

Oral tradition and african theatre

by Mineke Schipper

The theatre is always a mirror of human existence, and theatrical expression is always linked to a specific time and place and culture. Changes in societies generally lead to new forms of dramatic expression. African theatre today 'reflects' a variety of societies, because of the simultaneous existence of so many different kinds of communities. In most contemporary African theatre forms, the oral tradition constitutes a source of inspiration to the playwright. This being a matter of fact, the question is *in which ways* playwrights use the rich oral material. The answer leads in many unexpected and often fascinating directions.

As far as the metaphor of the mirror is concerned, theatre does not 'reflect' society in an objective manner. An objective reality does not exist. The theatre is an instrument with which dancers, singers, narrators, writers and actors interpret their own ideas about reality as they see it.

Oral literature is always linked to the performance itself. The significance of the performance and the essential presence of the performers without whom the oral literature cannot even exist, is a fundamental characteristic which in the past has often been overlooked in the study of oral literature. This same characteristic is an essential aspect shaping all theatre. There is a strong parallel between oral literature, theatre, dance and music, which all depend on repeated performances for their continued existence. In this sense, written plays differ from the rest of written literature.

In western ethnocentric thinking it has sometimes been stated that 'real theatre' did not exist in precolonial Africa. Robert Cornevin went so far as to dedicate his book *Le théâtre en Afrique Noire et à Madagascar* (1970) to the father or the 'bon oncle' of African drama, Charles Béart, director of the Ecole Supérieure of Bingerville, l'Ecole William Ponty as it was usually called, in the nineteen thirties. In that case, what about African Anglophone and other drama if the whole existence of African theatre depends on one Francophone colonial school director in French West Africa ?

It goes without saying that it is erroneous to take western theatre as it has developed in recent centuries as a criterion to determine whether or not the theatre exists among other peoples. In Europe the verbal element has come to dominate all other aspects in drama. Elsewhere this is not necessarily the case, the word may be subordinate to other elements or it may form a harmonious unity

with them. Of course, this does not mean that people there have no dramatic forms of their own. It is always a question of norms within the society in which the specific forms developed. This is unfortunately, not the only case of eurocentric thinking in literary criticism and scholarship. And even in the European context it represents a rather narrow and elitist view of theatrical forms. Indeed, during the thirties, Antonin Artaud already attached the purely verbal and psychological character of western theatre. In his famous *Le théâtre et son double*, written in 1934, he accused the West of having prostituted the theatre :

"Why is it that in the theatre, at least in the theatre as we know it in Europe, for that matter in the West, everything that is soecifically theatrical, i.e. everything that doesn't obey expression by speech, by words, or if you wish, everything that is not contained in dialogue... is left in the background ?"

Artaud became passionately interested in Asian theatre and he was inspired by the Eastern forms of theatre he was able to see in France at the World Exhibition performances there. He was fascinated by the Eastern aspects of theatre were not merely verbal : its wide range of facets allowed the Eastern theatre to retain the character of a total theatre — a total theatre as it is also to be found in so many African traditional performances.

The ignorance in the western world regarding traditional theatre, is partly due to a lack of descriptions of these theatre forms. In his book *The Drama of Black Africa*, Anthony Graham-White (1974 : 14) gives the following reason for this neglect :

"Why has most traditional drama gone unrecognized ? The brief answer is that most observers of traditional performances in Africa who wrote about them have, unfortunately, had no interest in drama. The ironic result was that at the very time that Europe was freeing itself from the restritive dramatic conventions of the well-made play on the well-made proscenium stage, Europeans in Africa were unconsciously using such standards to judge African cultures as wanting in drama. Groups of performers and spectators roaming a village did not match the European observer's conventional image of theatre."

Perhaps the European anthropologists looked with interest at theatre forms in Africa, but they looked with anthropological eyes and were not interested in the theatre as an art form. However, observers who are indeed interested in the dramatic arts as such are confronted with enormous difficulties. One must not only be fluent in the language of performance but also know the context to catch the meaning of all the allusions and jokes based upon situations and circumstances with the audience is familiar, the description of such theatre is not easy at all.

