Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity

Austin Ivigueraye Asagba
Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity

Abstract
In most discussions and essays on contemporary African drama and theatre the emphases by writers and critics appear to be focussed on areas of general criticism, autobiographical evidence and ideological content of the plays. No emphasis is placed on their performance context. While these approaches have their advantages, there is the temptation of studying African drama in isolation from its basic roots and inspiration, that is, its indigenous roots. Because of the peculiar nature of contemporary African drama and theatre, by this I mean that it is relatively new and, more importantly, it is a product of two cultures — African and European — an attempt to discuss it using modern criteria would not only create stereotypes but also a superficial understanding, especially among non-African critics and dramatists.
Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity

In most discussions and essays on contemporary African drama and theatre the emphases by writers and critics appear to be focussed on areas of general criticism, autobiographical evidence and ideological content of the plays. No emphasis is placed on their performance context. While these approaches have their advantages, there is the temptation of studying African drama in isolation from its basic roots and inspiration, that is, its indigenous roots. Because of the peculiar nature of contemporary African drama and theatre, by this I mean that it is relatively new and, more importantly, it is a product of two cultures — African and European — an attempt to discuss it using modern criteria would not only create stereotypes but also a superficial understanding, especially among non-African critics and dramatists.

Therefore, there is a need for a study of the historical and social traditions that gave birth to contemporary African drama and theatre. It means that we have to study these indigenous forms as well as their transitional phases during the colonial and post-colonial eras. This paper attempts an appraisal of the critical approaches which have influenced the development of African drama and theatre; examples of three indigenous festivals are discussed to buttress these approaches. In the second part, two plays, Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) and 'Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene* (1974), are discussed as examples of plays showing elements of continuity between the indigenous dramatic and theatrical traditions and contemporary traditions. The conclusion supports a more forthright and functional use of traditional materials by modern African playwrights and theatre practitioners.

There are broadly four critical approaches to the nature of African drama and theatre. These are (1) The Colonial Approach (Herskovits, Talbot, Ruth Finnegan and Kirby et al.), (2) The Evolutionary, (3) The
Divine Approach, (4) The Relativistic Approach. In this paper I shall avoid the first approach; my reasons for this, especially regarding the approaches of Herskovits, Talbot, Ruth Finnegan et al., are firstly that they are Euro-American and therefore inadequate for appreciating or assessing African drama. Secondly, they fail to appreciate the social and historical processes which have informed Euro-American, albeit that other literatures are different from the African experience. Thirdly, they fail to appreciate that despite the advent of modern societies in the African diaspora, the continuous influence of the oral tradition on most African communities is very strong. The European anthropologist Ruth Finnegan, writing in the late fifties and early sixties, notes:

How far one can speak of indigenous drama in Africa is not an easy question.... Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama, it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa, in contrast to West Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a widespread or developed form.²

Her evidence for this is that she could not detect those familiar elements which in her words ‘in the wide sense, we normally regard as drama’. She continues: ‘Most important is the idea of enactment, or representation through actors who imitate persons and events ... linguistic content, plot; the represented interaction of several characters; specialized scenery, etc.; often music — and of particular importance in most African performance — dance.’³ However, she agrees that, ‘certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena can be found, particularly in parts of West Africa — perhaps, the celebrated masquerades of southern Nigeria’.⁴ This type of attitude or approach to African drama and theatre either reveals the ignorance of the writer of the culture concerned, or represents a calculated attempt by the critic to create stereotypes or misrepresent a virile and sustaining dramatic and theatrical tradition. Hence, the duty of the contemporary African critic and dramatist is to put such misconception and criticism in perspective through an emphasis on the historical and social aspects of African drama and theatre.

