

# Preface

The beginnings of African theatre in the French language can be traced back to the early 1930s, when students of the *Ecole Normale William Ponty* in Gorée, Senegal (for the post-primary training of teachers and administrators) were encouraged to write and perform plays based on African history and customs. The students of the *Ecole* were drawn from all parts of French West Africa, which was organized as a federation during the colonial period. Their regional identity was, however, strictly maintained and the first play, entitled *La dernière entrevue de Béhanzin et de Bayol*, was written and performed by students from Dahomey (June, 1933). Since the main purpose of this exercise was educational, the dramatic was often sacrificed for historical and anthropological accuracy, while the interpretation of the African past and present tended to reflect, not the nationalist aspirations of the students, but the colonial attitudes of the French teachers. It is therefore interesting to compare this first play with Jean Pliya's more recent *Kondo le Requin* (1967), which deals with the same period and the same chief characters, but in a manner which reflects the very different outlook of post-colonial Africa. Such was the success of the *Ponty* experiment that a group of thirty students performed two of their plays during the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1937 (*Sokamé* and *Les prétendants rivaux*, written and performed by Dahoman and Ivory Coast students respectively). The tradition, once established, continued to flourish, especially after Charles Béart joined the *Ecole* in the mid-thirties, having already contributed to the development of theatre in the Ivory Coast. It lasted until 1948, when the school was empowered to award the *baccalauréat* and there seemed to be less time for theatrical activities. The influence of the tradition on those who had known it was, however, important for the future development of drama in French-speaking Africa. In some cases, one finds that the individual most responsible for stimulating drama in his region had formerly been a student at the *Ecole William Ponty*. Bernard Dadié, a well-known novelist, poet and dramatist from the Ivory Coast, wrote one of his first plays while a student at the *Ecole*. Another former student, F.-J. Amon d'Aby, although not so well-known outside his country, was one of the most active promoters of theatre in the Ivory Coast, as a writer, a director and a founder of the *Cercle culturel et folklorique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (1953).

After the Second World War, theatrical activity was encouraged throughout the federation by the French administration through the setting up of cultural centres (*cercles culturels*). An annual prize was offered for the best play, which was then published in the official magazine *Traits*

*d'Union*. Since the stimulus came from the colonial authorities, the plays still tended to reflect a folklore approach to their themes and a colonial attitude in their interpretation. Although, therefore, it is possible to list an impressive number of titles for this period and one can note a remarkable amount of activity, the standard was not on the whole very high. With the achievement of autonomy in the French colonies in 1958 and complete independence from 1960, it seemed likely that drama and theatre would be given a new impetus. In some respects this was true, but it was in fact nearly a decade before there were indications of a really significant burst of creative activity from the writers. As recently as 1969 an African director complained of a dearth of good plays in French-speaking Africa. A great stimulus was provided by the annual competition organized after 1967 by the *Direction des Affaires extérieures et de la Coopération* (D.A.E.C.) of the *Office de la Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française* (O.R.T.F.) Pan-African cultural festivals, such as those held at Dakar (1966) and Algiers (1969), invariably include a drama competition and have been a valuable incentive to both writers and performers.

The first professional theatre company was created by the Guinean Fodéba Keïta as early as 1949. A former pupil of the *Ecole William Ponty*, Keïta included some of its plays in his early repertoire. His company, the *Théâtre Africain*, performed both in Africa and in France. However, with the growing demand for more traditional forms of African entertainment, Keïta abandoned drama for dance and in 1958 the name of his company was changed to *Ballets Africains*.

The *Ballets Africains* of Guinea was a state company, for it is difficult for professional theatre to survive in any other form at present in French-speaking Africa. Senegal has had the oldest established theatre, as a result of its having been the administrative centre of the former French West African federation. The *Théâtre du Palais* in Dakar was opened in 1954; it was replaced in 1965 by an entirely new building and renamed the *Théâtre Daniel Sorano*, under the management of Senghor's nephew, Maurice Sonar Senghor.