Another question to be posed is how to set the borders between oral narrative and theatre. This is a very complicated point. Oral literature always also contains elements of drama at the same time : the story-telling performance is a total happening, a *total art form in several ways*. The narrator is often also a *poet, a singer, a musician and an actor*. He is a *poet* because he re-creates in his own, improvising way, the traditional 'texts'. He is able to do so because of his know-ledge, his mastership and his command of the traditional literature. He is a *singer* because he sings the complete text or parts of it, and a *musician* when he accompanies himself on his own instrument. Sometimes there is a whole orchestra of percussion instruments, drums, xylophones and so on, or a whole group of singers and/or dancers. The bard is also an *actor* because he interprets different roles with his voice and mimicry. The performance is also *total theatre* in another sense involving as it does the active participation of the audience. Dancing, music singing have a community aspect and are concentrated on the dialogue between two groups or a single person and a group. Dancing, singing and music are still an important part of African writtenplays, even when the playwrights have been influenced by verbally dominated western drama.

Very often oral tradition and written literature have unfortunately been treated as if they two completely distinct matters. Likewise, in the case of drama, it would be incorrect to treat traditional drama forms as one thing and modern drama as another. The oral tradition continues partly in written literature, and traditional theatre has a great influence on written drama in our time. In many contemporary written plays, the narrator functions very much as he did traditionally. The same holds for a number of other devices in present-day African theatre. On a general level, we can see that the contemporary playwright draws upon such varied oral genres as *myth, epic, history, animal stories*, popular comedies and *farces*. He takes whatever he wants : the narrative frame with a story-teller, some characters, a theme, a dance or song which belongs to it, a plot, etc.

I'll give a few examples. The Ugandan playwright Tom Omara based the theme of his play the *Exodus* on the *myth*, the 'story from the beginning' as he calls it, from the north of Uganda, Acholiland, which explains the original separation of the ancestors of the same clan that now partly lives on different sides of the Nile. As far as the *form* of the play is concerned, he also draws heavily on the oral tradition : a narrator introduces the play up to the point where it is taken over by actors. An old song marks the transition from the first part to the moment the actors start. At the end there is a ceremony, in which the brothers swear on their crossed spears that they will never meet again. Another example of a play which uses song and the narrative frame is the South African play *uNosilimela* by Credo Mutwa. After a short introduction and 'The song of the children of the Sun', the storyteller enters and says :

"Ever since Man first began to think, he began to wonder about the origin of the stars, the sun, the mountains, the seas and the miracle of life in them and he wove shining legends about all this. In the land of the Barotse there are those that say that Man originated from a great tree that grew in the middle of the desert, while in the land of the Batswana they say that Man and the animals crawled out of a great whole in the ground which is still to be seen today (...). And there in our own country, kwaZulu, we believe that Man originated from a great reed, uHlanga, that grew on the bank of a mighty river..." (Mutwa 1981 : 6-7).

Besides myth, epic and history are well-known sources of inspiration for the playwright. In oral literature it is rather impossible to make an exact distinction between myth, history and epic. This is even more so with the plays derived from such genres. Much depends on the interpretation that a writer gives to his source. Heroes may rise above the historical reality and sometimes even be deified and granted almost mythological status. Chaka is such a well-known heroic character who often inspired writers all over Africa to write free adaptations of this Zulu hero, e.g. Senghor, Seydou Badian, Djibril Tamsir Niane. The Guinean Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara saw in Chaka the man who moulded a people into a nation. It needs to be said that his play, *Amazoulou* (1970) which has an introduction by the Angolan Mario de Andrade, is dedicated to the Guinean head of state, Ahmed Sékou Touré, 'revolutionary and friend'. This is perhaps the reason for the idealisation of the Chaka figure, and the concealing of his mistakes and paranoia, which are transformed where possible to noble heroism only.

Senghor emphasised the passion and the spirit of sacrifice of Chaka, while Seydou Badian (Mali) chose the theme of his death and draws him as a black militant fighter. After them, Abdou Anta Kâ (Sénégal) saw Chaka as the visionary who foresees the coming of the Boers to his land, in his *Les Amazoulous* (1972). And so, in the words of Ogunbesan (1973), Chaka, the epic hero, became 'a king for all seasons'.

There are many other examples : the traditional epic hero Ozidi is the main character in J.P. Clark's play of the same name. Eugène Dervain (Ivory Coast) devoted two plays to Da Monzon, a hero from the Bambara tradition.