I now turn to our three broad categories of critical approaches mentioned earlier in this paper. The evolutionary approach postulates that drama in Africa developed from man’s need to control and dominate the natural and unforeseen forces that co-inhabit the world around him. Through ritual propitiation and sacrifices, which evoke elements of magic and spiritual possession, man dominates and empathises with the repressive and unpredictable forces of nature. With time, festivals which are the culmination of these rites become the unit of joyous celebrations (as well as an occasion for social and communial integration) against the
capricious forces that seek to annihilate him. The protagonists of this view draw examples from classical Greece, Asian and Japanese cultures to buttress their contention. From the argument of the evolutionary theorists, folklore, legends, myths and history become sources for dramatic and theatrical presentation. The central point in the evolutionary approach is the influence of religion on the development of African drama, and this point cannot be over-emphasised. J.C. de Graft, the late Ghanaian playwright and scholar, draws attention to this important relationship when he says:

It is to the early twilight zone of this middle region that many forms of ritual drama observable in many African traditional societies seem to me to belong — ritual dramas through which the participants seek such desired effects as social solidarity, or through which they attempt to reaffirm, keep alive, or commemorate such facts, beliefs, relationships, and attitudes as the community considers vital to its sanity and continued healthy existence.

Closely analogous to the evolutionary approach is the Divine approach identified by Dr Atiboroko Uyovbukerhi, a Nigerian scholar and dramatist: The divine approach traces the origin of drama to a divine force or spirit power. Usually a human being by some inexplicable circumstances is abducted by a diety. Upon his freedom, he brings along with him the secrets, dance steps and songs of his divine abductors. The Ohworhu theatre, in the Evwreni and Uwherun clans of the Urhobo tribe in Bendel State and the Ekine plays of the Ijaw make such claims. Another good example is the Ame (water) festival theatre at Sapele in Bendel State of Nigeria. In the case of the Ekine theatre, Ekhineba, a lady was said to have been abducted by the water deity who taught her the Ekine dramatic form. Upon her release she brought and taught her people the dramatic forms of the water deity and they have been performing it ever since.

In the example of the Ame festival theatre at Sapele, Mrs C.A. Oyoyo, the founder of the society also called Ughegbe or Orhuerakpor Ughegbe, was said to have been a successful businesswoman; one day she fell into a trance and was instructed by the goddess Olokun, or mermaid, to form the society in order to serve and heal the afflicted. In her trance, she was given spiritual powers, and taught the dance and songs of Olokun. Since then she has expanded what was hitherto a family affair into a world-wide ‘society’ with a strong theatrical bias.

The influence of these basic religious and ritual rites on contemporary drama and theatre are enormous and varied, and these will be discussed in the second part of this paper. The divine approach to African drama exclusively draws from myths, and like the evolutionary approach it has a
strong religious overtone. The credibility of both approaches is that they are based on concrete events and personalities of the community that gave rise to them. Also, apart from the religious content of such dramas, they allow for secularisation and entertainment as later Ekine and Yoruba theatre has shown.  

A third prevalent approach to traditional African drama using Nigerian examples is the relativistic approach; the protagonists of this approach are Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossie Enekwe, both Nigerian scholars and dramatists. On the surface, the relativists are in no way in disagreement with possible religious (evolutionary) and mythic origins of African drama. Their bone of contention rather lies in the form, content, and interpretation of traditional forms of drama. They argue that any interpretative approach and aesthetic standards should be based on the merits and demerits of African drama. Contrary to the evolutionary view put forward by Michael Echeruo, they argue that indigenous forms with their religious and ritual content must not necessarily follow ‘identical linear development of the classical Greek drama from the Dionysian and Apollonian festival. This is because Africa has a history and culture that are different from those of the Greek.’

The good thing about the relativistic view is that it calls for an objective critical approach to African drama. Far from being another kind of pan-Africanist propaganda, it calls for aesthetic and critical standards that are not alien to the African experience. I feel any critical approach to African drama and theatre should take cognisance of the influence of the indigenous forms that have influenced and will continue to influence contemporary drama and theatre: the variety in the content of indigenous festivals must be seen in relation to contemporary setting, thematic content, dance forms, music and language etc. It is only in this sense that one can speak of continuity between traditional forms and contemporary drama and theatre. As Emmanuel Obiechina observes:

Is there any particular reason except that of meeting the specifically practical pressures of the present age, why an enactment should last only two or three hours instead of six months? Is the sense of organic unity which we assume in the modern theatre and its conventions not possible on an extended scale among a people whose sensibilities are trained to absorb more diffused ritual and symbolic significance of action? Is a broad communal canvas not more suitable for painting more inclusive social and emotional action than the mere mouse-tongue platform called the modern stage?

