth and Truth*, (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1964), p. 35.
20. See Herbert M. Cole, "Ibo Art and Authority", in *African Art and Leadership*; Douglas Fraser and Herbert M. Cole, eds., p. 92.
21. Douglas Fraser and Herbert M. Cole, "Art and Leadership, An Overview", *African Art and Leadership*, pp. 299-302.
22. Obiora Udechukwu, "Functionality, Symbolism and Decoration: Some Aspects of Igbo Traditional Art", *The Conch*, III, (September 1971), p. 90.
23. Simon Ottenberg, "Afikpo Masquerades: Audience and Performers", *African Arts* (Summer 1973), p. 33.
24. *Ibid.*
25. "Umuode People Rejoice During Ekpe Festival," *Nigerian Mask: The Cultural Paper*, No. 1, (January 6-9, 1973), p. 4
26. John C. Messenger, "Ibibio Drama", p. 212.
27. Simon Ottenberg, "Afikpo Masquerades", p. 33-4.
28. Phillips Stevens Jr., "The Nupe Elo Masquerades", *African Arts*, (Summer 1973), p. 43.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Onuora Nzekwu, "Masquerade", *Nigeria Magazine*, Special Independence Issue (October 1960), p. 134.
31. *Ibid.*

32. By comparison, Dr. Echeuo believes that the traditional Igbo festival is "Structured on Sumerian rather than Greek lines" and would like to see ritual yield to drama for the latter to develop unrestricted. The examples offered by him do not represent the best that could be found in Igboland. Moreover he does not dwell on the masquerade action which in most cases dramatizes the ritual. See M.J.C. Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual", p. 25.
33. Geoffrey Gorer, *Africa Dances*, pp. 173-8.
34. See J.A. Adedeji, "The Alarinjo Theater", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, 1969; J.N. Amankulor, "The Functions of Traditional Festivals Among the Ngwa (Igbo) of Southeast Nigeria", M.A. Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974; Oyinade Ogunba, "Ritual Drama of the Ijebu People", Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1967; Fidelma Okwesa, "The Owu Masked Plays", M.A. Thesis, UCLA, 1972.
35. Loomis Havemeyer, *The Drama of Savage Peoples*, p. 187.

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