Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia

Theater and Dance: 1900 to Present: Africa

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During the early 20th century, most African countries were under various colonial regimes from Europe and the Middle East. However, it is widely known that Africa, as other continents in the world, had theater practices which existed since time immemorial. The continent had thousands of ethnic communities, each with its theater attached to customs and traditions. The history and nature of these communities played a major role in the theater which was practiced. The theater included various forms such as dance, plays, games, recitations, storytelling, masquerades, ritual, puppets, and music. All these forms were holistically considered to form theater, as they could be performed in combination and seldom in separation. In general, dance was part and parcel of African theater.

Apart from improvisation and oral presentation, African theater involved community participation from preparation to performance. Theater was performed in or around community venues, depending on the nature of the performance. For example, if the event was a ritual, the performance was done around the ritual shrine. Since there was no separation between theater (drama) and dance, most theater performances were accompanied by dance and drumming. Costumes, props, and makeup used reflected the environment in which the community was located. For example, the theaters of farming communities depicted farming seasons and activities; this was reflected in props and in the content of the performance itself. As a simulacrum of culture, theater also reflected major life events such as birth, marriage, and death. There were dances that were specific to celebrating birth and baby-naming as well as for the rites of passage. Therefore, each theater or dance performance had a message to communicate. The communication intended to teach, warn, mourn, celebrate, entertain, or even predict the future of the society.

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Impact of Missionary Education

The rise of missionary education during colonial times in the 1930s and 1940s had a direct impact on theater. Colonial education portrayed theater and other traditional performances as primitive and demonic, especially when compared to religions such

as Christianity. The colonialists included missionaries who did not understand the content, context, and form in which theater in Africa was performed and, hence raised suppressive suspicion. In order to replace African theater, the colonialists introduced colonial theater. The introduction of colonial theater was supposed to act as a model of theater for Africans. Colonial theater was practiced primarily in schools, which were mostly run by missionaries. In these schools, apart from performing plays for church ceremonies such as Easter and Christmas, students were also allowed to perform Western plays. Some of the famous plays were those of William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, and Gilbert and Sullivan, among others from Europe and America.

As opposed to German colonialists, who banned African theater altogether, British administrations allowed the people to practice their theater but required them to follow Christianity and accepted morals. For example, traditional dances were allowed if they adhered to the colonial administration and Christianity. As in precolonial times, theater continued with its oral traditions. This was different from European theater, which was based on written literature (drama) and was performed in well-constructed theater houses on stages. Also, Arabs, who were colonizing parts of Africa, especially the coasts of western and eastern Africa, had introduced a kind of theater with songs and dances related to Arab culture.

During the British colonial administration in Africa, some prominent theater houses, known as “Little Theaters,” were built, mostly during the 1940s and 1950s. These theaters still exist in some African countries, including South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. The major objective of these theaters' construction was to provide European communities in Africa a place to sit and enjoy Western plays. The plays that were performed in these theaters were also used as a model to show the “elite” of Africa the quality and value of Western theater. Compared to traditional African theater, Western theater used imported costumes, and elevated and proscenium arch stages. In such theaters, drama was the key, as opposed to the traditional theater, which incorporated more than one form.

Regardless of their suppression, traditional African theater and dances from the precolonial era did not die. They continued to be practiced in secrecy, depending on available space, or in public, in accordance with colonial regulations. In order to be accepted by colonial administrations, some communities had to change—to adopt and

transform their traditional dances—to fit with colonial preferences. For example, *beni ngoma* was a traditional dance that developed in eastern and some parts of southern Africa as a result of colonial cultural policy that denied some aspects of traditional dances. *Beni*, from the word *band*, imitated colonial military drills, movements, and costumes. The content was a combination of military commands and the message that the dancers wanted to communicate.

Impact of Independence

The period from the 1960s onward was seen as a new beginning for theater practitioners, especially after independence, in a number of African countries. The establishment of national theaters in various parts of the continent was at the top of the agenda. This was seen by the newly independent African states as a mechanism to regain their lost identity. Western theater continued to be practiced in schools but incorporated elements of traditional African theater. The literature taught in schools also incorporated plays from African writers. Most of the incorporated literature was a mixture of African content presented in a Western style similar to the Shakespeareans. This style of writing was seen in the early works of various playwrights, including Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya), Ebrahim Hussein (Tanzania), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), John Ruganda (Uganda), and a few others who wrote in and about postindependent Africa.

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Technological advancement and the change of global policies on Africa from the 1980s and 1990s changed the nature of theater performances. In some cases, theater forms were separated and could be performed in isolation. Some theater forms, such as dance, seemed to be more famous within and outside the continent. This is because dance can communicate beyond the language barriers, in terms of movements and sounds. Both theater and dance performances in most African countries incorporated infusions from within the continent and abroad, for example, from Europe, America, Asia, and the Arab world. Some African countries have managed to construct their own theater houses, especially in urban areas. In rural areas, some communities still use open venues for theater performances.

Because theater is still considered a tool of communication, it has been used to communicate various issues, from social to political. The main issue communicated is development and its manifestation. This funding trend has enabled the resurfacing of community theater, popular theater and Theatre for Development (TfD), which seeks to empower people. TfD used drama and other traditional theater forms, mostly dance, to address various issues, such as malaria, human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), poverty, and illiteracy. This kind of theater enables community members to participate in identifying and discussing solutions for problems.

Looking at its evolution from the early 1900s to date, it is evident that theater and dance are not static entities. They adopt changes accordingly. This flexibility is what has made theater continue to act as a simulacrum of culture in many societies in Africa.

This means the content of theater reflects the societal needs, aspirations, thoughts, and achievements of people, while also predicting the future.

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