In traditional African society the festival was and is still the nucleus of communal religious worship and also an occasion for artistic displays and
dramatic enactment. Because of its varied content and functions, the festival has often been seen as a loose phenomenon, elusive in meaning and significance. At best most critics appreciate it only in its religious context. These erroneous attitudes misrepresent the rich and cultural values of African festivals. A study of these festivals should reveal the story behind them, their functions, dramatic and theatrical aspects, which in the main have influenced contemporary playwriting and theatrical practice. Oyin Ogunba, a Nigerian dramatist, emphasises this point: 'In traditional Africa, the great artistic institution is the festival. Contrary to popular understanding the festival is not just a religious occasion; if it were, it would hardly command more than a tiny fraction of the interest it generates among the people.'

Thus, if one must speak of a continuum between indigenous forms and contemporary dramatic and theatrical practice in Africa, it is imperative that we take cognisance of the role and functions of festivals in African communities, both in the past and in the present. The influence of the ritual and socio-cultural aspects of most African festivals on the contemporary drama and theatre is enormous and varied and will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

However, one can discern elements of secularisation in some extant indigenous festivals, especially those geared toward entertainment and moral instruction; others still retain those functional aspects that seek to integrate the community, 'keep alive or commemorate such facts, beliefs, and attitudes vital to the community in which they are still celebrated'. Three examples will now be discussed.

The *Ame* festival or Olokun or Igbe (literally 'water festival') mentioned earlier is intrinsically a water cult dedicated to the worship of Olokun — water mermaid, 'mammy water' etc., the goddess of the sea. According to the accounts of the festival as celebrated by the Ughegbe Society at Sapele, Bendel State of Nigeria, Mrs C.A. Oyoyo, a once successful businesswoman, was visited by Olokun in her sleep. She was instructed to give up her job and dedicate her life to caring for the afflicted. Literally she became the representative of Olokun on earth. In all her appearances, whether in the context of religious worship or during the annual celebrations, she depicts the true image and qualities of the goddess herself. She has taught her followers not only how to worship the goddess but also the songs, music and dance movements of the water spirits.

Annually between March and April, the followers of the *Ughegbe* Society gather to celebrate its founding. The venue is an open arena specially prepared for the festival. The content of the festival is as varied
and loosely structured as in most other indigenous forms. However, behind its loose structure and varied activities one can see its coherent form. The rituals performed in the shrines are geared toward placating the goddess; in the same vein the group expect a reciprocal action from the goddess in the form of financial reward, fertility among the women folk, good health and peace on earth.

Short dramatic pieces are enacted during the celebration. For example, when I witnessed the celebrations in 1982 (March/April), the drama performed centred around a sick woman who is destined to serve the goddess. Because the parents are Christians the child could not fulfil her role on earth. However, on the eve of her marriage she falls ill; when all other sources fail to cure her, the Olokun priestess is called in. She prays and performs the necessary rituals which eventually cures the lady. Thereafter it was a happy ending for the couple and the community. Such dramatic sketches are geared toward moral and religious instruction. Apart from improvised dramatic performances, other cultural activities geared toward entertainment include masquerade dances, group singing and general merriment.

The Ame festival is a good example of a ritual festival which provides a rich dramatic and theatrical experience. The aesthetic values discernible from the whole performance highlight the world view of the community. Moreover, the celebration is not restricted to members of the group but is open to all comers.

THE OHUVWE FESTIVAL DRAMA AT ABRAKA

Among the Abraka-Urhobo community in Bendel State, Nigeria, the Ohuvwe festival is an annual celebration held around May to commemorate their victory against the incessant onslaught of the royal army from Benin during the sixteenth-century. Officially the festival lasts for two weeks.