More historically faithful are plays like Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* (1970) or Cheik Ndao's *L'exil d'Alboury* (1967), although both playwrights stress in their respective introductions that they have borrowed freely from imagination when the historical facts did not suit their purpose. The African history had to be reconstructed in order to have faith in the future restored, as Christophe Dailly put it in *Le théâtre africain* (1971 : 91).

One of the historical heroes of Kenya who lives on in the memories and the oral history of the people is Dedan Kimathi. In the introduction to their play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976),

Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githa Mugo stated their view explicitly :

"The most important thing was for us to reconstruct imaginatively our history, envisioning the world of the Mau Mau and Kimathi in terms of the peasants' and workers' struggle before and after constitutional independence (...). We believe that good theatre is that which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggle for total liberation. So the challenge was to truly depict the masses (symbolised by Kimathi) in the only historically correct perspective : positively, heroically and as the true makers of history". Here again we see that oral tradition — Ngugi and Mugo consulted people from Kimathi's surroundings to get their oral historical information — is used to mould to the intention of the authors.

Traditional stories about animals or fables exist in large numbers everywhere in Africa. There are cycles about the hare, the small antelope, the tortoise or the spider. However, plays based upon such animal stories are not that common. I only know them from Ghana. Efua Sutherland developed the oral Ananse stories into new plays. Ananse is a kind of Everyman. As a character he shows people who they are and how human qualities such as greed, ambition, foolishness or slyness affect the community. Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewaa* (1975) is an example of this kind of story-telling drama as the author calls it. Here again the frame of the oral story-teller is used. He is as omniscient as he normally is in the oral story-telling situation : he knows what is going to happen, he intervenes in the action and comments upon the events. Efua Sutherland also introduces musical intermezzos called *mboguo*'s, which traditionally may be contributed by people from the audience. A libation is necessary before it all can start, as is often the case in tradition. The singing of the *mboguo* is accompanied by hand clapping and drum rhythms.

Besides the four above mentioned genres from oral literature that serve as a source of inspiration for the writer, there are many others we cannot deal with here, e.g. all sorts of poetry, from elegies to love poems, riddles and dilemma tales. And, of course, there is the *proverb* which is used time and again in the written literature. Here is just one example from wole Soyinka's play *A Dance of the Forests* (1960 : 38) :

"If the wind can get lost in the rainstorm it is useless to send him an umbrella. Proverb to bones and silence (...). The hand that dips to the bottom of the pot will eat the biggest snail. The sky grows no grass but if the earth called her barren, it will no drink no more milk. The foot of the snake is not split in two like a man's or in hundreds like the centipede's, but if Agere

could dance patiently like the snake, he will uncoil the chain that leads into the dead..."

There are only a few examples to illustrate how numerous the links are between oral tradition and modern drama, and the great extent to which playwrights have been influenced and moulded by genres, themes and devices of oral literature.

On the other hand, present-day African drama, particularly the forms and performances of many written African plays, have also been affected by western influences.

1) The language is a European language, although in recent years there has been an increase in acting and writing in African languages.

2) The verbal element is more important than the music, singing or dancing.

3) The distance between the audience and the stage has increased and an elevated stage is used. The curtain emphasizes the distance between the performer and the audience.

4) The play is presented in a more concentrated form and in much less time than in most traditional performances.

5) Depending on the society, themes have changed.

6) Modern performances, especially if given in a hall, are mostly attended by a small upper-class elite.

7) It is also characteristic of modern African drama that plays are published in book form by predominantly European publishers.

In the past, performances were meant for the entire community. Often, this is no longer the case. Referring to the gap severing African theatre into two, Eldred Jones has said that 'popular plays never get published and plays which are published are never popular. In practice, the difference between popular theatre and literary theatre is becoming more evident. Literary theatre is usually limited to a small audience of schools and universities, but I won't go into that subject here (see Etherton 1982, Schipper 1982). Instead, I'll briefly talk about popular theatre as it has been developed in recent years by playwrights who have used it as a means of conscientization. Very often popular productions are never offered to a publisher whereas, on the other hand, a number of published plays have never been performed. A systematic investigation of this phenomenon has not been conducted yet in Africa. It is obvious that a European publisher would see little profit in a popular using different languages side by side, which are only understood by the audience in the area it was written for. The popular playwright takes advantage of the fact that his audience is bilingual or trilingual. This adds an extra-dimension to his play which will be appreciated by the audience it is written for. A Christmas play I saw performed in 1965 in Kisangani was in Kiswahili (the local language) but the soldiers spoke Lingala (the language of the army in Zaïre), and the officials spoke French (the

language of the administration). In this way different languages are used to add to the realistic character of a work. The same use of different languages is to be found in many South African plays, where the police speaks the language of the white Boers, whereas other languages, e.g. English, Tsotsi (a sort of city slang) and African languages, are used for other purposes.

