Health and the African theatre

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Abstract
This article explores the representation in performance and theatre of three contrasting approaches to our understanding of disease causality —explanations that invoke material and non-material forces in a traditional cosmology where all phenomena are interrelated, contemporary biomedical explanations that situate causation in material forces alone and that isolate individual responsibility, and socialist explanations that seek underlying economic and political causes of community ill health. Written by an active performer, the article is based on her observation of workshops and performances, on interviews, published and unpublished reports, and an analysis of contemporary plays by Soyinka, Hussein and Muhando.

Different approaches to health, disease and cure are reflected in different infrastructures created to deal with them, which are informed by political, economic and social structures and attitudes. These attitudes and structures find expression within general culture and within specific cultural expressions such as theatre. This paper looks at attitudes towards health, disease and cure manifested in traditional and contemporary African performances. It is argued that traditional performances reveal attitudes that arise from an understanding of interrelationships among universal phenomena, whereas most contemporary theatre carries attitudes that have a limited socio-political framework or that remain symbolic representations of interrelationships.