The highlight of the festival includes the worship of Uvwuvwe, their ancestral god who, as the story goes, protected the people of Abraka against the superior warriors from Benin. Before the official proclamation of the beginning of the festival various meetings take place among the two sections that make up the Abraka community — the Oruarivie which is made up of four quarters, namely Uruoka, Urhuogo, Urhuevie and Ekrejeta, and the Unuawha section made up of Oria and Umeghe quarters. Before the commencement of the festival proper the chief priest performs and organises pre-festival ritual observances as well as ensures
a hitch-free celebration and the building of the festival arena. The main activity of the first week is the hunting of animals, with specific emphasis on the *Ovie* (Duiker). There are two possible reasons why the hunters search for the *Ovie*: the *Ovie* is the king of antelopes and therefore the ability to bring the animal back alive proves the hunting prowess of the hunters; however, other sources claim that the *Ovie*, which literally translated means 'slave' in the Urhobo language, symbolises the capture of the enemy, thus representing and enacting the defeat of the Benin warriors by their ancestral fathers.

The return of the hunters from the forest is the beginning of the second week of the festival. Various hunting groups accompanied by members of village wards march in the different processions heading for the village square en route to the king's palace. Smoked meat dangling from spears or stretched on tree trunks and some in containers well displayed for everybody to see creates in the people a general sense of joy and excitement. In war-like procession led by the elders of the various groups they sing and dance through the various festival routes to the village square. At the king's palace, the leader of the hunting expedition narrates to the king their experiences in the forest. A successful expedition, usually marked by the number of duikers and other animals, is an indication of a good festival and a prosperous year ahead. This means that the gods have accepted their sacrifices and libations. The king on behalf of the community accepts the gifts of the hunters and is carried to the main shrine near the Ohuvwe stream.

A more vibrant and entertaining aspect of the second week are the mock battles fought among imaginary enemies. Turn by turn, which incidentally have been arranged to coincide with the distance from the different villages to the market square, the different warring groups from the surrounding villages sing and dance into the arena; the market or village square is an open air arena with a central clearing. While there is no strict demarcation between the performers and the audience it is not difficult to ascertain who are performers and who are spectators. Having said that, it is also not uncommon to find performers hanging around the audience — this is usually the case when the performers are either taking some time off or attempting to involve the spectators.

The symbolic enactment of the defeat of the Binis takes the form of mock fights, actual body whipping between the various groups and individual participants. The interesting aspects of these mock-fights are the clash of cutlasses and whips made from animal skin or local fibres. Sometimes the fights are so fierce that non-initiates or visitors are advised to keep their distance from the main fighting arena.
The dramatic and theatrical relevance of the Ohuvwe festival is immense. The festival centres around the defeat of the royal army from Benin; participants at the festival bear this victory in mind. They approach and enact the mock-battles with all the strength in them, and at times the spectator is carried away and tempted into believing that the whole performance is real. The songs, dances and cultural displays are executed to perfection. The ritual ceremonies are an attempt to commune with their gods and ancestors. In this regard the king, chief priest and members of the community believe that by worshipping the gods and their ancestors in the proper way, peace, fertility and wealth are guaranteed for the future. Also, the symbolic exorcism carried out by the women group wards off evil from the community and protects the people against their enemies.

The social and cultural aspects of the festival embody aesthetic values of the community; for instance the various spectacular costumes that can be seen during the festival, apart from serving as a reminder and a portrayal of their rich tradition, also create in the audience a sense of beauty and belonging. Also, apart from the weird and bizarre costumes of the warriors and hunters, other participants dress in gorgeous traditional costumes befitting the occasion. The men tie very big wrappers, six or eight yards long, round the waist with big shirts to match; beads are freely hung on the neck. The women tie two wrappers, two and three yards long, round the waist, properly adorned with beads or gold chains with the appropriate colours of a small blouse to match the wrapper.

