

Ugandan Theatre: paradigm shifts

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Pre-Colonial Theatre in Uganda

Western literary and theatre critics have held that Uganda, along with all other African countries, lacked any form of real theatre until the late the nineteenth century. This position emerged because Western critics differentiated theatre from performance and, as Rose Mbowe (1999: 227) has noted, they defined theatre as a "formal scripted theatre performed on a proscenium arch stage, an artistic form that was introduced [to Uganda] by the colonial educators and missionaries." In the interest of clarity we will for the moment accept the Western distinction between formal theatre and other kinds of performances while noting that such a distinction did not exist in Uganda's culture.

In reality, Ugandan theatre, which we will hereafter call performance, did exist, in the form of traditional ceremonies, festivals and popular epics.¹ The ceremonies and festivals constituted sacred acts aimed at teaching men and women the art of living. The traditional, popular performance of epic involved a communal cultural practice both highly structured and yet spontaneous, open for improvisation and generally participatory (Mbowe 1999: 228). A brief account of these traditional performances and their later co-existence with the colonial theatre may dispel the misconceptions that there was no Ugandan tradition of performance before 1962 – the year the country attained her independence.

Popular epic performances had existed for centuries before the introduction of a formalised theatre, and they continued to thrive even under the intense cultural imperialism of the colonial period, that is between the 1880s and 1960s (Low 1971: 105-107). Initially, in Uganda as elsewhere in Sub-Sahara Africa, retelling known chronicles of a people was a way of transmitting history from one generation to the next (Mbowe 1999:228). The form survived through decades of colonial oppression because it was closely bound to the oral traditions of Uganda, which were then, and continue to be, a powerful medium for transmitting information.

Uganda with her pre-colonial system of monarchs had well-established systems of artistic communications, including epic narration. It is this monarchic system that supported and

sustained Ugandan performances both before and during the colonial period. These early players were expected to narrate current events in the kingdom. As Mbowa (1999: 228), a Luganda theatre scholar, explained, the role of epic performers at the Buganda court was to inform the Kabaka [king] of current events. This was done by specially trained professional performers appointed and employed as court musicians to perform narrative songs accompanied by the tube fiddle, the lyre or the harp.

The king would ask a player to present the local news, and the player would begin his narrative, adopting an indirect speech pattern. Oftentimes the king would quiz the musician to check the accuracy of the story; if the king discovered any false information, the musician was punished severely. This process forced the king's performers to be sensitive in their choices of topics, their presentations, and their separation of facts from fiction.

At the Bunyoro royal court, a traditional narrator assumed multiple roles that parallel today's writer, director, or actor, and was indeed a commentator on his own act. The narrator therefore had to be versatile. He completely avoided becoming entangled in gossip, but rather used historicised information to pose provocative questions to sceptical spectators.² In his composition the epic narrator (also called *omuyiya*, or composer) used imagery to shape the attitudes of the spectators towards the message. According to Paul Byebandwa (1881-1983), once player for King Sir Tito Winyi, a public performer was always alert not to be outwitted by the spectators. He therefore prepared himself for such eventuality as unruly spectators. To cope with this task he carried *engalabi* [long drum] and *endigidi* [tube fiddle], which he used to alert the spectators of their rudeness or as transitional signals, or as reinforcement of the message.³

The role of the audience was thus central in this traditional epic performance, and all those present took part. Indeed, the performance could never be complete without the participation of the audience. Throughout the performance the spectators voiced favourable or unfavourable reactions, functioning as immediate critics on behalf of their community. The narrator therefore had the responsibility of involving the spectators, as the success of the performance depended largely on the audience's participations. Such reactions ranged, among others: antiphonal chorusing, clapping in rhythm, dancing, and sarcastic interjections.

As could be seen, this epic performance was highly participatory. As David Kerr cites Mukotani Rugyendo observation:

In the course of the performance, spectators could participate as they liked by clapping, shouting or whistling, all in appreciation and actually contributing to the force of the performance by following beautifully with the performers.
(1995: 2)

In sum, then, the epic narrator was a powerful performer mainly because of careful use of words. Nonetheless, he depended on his fellow citizens to improve and vitalise his performance. For the most part, the player's names varied from kingdom to kingdom but the performances themselves retained similar qualities throughout Uganda. Such popular performance was a collective effort that did not require any elaborate system to stage. It could take place in any open space in the village centre where people usually converged. In these traditional performances, music and dance played a major role and were highly spontaneous.