The author of a popular play is inspired by the life of the ordinary people for whom he writes his plays. Etherton (1976) speaks of an *urban pop culture* which has developed in the urban areas : it is a mixture of traditional and new elements. The traditional elements in such plays are borrowed from different traditions and amalgamated into one new form. Unfortunately, the officials in charge of granting subsidies seem to lack enthusiasm for this new popular culture. In most independent African countries, the authenticity of 'pure' ancient tradition is considered to be the norm for artistic merit. Traditional dancing groups receive subsidies and are sent to the western world as visiting cards from Africa, even though the dancing is adapted to the western stage and performed out of context. Politically it is of course quite harmless. The ordinary people in the townships dance their own dances without wondering about their 'pure' authenticity. For such an audience a writer like the Zambian Kasoma has written his plays. His is the saying : "in Africa, you must bring theatre to the people, not people to the theatre" (in Etherton 1975 : 5). This Zambian playwright also uses different languages in a play like *The Long Arms of the Law* (1968) which deal with life in a township in Zambia's Copperbelt. The play continually refers to local situations popular songs, political leaders and events everyone in the audience is familiar with. People react enthusiastically. Such plays by popular playwrights are comparable to the Ghanaian Concert Parties and the Nigerian Opera. Alain Ricard describes similar popular forms in Togo, where he distinguishes between *théâtre scolaire et théâtre populaire*. Comparable tendencies are to be found in South African theatre. Some groups there were founded by the black students organization SASO which has now been banned. Most of this popular theatre originates from a mixture of African and western elements arising out of the social conflicts in the large African cities. The main theme is the pursuit of material security and human contact in the hard reality of urban society. The result of the amalgam of 'traditional' and 'modern' elements can be very original and, whether published or not, it is applauded by the people about whom it is written and for whom it is intended.

In cases where theatre intends to conscientize people, the authorities often react negatively. In their view such theatre is dangerous, especially when the language of the people is used instead of foreign languages. As we all know, Ngugi wa Thiong'o had to pay a high price for his democratic ideas about art. In a letter he wrote from prison, he said the following : "It was because of my involvement in that collective enterprise for a national theatre in a national language for a national audience, that I am now languis-

hing in a detention prison. I am unrepentant. I do not regret even a single minute of my many Saturdays and Sundays and evenings I worked with the peasants and workers at Kamiriithu, and learned far more than I ever gave to them in the whole area of our music and dance and drama and language. I also learnt from them the meaning of sheer selfless dedication to a communal effort" (Ngugi 1981 : 190 f).

On the other side of the continent Pat Amadu Maddy had the same sort of experience in Sierra Leone and of course, this happens time and again in South Africa.

Since often very little information about the South African cultural situation is available in independent Africa, I should like to go briefly into that subject as far as the oral tradition and the theatre are concerned. First of all, in South Africa literature, besides the blackwhite Apartheid separation there is another distinction to be made — the one between those at home and those in exile. This is also the case with the theatre. The refugee camps in countries like Lesotho, Botswana and Tanzania are fuller than ever since the events of 1976 in Soweto and other townships. The struggle for freedom gets impulses from theatre activities, with performances in Tanzania like *Freedom in My Lifetime* and *Soweto Sequence* : plays with songs, music, dancing and based upon stories about refugee experiences in South Africa, such as the Soweto youngsters who saw their schoolmates killed by the South African police. Other South African actors formed theatre groups in Angola or in London.

Inside the country, there are many theatre activities. In South Africa traditional culture has been damaged by white domination than anywhere else in Africa. But there have always been counter-currents reacting against this domination and theatre is one of the forms which bring new opportunities for self-affirmation to the people. All action for cultural freedom is risky and the South African laws are designed to control the lives of the black people in all respects, by the most unbelievable regulations, police intimidation, etc.