THE INE FESTIVAL AT OGWASHI-UKU

The Ogwashi-Uku people are Ibo-speaking Bendelites and inhabit the eastern part of the Niger river in Nigeria. The Ine festival is held in August and September of every year to mark the harvesting season, and also to commemorate the founding of the Obiship title in Ogwashi-Uku land. The Obi uses the occasion to consolidate and affirm his powers over the kingdom.

The historical origins of the festival speak of the need for a ruler around the sixteenth century who will bring the people together and harness the resources of the land. After solving the riddle from the Oba of Benin a woman called Odu became the first Obi of Ogwashi-Uku and her instrument of office was the mace. During the celebration of the Ine festival a cardinal aspect of the occasion is the display of the mace.
Before the festival proper, the Obi spends about seven days in isolation in his palace praying and meditating over the problems of the community. Ritual propitiations are performed in various shrines for the benevolence of the gods. The various wards that make up Ogwashi-Uku make elaborate preparations for the festival — dances, songs, mock-battles and short dramatic sketches are informally rehearsed for the occasion. The mock-fights centre on the past heroic exploits of their forebears; the songs and dances are profusely drawn and adapted from the repertoire of the community.

The dramatic sketches are contemporary and comic in nature. The themes are drawn from the social, economic and moral aspects of the community; for example the themes include 'a man riding his bicycle to the farm. The relationship between a teacher and his pupils, where the pupils are the different parts of the male and female sex organs; and indictment against unacceptable behaviour.'

As in most other performances of this nature the subjects and themes are not explored to the full; the performers highlight the theme and through indirect reference the audience articulates the message because they are familiar with the subject. Also because the action and songs are repeated time and time again in various ways the message is communicated without boring the audience. The spontaneity of the action encourages the audience to chip in and be involved in the performance. The goal is to make people laugh, and the performers use gestures, facial expression and songs to reach the audience and make the whole production a communal affair.

The Ine festival, like the other two festivals discussed in this paper, embodies all the elements that are present in most indigenous forms; it is loose in structure and flexible in form. Improvisation plays a major role during its celebration. In all respects it portrays and articulates the artistic and religious life of the community where it is celebrated. These qualities in indigenous festivals have influenced and will continue to influence contemporary drama and theatre and other literary forms in Africa. Playwrights working within the ambit of the traditional festival have not only borrowed its form and structure, but also its language and theatre craft (J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, ’Zulu Sofola and others).

Despite the immense influence of western drama and theatre practice on contemporary African drama, especially in the late nineteen fifties and the first half of the sixties, there has been a radical departure from imitating, as it were, the great western dramatists. This is not so much because of the rise of forthright criticism but more from a conscious need
to return to their traditional roots. Most African playwrights and theatre practitioners (Femi Osofison, ’Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka and others) have through their works sought to use both the traditional and contemporary aspects of their people to portray man in perspective.

Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*¹⁶ (1960) and ’Zulu Sofola’s *King Emene*¹⁷ (1974) are two plays that embody the notion of continuity between indigenous festival drama and contemporary drama and theatre at different levels. The former, through its complexity in characterisation and form, portrays the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in a socio-religious and political order that seeks communal harmony; a community bedevilled by corruption and immorality, yet seeks redemption through an equally corrupt and inept leadership. The latter (*King Emene*), through its simple and straightforward rendition of a rebellious act committed by an inexperienced king, articulates the line of demarcation between a tradition shrouded in riddles and proverbs, and modern ideas of self-preservation and politics. Both plays explore the indigenous repertoire of music, language and theatre-craft in an attempt to mirror man for all time. Though both plays are written in English, one discovers a subtle attempt by both playwrights to translate their indigenous language into English. Both plays, and especially *A Dance of the Forests*, are rich in proverbs, riddles and praise songs — everyday tools common in most indigenous African languages. Also, it is no coincidence that both plays use an occasion of a festival celebration to unfold their themes.