Colonialism and Theatre in Uganda

Although Uganda had a vibrant traditional theatre experience, European colonialists and the later Christian missionaries viewed the traditional performances as pagan practices and considered it reprehensible. Sir Henry Morton Stanley, for example, after a visit to Kabaka Edward Mutesa I's court in 1875, where he was entertained by court performers, wrote a famous letter to the *Daily Telegraph* that altered the cultural face of Uganda. The letter called for missionaries to introduce Christianity to Buganda (Gerald, 1981: 229). Thereafter, as writing developed following the arrival of the missionaries, oral tradition begun to degenerate, and the traditional narrator was relegated to a poetic singer of the king's praise, who now concerned himself with the artistic quality of his presentation rather than the narration of exact events. The narrator began to sing and dance, shifting the emphasis from actualities to imaginative performance. Traditional performances that have survived in Uganda in any form are those rooted in these communal forms – forms that were sheltered by a people's culture and so resisted foreign obliteration or, to use King Chwa's words (Low 1971: 106), resisted "foreignisation."⁴

From the 1880s onward, as the oral culture declined and was replaced by written culture, which stressed word-writing instead of "creating things using words," the colonial and

missionary establishments tried to stamp out all traditional forms of Ugandan performances (Nichols 1981: 244). But the original Ugandan epic form persisted and flourished, continuing to be a reliable source of information, which the colonial administration ironically turned to during the 1940s for its economic campaigns. In the 1940s, though uncommon, it was still possible for a visitor to encounter an epic performer in action in the village square. Mikhail Byenkyaro, the record keeper of the Abakwonga clan in the kingdom of Bunyoro, recalled such an incident, which he observed while walking home from his catechism class: "A man started performing when the sun was mid-sky, the sun set while he was still performing."⁵

But by 1967, the older form had undergone great change, much to disappointment of culturally conscious Ugandans like Mzee Mpaka (1886-1977), once an *Omuseguzi* (player) and *Omuragunza* (enchanter). When watching an open-air performance, he lamented in that: "Instead, of teaching the people things that would help them, he [the epic performer] is simply assaulting them with vulgarity." Indeed it is clear from Mpaka's lament that the form had lost its narrative characteristics, which had been designed to teach and instruct the spectator rather than amuse him. By the late 1960s, then, the traditional epic form had lost much of its appeal to the elderly.

A different, colonial theatre did not suddenly appear throughout Uganda; rather it followed the political, economic, and educational agendas of the colonial administration and Christian missionaries in Uganda.⁶ Politically, the Imperial British Administration wanted to hasten the use of English in its protectorate in light of the threat that Uganda (then Buganda) had shown a desire to adopt Swahili as her national language (Gerald 1981: 297-298). This move to install English as the official language was supported by the Christian missionaries, who resented the official colonial policy of tolerating Swahili, because Swahili was closely connected with the progress of Islam. Because the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) was in charge of education, it was able to introduce drama as a tool of education, specifically as a tool of teaching the English language as well as evangelising. Thus, the advent of formal drama in Uganda filled a political agenda for both state and church.

Speaking English became the mark of sophistication and a way of being accepted by the colonial administration, in case one happened to become a leader. The approval attached to speaking English during this time is captured in J. F. Cunningham's interesting journal entry of

April 1904, an entry concerning the King of Toro where he observed: "Kasagama also speaks a little English, which he has learnt at mission stations, and whenever an opportunity occurs, he is very fond of fitting in English words and phrases in his conversation"(Cunningham 1969: 50).

An economic impulse led to yet another form of colonial theatre. This colonial theatre, characterised by performances of imported plays in English, was performed as pure entertainment for Imperial Administrators, the growing Asian community, and a few Ugandan elites (Rai 1979: 8, 35). This colonial theatre led what Robert Serumaga and Janet Johnson described as "an isolated existence related only to the needs of the few who fell within its ambit" (Owemoyela 1993: 143).

The colonial administration also had an educational agenda to forward. On the advice of CMS, the administration decided to copy Eton College's experience with school drama and its advocacy for acting to be "part of everybody's education in Public School" in England (Motter 1968: vi). Accordingly, missionaries, who ran Uganda's schools, adopted drama to accomplish their tasks of civilising Ugandans. These two traits – speaking English and being civilised – were often considered roughly synonymous. Ugandan school drama and theatre productions was a prerequisite for English teachers from the 1890s through the 1930s until St Paul's Church at Namirembe started the drama festivals of 1940s. The institution of these drama festivals marked the beginning of a culture of written drama and conventionalised theatre in Uganda.⁷

A common pattern can be seen in St. Paul church at Namirembe, which also housed the headquarters of CMS. They had regular, after-service dramatic skits to reinforce Christian messages. They also performed Christian passion plays at the churches during Easter and Christmas seasons. Such skits and plays were later extended to schools because most of them were funded by CMS. This extension of theatre into schools had several implications. First, it meant that the European theatre was permitted in the hands of Ugandans. Second, it meant a superimposition of Western theatre onto the Ugandans, who were then expected to be passive consumers of the new culture. Finally, it meant that Ugandans could no longer remain mere spectators of the foreign culture; rather they must participate in the foreign

culture as well as preserve their own culture. Nonetheless, almost four decades passed before Ugandan theatre produced a work written by a Ugandan.