"There are no black professional theatres in South Africa and black drama schools. Under the Group Areas Act, city centres and commercial theatres are zoned for white use. Blacks may only enter theatres, as players or spectators, if a special permit is issued (...). Black actors, directors, musicians and others in the theatre are thus confined to their own areas — strictly speaking not just black areas, but African, Indian or coloured as the case may be" (in IDAF, June 1976 : 2).

In spite of all the difficulties, black theatre in South Africa is very much alive. In the seventies it changed in the sense that European theatre norms were abolished. Whereas in the previous years black art expressed sorrow and protest against white injustice, it has become more and more a theatre of anger, a theatre that speaks to the black audience about the way and the means that can

change their situation. Ever since 73, the Black Consciousness leaders have been almost systematically eliminated by the government by means of banning orders, house arrest, prison. South African black artists have often felt closer to Afro-American liberation movements than to traditional African literature.

For instance, after performances of Pinter's *The Caretaker* and Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* or Anouilh's *Antigone*, the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) performed *Requiem for Brother X*, a Black Power play by the American dramatist William Wellington Mackay. This play is set in an American ghetto and the possible responses to oppression by the oppressed blacks are dealt with, from assimilation through collaboration to resistance. This was the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies. The plays became more and more radically committed to political change. At the same time there was a move from the theatre performed in town centres thanks to black-white cooperation, to theatre for blacks only in the black townships. The theatre *forms* changed as well : it started with poetry recitals and music, but in fact the distinction between 'drama' and 'poetry' disappeared. In an introduction to a recent anthology black literature, the editor, Mthobi Mutloatse put it this way : "We are involved in and consumed by an exciting experimental art form that I can only call, to coin a phrase, 'proemdra' : Prose, Poetry and Drama in one ! (...) We are not going to be told how to re-live our feelings, pains and aspirations by anybody who speaks from the platform of his own rickety culture. We'll write our poems in a narrative form, we'll write journalistic pieces in poetry form ; we'll dramatise our poetic experiences ; we'll poeticise our historical dramas (...) we'll perform all these exciting, painful, therapeutic and educative creative acts until we run out of energy !" (Mutloatse 1980 : 5). The result is a literature in which the oral element becomes very important indeed. It is *oral literature*, as Mutloatse confirmed when I asked him during his visit to the Netherlands. But is not so much *oral tradition*. It is essentially urban and the inspiration comes mainly from the urban situation of people in the Apartheid system. The elements from oral tradition are often much less directly evident than in many plays elsewhere in Africa. One might bear in mind play like Nkosi's *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964), Leshoai's *Revolution* (1972) or Mqayisa's *Confused Mhlaba* (1974) — which have all been banned in South Africa.

In his introduction to *South African People's Plays*, Robert Mshengu Kavanagh explains this as follows : "Soweto and other South African urban townships contain the largest concentration of industrialized proletariat in Africa. It is this proletariat that gave birth to a new, urban, popular tradition of theatre. It is important to comprehend the significance of this fact as it is to comprehend the extent to which the traditional structure in the rural areas has been shattered (...). To expect, therefore, in the context of such phenomena, a genuine modern traditional theatre with its roots in a vital rural culture is at present unrealistic. All the plays (...) are

examples of the new urban, popular theatre that the largest proletariat in Africa has given birth to" (pp. xiii-xiv).

What I said earlier about the export of so-called 'pure' authentic tradition by governments in Africa is all the more harrowingly true in South Africa. There the racist government sponsors the European tours of black dance-dramas like *Ipi Tombi* or *Kwazulu*, entertainment with tradition misleadingly used and largely influenced by the western demand for the exotic, in terms of western tourist needs, under white direction.

The question I asked earlier was : how is the modern playwright inspired by the oral tradition ? The answer given dealt with oral forms, themes and devices as we find them again in modern plays. However, the question can also be asked in ideological sense : how that is with what intentions does the writer use the oral tradition in his texts ? An example from the South African context illustrates the point. I have already quoted Credo Mutwa as one of the playwrights who used myth in his play *uNosilimela*. This play was, for a while, quite popular in South Africa, because it expressed the re-evaluation of black culture, one of the ideas of the *Black Consciousness Movement*.