*A Dance of the Forests* was written as part of the Nigerian Independence celebrations in October 1960. In this regard, it represents what Eldred Jones aptly describes as ‘the complexities of the human personality and its consequences within the cyclical pattern of history.’¹⁸ However, it goes further than a mere journey into human history; through its complex plot and characterisation the play combines elements of history, myth and metaphysics in its attempt to define man’s relationship with the forces of nature. Using his Yoruba cosmology, Soyinka turns *A Dance of the Forests* not only into a drama of the gods and spirits but also the play becomes a platform, a mirror, as it were, in which man sees himself in perspective.

*A Dance of the Forests* begins as an occasion for the ‘Gathering of the Tribes’ and the human community requests their forest neighbours to send illustrious ancestors to grace the occasion. In a dramatic twist, the gods send two spirits (Dead Man and Woman) of the restless dead; predictably the human community rejects these cursed spirits. In another typical Soyinkean twist, the human rejection of Dead Man and Woman takes the principal characters, Adenebi, Demoke and Rola, into a series
of spiritual and metaphysical journeys where their misdeeds in past reincarnations are exposed by equally guilty spiritual acolytes of Forest Head — Aroni, Murete, Esuoro and Ogun. At the end of the play, the human representatives do not appear to have gained or changed from the arduous spiritual experience, although some characters appear temporarily chastened, especially Rola. Demoke, the hero, tries in vain towards the end of the play to bring ‘into existence the frustrated potential of history, as well as the repeatedly still-born child himself’. However, he fails in this last act of heroism:

MURETE: Come back later. I have told you, the forest is big and I pay no heed to the footsteps of the dead.

AGBOREKO: Murete, if the hunter loses his quarry, he looks up to see where the vultures are circling. Proverb to bones and silence.

MURETE: All right, all right. Come back later. I may have learnt something then.

[Agboreko sighs, goes. Murete pops up, looks after him.]

MURETE: [Mimicking] Proverb to bones and silence. Somehow I couldn’t bear him today. That is Aroni’s influence. He spoils everything.

[Reaches for the pot and takes a deep draught. Enter Ogun who holds the pot against his mouth and forces him to drink the lot at once. Ogun then takes him and turns him quickly round and round. Murete staggers about, quite drunk and unbalanced.]

In exploring the Yoruba mythology Soyinka draws on ritual prototypes and the major characters assume archetypal roles. For example, Demoke, the hero in *A Dance of the Forests*, is Ogun’s surrogate; he exhibits in his actions and speeches both the destructive and creative qualities of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war. Orile, Eshuoro’s surrogate (a capricious god with a knack for vengeance) is beheaded by Demoke at Ogun’s instance when the former tries to spite the latter while carving the tribe’s totem for the celebration. This act sparks off a crisis in the spirit world. Eshuoro is annoyed both by the act of wilful destruction by Demoke and, worse still, by Demoke’s destruction of Eshuoro’s symbol on earth — the Oro tree — under the guidance of Ogun. In his moment of anger, Eshuoro says:

Demoke, son and son to carvers, who taught you
How you impale me, abuse me! Scratching my shame
To the dwellers of hell where
The womb-snake shudders and the world is set on fire.
Demoke, did you know? Mine is the tallest tree that grows
On land. Mine is the head that cows
Tte messengers of heaven. Did you not know?
Demoke, did you know? Only the tree may eat itself. (p. 43)

This last act in the play by the hero signals the tone of pessimism in the play. Man will never learn from history, and human existence is a repetition of follies and misdeeds. Forest Head articulates this fact when he says to Aroni:

The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered ... hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings ... Aroni, does Demoke know the meaning of his act?