The vitality of the theatre continues, however, to depend mainly on the enthusiasm and perseverance of amateurs. In Mali, amateur theatrical activity was encouraged after independence by the ruling party, which saw the theatre as a powerful weapon for education and propaganda. Continuing the practice of the previous colonial administration, prizes were offered for the best plays and performances, organized under the aegis of the local branch of the party. Elsewhere activity has been more spontaneous, but the pattern generally much the same. Plays are often written for specific occasions and frequently by the troupe working as a team; not many of these plays are ever published. They provide entertainment for audiences that make few serious demands either on

authors or actors. Independence and the disintegration of the old inward-looking federation stimulated a desire for higher standards among performers and audiences in the larger centres, with their greater awareness of expectations abroad. The result has been an increasing dissatisfaction with the patronizing praise of inadequate plays and productions.

Some French-speaking African states have begun to make provision for the training of actors, directors and specialists in other theatre skills. Senegal has its *Ecole des Arts*, with a five-year course of training, while the Ivory Coast and Mali each have an *Institut National des Arts* (I.N.A.). In these countries and in others which do not yet have professional training centres, short courses are given from time to time by visiting experts from France. Experience and the chance to measure one's standards against those of others are an important stimulus. Several African states have taken part in the annual *Théâtre des Nations* in Paris and, from time to time, troupes, mostly of students, visit Paris and tour the French provinces. Those who wish to make a career in the theatre tend often to go to France in order to undertake further study at French drama schools and to gain experience working in French theatres.

African actors do not, however, find it easy to make a living in France. Directors are often reluctant to cast black actors in roles that have always been played by white actors. Opportunities are sometimes provided by plays which have black characters, such as Genet's *Les Nègres* and J.-P. Sartre's *La Putain respectueuse*. The Senegalese actor Bachir Touré is well-known in France and has played Othello in a French production (1969). Actors and directors from Africa and the Caribbean working in Paris have sometimes come together to form all-black companies, but with little lasting success, except in the case of *Les Griots* formed in the 1950s by Robert Liensol from Guadeloupe and *Chango* formed in 1966 by Med Hondo from Mauretania. *Les Griots*, directed by Blin, were responsible for the original production of *Les Nègres*, while *Chango* staged the first Paris production of Guy Menga's prize-winning play *L'Oracle*, at the *Théâtre des Champs-Elysées* in 1969.

Unionmwan Edebiri describes most of these efforts to stimulate theatrical activity in French-speaking Africa, in the article that opens this special number.

A large body of plays has now been published since the early sixties, and Harold A. Waters' article shows that there is no sign of any diminution in this creative activity in the early eighties. Some writers have stood out from the crowd – Bernard Dadié (who, like the West Indian, Césaire, returned to the theatre as a medium late in his career), Charles Nokan, Cheik Alioun Ndao, Guy Menga and Guillaume Oyónô-Mbia. A dominant genre is the historical play, and Gary Warner provides an

analysis of the origins and characteristics of this aspect of African drama in French.

If drama exists at all in French-speaking Africa, this is because there is an ancient and deeply-rooted indigenous theatrical tradition in all these former French colonies – a tradition built essentially on religious and social ritual, expressed on the one hand in terms of song, dance and mime, and on the other through the art of the griots, story-tellers and musicians *par excellence* whose techniques display a thorough sense of theatre. Most of the playwrights mentioned above, as well as many of their contemporaries, have shown some awareness of these traditional practices in writing their plays, incorporating song, dance and mime, as well as the griot as character, in much of their work. Mineke Schipper examines the scope and importance of this dimension, while Barthélémy Kotchy shows how directors and actors in the Ivory Coast have tried to make the African theatrical tradition the natural basis and inspiration for a modern theatre for Africa. As Kotchy points out, there are inevitably weaknesses and limitations at this early, experimental stage, but, if theatre is to flourish in Africa, this is a development that must take place.

I am grateful to my colleague, Allan Doig, for translating Mineke Schipper's article from the Dutch. I myself translated Barthélémy Kotchy's article from the French.

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## The Development of the Theatre in French-speaking West Africa

*Unionmwan Edebiri*

French-speaking African drama owed much of its growth in the colonial era to French initiative and support. From 1933 to the late 40s, French-speaking African drama was virtually synonymous with the end-of-year theatrical presentations at the William Ponty School in Gorée, Senegal. Not only did the French colonial administration encourage the students to tour the capitals of French West African colonies with their plays during the holidays but it also sponsored a William Ponty School troupe to the International Exhibition in Paris in 1937, where it performed *Sokamé* and *Les prétendants rivaux*.<sup>1</sup>

Another institution was engaged in theatrical activity in French West