The black cultural heritage had to be rediscovered and *uNosilimela* was considered by many people to be an important contribution to the theatre of Black Consciousness, although the author was never connected with the movement. The play suggests a way out of the destruction, symbolically, as *uNosilimela* leads the children of Africa 'into a new Africa where peace and harmony, based on a revitalization of the old values, are restored, with the High Inyanga (traditional Zulu doctor) as their custodian' (ibid. p. xix).

Language, songs, dances and music are beautifully combined and rich ; however, Mutwa's ideas are rather romantic and also very conservative : he rejects the modern city and its inhabitants, replacing them with a mystical Eden and a religious hierarchical system. The first performance was in 1973 and the success was enormous, mainly because of the romantic black dream he showed. Then came 1976 and Credo Mutwa revealed on what side he stood : he rejected the militant youth of Soweto and he wrote 'an unsolicited letter to the Minister of justice, Jimmy Kruger (in which he) compared Black Consciousness to Nazism and urged the government to suppress the June uprising by sending in the army. In retaliation the people of Soweto burnt his house down about his family's ears' (in Kavanagh 1981 : xviii). Does the rejection of the urban environment in the play have anything to do with the author's rejection of the militant students ? Conscious South Africans reproach Mutwa for wanting to present African culture as a 'nice black culture for white people' instead of using black culture to bring about change in South African society. To a critic like the South African exile Lewis Nkosi, the question seems to be whether this is possible at all : "the question of a usable tradition still lies at the heart of the problem of South African literature. (...) The question is not whether Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho cultures exist,

form which a writer might derive sustenance in the same way that a Soyinka might draw information from Yoruba lore or Achebe from the Ibo one ; it is simply that the Black South African writer is engaged in a contest the nature of which gravely limits his ability to make use of the indigenous tradition (...). In South Africa the pressure of the future is so enormous that looking backwards seems a luxury. The present exerts its own pressures which seem vast, immanent, allconsuming" (Nkosi 1982 : 79). And further on he adds : "The black writers' gruff impatience with models from old traditional cultures is due in part to the recognition that such models provide no clues as to how life is to be lived under apartheid conditions where survival is the only test of human intelligence. Without these clues, tribal morality, the grace and dignity of African traditional life, the severe ethical restraints such a way of life imposes, seem for the embattled city-dweller to have only an empty pietistic appeal" (ibid, p. 80).

From Nkosi's statement, one might conclude that in a political situation like the one in South Africa it is almost impossible to link the oral tradition with the literature of the present. One might ask whether this is a result of the apartheid system. Or does it actually have to do with the urban character of South Africa literature in general ? The Mutwa case, on the other hand, shows how relevant the question of the author's intention is when he makes use of oral tradition in his writing.

Unfortunately, this is also the question the censors ask themselves and not only in South Africa. Censorship is suffocating many texts and performances, especially of the popular kind, because they reach too many people.

When considering the theatre in South Africa, I personally believe that Nkosi's statement is not as valid in that field as it is in the case of the novel (which was what he was referring to), because in the popular theatre the traditions of music, song, dancing and mimicry are very much alive in the townships.

Diviners, wakes, weddings, funerals and a rural people coming to town, are all part of the traditional culture and they preserve some of their characteristics in the urban theatre. Kavanagh (1981 : xxx) describes the township audience's expectations. They want a play to teach, reveal, comment on either moral or political issues. They require a message. They expect the driving force of the play, its cohesion and its strongest channel of communication to be music and dance. They prefer large casts, many and varied characters, a multiplicity of incidents and a clear narrative emphasis. Playmakers and actors attempt to create plays of this kind usually through a mixture of writing, group improvisation and discussion. Their theatre is oral not literary, public, not private. Acting is passionate and committed, energetic and heightened. Laughter is provoked in the midst of tragedy — comedy depends more on movement, gesture and facial expression than on dialogue. Tears are brought by prayer and song. Anger is expressed through purple passages in English. Joy is embodied in dance.

All in all this description does not seem to be so different from what we see in the developments in popular theatre elsewhere in Africa. My conclusion is that the oral tradition is linked by an umbilical cord to the present-day theatre, which continues to hold up the mirror of society to the audience, as it always has.

Political authorities are likely to prefer a different reflection of reality than the one shown by the popular theatre and to criticize the way it relies on the oral tradition in its commitment towards change in today's society. In this and many other respects the African theatre is also a rich source of inspiration for dramatists outside Africa who are in search of new theatrical forms and experiments, in their societies.

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