ARONI: Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hand. It is no light matter to reserve the deed that was begun many lives ago. The Forest will not let you pass. (p. 71)

_A Dance of the Forests_ is set in a typical indigenous festival setting. Most of the action takes place in the forest and the only semblance of human setting is in the court of Mata Kharibu, a flashback which reveals a human action of about eight centuries in the past (p. 46). The series of movements in the forest that take us through the action of the play are akin to the various rites performed by the chief priest in a typical festival context on behalf of the community. The various libations performed by Agboreko, 'Elder of sealed lips', and his communications with Murete (tree imp) typify the communion between man and the spirits — a frequent aspect of festival celebrations. Also, the outcome of these rites reveals the capricious nature of the gods. An example will suffice:

AGBOREKO [sprinkles some of the wine at the foot of the tree and leaves the pot beside it]: It is I, Agboreko Murete, it is Agboreko that calls you. Ear that never shuts, eye that never closes. Murete, Agboreko brings you the unhappiness of his children. (p. 14)

ESHUORO: Oro alone is the worm that strips himself
...
The slanted eye of night. Beware
The anger of the silent wind that rustles
Not a leaf. I'll be revenged. (pp. 43-44)

The second half of part two of the play is dominated by ritual scenes and symbolic acts aimed at expiation of the characters; however, most of the rituals end in futility. The spirits of the Palm, Darkness, Precious stones of the Pachyderms, Rivers and Volcanoes articulate the main sources of man’s sustenance and destruction. The symbolism of the half-
child and the dance of the unwilling sacrifice reveal heroic qualities in man which ironically serve no useful purpose at the end of the play. This is made glaringly apparent in an exchange between Demoke and his father:

OLD MAN: Demoke, we made sacrifice and demanded the path of expiation...

DEMOKE: Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives? (p. 73)

The crucial question one may dare ask is whether one night’s traumatic experience for three of a kind is enough to salvage a community yearning for regeneration from its corruption, immorality and the abject lack of a sense of direction.

'Zulu Sofola’s King Emene unfolds the tragedy of a king (King Emene) when he decides to undermine the traditional norms of his community (with justifiable reasons of course). The action of the play hinges on the popular African theme of a conflict in a polygamous home. Jealousy, material want and fear of the future are some of the causes of such conflicts in a polygamous situation. Nneobi, the king’s mother, in order to ensure that her son succeeds his father to the throne, commits an atrocious and abominable crime by killing her son’s half brother, the legitimate successor to the throne. For a time her crime does not come to light. With the death of the king, Emene ascends his father’s throne. Unknown to the king the crime of his mother contaminates the palace and the community. The gods in turn are angry. On the eve of the Peace Week, his first official assignment, his advisers and councillors forbid him to perform the necessary rituals. King Emene, suspecting a plot against him, as the councillors had plotted against his father, purges the Olinzele Council and replaces the Omu (leader of the women’s section of the government). This affront to the leadership reverberates throughout the community. When his mother confesses her abominable crime, he kills her and commits suicide.

King Emene is 'Zulu Sofola’s first popular play — and was preceded by Wedlock of the Gods (1972). She is the first Nigerian woman playwright, and as a lecturer in drama, first at the University of Ibadan and now at the University of Ilorin, she has contributed immensely to the development of contemporary Nigerian drama and theatre. As made clear from most of her works, she has a keen interest in traditional drama and theatre. Despite the fact that she is yet to reach the height of her play-
writing career, *King Emene* is a pointer to her deep interest in using traditional forms of drama to advance her ideas about modern society. *King Emene* is simple in plot and language, which sometimes weakens the dramatic qualities of the play; however, her careful unfolding of the events shows a deep understanding and a sound grasp of her culture and the attendant problems of a culture in transition. Also, despite the simple and straightforward language one does not fail to recognise the richness of the speeches by key characters, as in this example where Jigide, leader of the royal lineage, is addressing the king:

> You must stand firm and wield your power. You must use an iron hand with these people. Let the old and the young alike know that our new king is not a woman. [*He readjusts his toga.*] It is a truism that the person you pity and help is the same one who slaps your face afterwards. Those people whom we pitied and gave some quarters for shelter and food are now so emboldened as to want to destroy us and usurp our power. Tell them that I said that they should go to hell and never come back. (p. 28)

*King Emene*, like Wole Soyinka’s *A Dance of the Forests*, hinges on a festival motif — the celebration of the Peace Week, an important social and religious event in the life of community. The setting is also a courtyard. The tragic action of the play lies in the king’s insistence on celebrating the Peace Week contrary to the message from Mkpitime, goddess of earth. Suspecting a plot against him by members of the Olinzele Council, the highest governing body in the land, he sacks key members of his government and relieves the chief priestess of her duties. His suspicious mind blinds him against the crime his mother has committed on his behalf. Her crime pollutes the palace and contaminates the community. *King Emene*’s inability to distinguish between politics and religion alienates him from his people. Diokpa, the people’s representative, detects this fault in the king:

> You certainly need somebody’s help. The Olinzelle Council has not been of any help to you nor has the Omu proved useful. You have turned a deaf ear to all advice. The people have taken it upon themselves to stem the impending disaster and all we now hear from you is that you are not a king who must be told what to do by his subjects. (p. 19)

In fairness to the king, he pays for his mother’s crime, a crime committed by a woman who loves her son and who fears for his future. In this community, the effect of a crime committed by a member of any family reverberates through the whole community. We do not empathise with the tragic fate of Nneobi because her crime is necessitated by selfish
goals — fear of misery and poverty, material bounty for her lineage and the protection of her son — reasons that were not unavoidable. As she reiterates in Act III, Scene I:

Ogugua my son, listen to me. The rat did not fall from the ceiling without a cause. I suffered in my childhood with a poor mother of twelve children. I saw my mother cry bitterly night and day when she had no food for her hungry children. I could not bear this, so I started praying very early for a better life. My prayers were answered. Your father married me. My fortune and that of my children changed. I promised myself then never to return to those miserable days. (p. 44)

Ironically, she not only plunges the rest of her family into further misery but also her action leaves a curse on the whole community. Unlike A Dance of the Forests, the events of King Emene leave utter gloom in the community and there are indications of further communal chaos in the future except that this is arrested through the necessary rituals provided by the social and religious norms. At least there is a glimmer of hope, but how soon will such a redemption come?

Wole Soyinka's A Dance of the Forests and 'Zulu Sofola’s King Emene explore and use indigenous motifs; especially, traditional materials have informed both plays. However, their message of cyclic doom and gloom for humanity without an avenue for reparation serves no purpose; these communities need urgent radical political, economic, social and cultural reforms and these goals cannot be achieved by half-hearted heroism and suicide. Contemporary African drama and theatre should be functional especially when they are inspired by the cultural life of the people.

That there are elements of continuity between traditional African dramatic and theatrical traditions and their modern literary counterparts is not disputable. The important query is, how have modern playwrights utilised these influences? To deny the enormous influence of western drama and theatre on modern African drama is to underestimate the effects of the colonial period in Africa. Hence this paper calls for a radical break with the conventionalism of this period. If modern African playwrights and theatre practitioners are to bridge the enormous gulf at present existing between them and their audience, a first step would be to write plays that are relevant to the historical and cultural values of their people. Also, criticism of African drama and theatre needs a new radical perspective. The new criticism which is advocated here must centre on the social, historical, political and aesthetic values that have influenced the lives of the African people.
1. Critical terms used in this paper such as 'colonial', 'evolutionary', 'relativistic' and 'divine' approaches are terms that have been often applied to the criticism of African drama and theatre by scholars and critics.


3. Ibid., p. 501.


5. See, for example, the following:


8. Ibid., p. 18.

9. The present writer conducted fieldwork on this festival in 1982.

10. The Ekine drama has influenced playwrights like J.P. Clark and the Yoruba Theatre influenced dramatists like Ogunde, the late Ogunnola and Duro Lapido, etc.

11. The term was probably first applied to the criticism of Nigerian drama by Emmanuel Obiechina in 'Literature — Traditional and Modern - in the Nsukka Environment', in G.E.K. Ofomata, ed., *The Nsukka Environment* (Fourth Dimension publishers, 1978), pp. 28-29. Subsequently many scholars and critics have used the term in their related studies.


13. Ibid., p. 152.