Makerere University and the Evolution of Modern Ugandan Theatre

Beginning in the 1950s, the influential site of Ugandan theatre and drama shifted from the missionary schools to the nation's major university, Makerere University. The 1950s running through the 1990s are years of particular significance to theatre scholars because the period reflect growing resistance to the wholesale imitation of European models.⁸ The period witnessed a theatrical striving to develop a Ugandan form of drama in English that was more imaginative than solely historical, anthropological, or political. This, indeed, was also the period of a major leap from oral to written forms of theatre.

It is important to note, however, that the development of this Ugandan theatre in English followed years of systematic erasure of indigenous performances. This erasure was caused both by colonial policies of education and by the teaching of the missionaries. The education policy, according to Holger Bernt Hansen (1984: 464-469), emphasised "training for resource by predisposing the elite (the young chiefs) to acceptance of alien Suzerainty and colonial ideology." The selective integration of the chiefs into a colonial society required a compromise of their traditional roles and a willingness to promote the British strategy of divide and rule. This selective integration in turn led to both a cultural elitism and a misrepresentation of traditional cultures, including their theatrical activities. The attitude of the church extended to all aspects of social life resulting into censorships, which as Colman (1998: 103) accurately observed invariably condemned all forms of traditional African performances.⁹

These interruptions of traditional functions, coupled with Christian missionaries' concept of "godliness and good learning," were used to justify concentration of education and related activities (e.g., school drama festivals in the 1940s) in some districts more than others.¹⁰ Privileged districts, such as Kampala and the surrounding townships, dominated the state's civic functions. These functions required and encouraged both traditional Ugandan and formal Western theatrical performances, thus providing people in these areas with theatre skills and exposure to the conventions of Western theatre. In addition, the theatre activities of the CMS at Namirembe's church in the 1940s also increased the opportunities of formal theatrical

influence in the central region of Uganda, while denying this same experience to the rest of the country.

Indeed, before the late 1950s, the colonial rule and the teaching of missionaries succeeded in creating an inferiority complex in many of Uganda's talented writers and performers. Peter Nazareth aptly commented to this effect thus:

There was a heavy colonial pall over the place which made it quite hard to be creative instead of imitative, to challenge the norms. I mean we were supposedly elite who had made it up there and yet somehow there was this feeling that we were not good enough. We were not European. It fitted into the racial structure at Makerere University: nearly all the lecturers were Europeans, like the rulers of the country. (cited in Lindfors 1980: 84)

The credibility of the above assertion can be verified from the British Information Services records, which indicate: "in the last term [December] of 1960 there were 912 students at Makerere University, of whom 279 came from Uganda, and 18 of these obtained degrees during the year".¹¹

Despite the important role that Makerere University eventually came to play in the promotion of creative literature, its early colonial bias, with its Great Tradition of canonised British texts and insistence upon correct British usage, actually mitigated against the early development of an authentic Ugandan voice in English. It is precisely this reverence for English etiquette that Okot p'Bitek responded to in *Song of Ocol*, when he said, "educated people wanted to look and sound like the colonial master" (Lindfors 1980: 135).

By the late 1950s Makerere University had cemented its role as an intellectual centre in Uganda and, incidentally, as home of nascent interest in drama and theatre. The extent, consistency and complexity of the engagement between the development of theatre and drama at Makerere University and that of the rest of Uganda cannot be doubted. Yet despite its undisputed centrality to the development of Ugandan theatre and drama, Makerere University's specific role has remained unexplored.

There are conflicting records of where or when Ugandan popular theatre began, but scholars of popular theatre, the only group that has shown interest in studying Ugandan theatre in

relation to Makerere University, suggest the years between 1964 and 1966 when the first popular theatre activities were conducted by students and their patron lecturers.¹²

There are earlier records, however.¹³ These early records reveal that the first playwright, a graduate of Makerere University, Lacito Okechi, wrote a play in 1946, *The Conversion of a Heathen House into a Christian Home*. It was performed by students at the Sir Samuel Baker School, where Okot P' Bitek – who would in future become a dramatic poet – was a student.¹⁴ Education records of 1951 show that Makerere College (as it was then called) participated in trial projects using theatre and drama as a didactic tool: “Africans teach Africans by drama” (Epskamp 1989: 118).

Also in 1951 D. E. Carr’s account, “Demonstration Teams in Uganda,” reveals an attempt to institutionalise theatre as a didactic tool in Teachers Training Colleges. It is worth noting that in all three instances Makerere students were involved.

In 1958 the English department, chaired by Professor C. Warner, initiated the English Competition to encourage proficiency in the English language. The competition was an inter-hall drama. Despite the sponsorship of the English department, students from other disciplines freely participated. From the foregoing account, thus, we can conclude that conventional theatre performance emerged much earlier than 1962, the date suggested by David Cook’s account.

Peter Nazareth, then a student and a major participant in the English competition, gives an account of the process of this organised amateur theatre of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the following words:

In 1959, I was asked to write the play for my hall. The previous year, a medical student named Ronald Noronha had written a satirical play about the way students behave [depicting real life situation and constructing recognizable characters] and it had gone extremely well, except that the women students boycotted our hall for rest of the year. Noronha left the hall shortly after. I decided to use the same opening scene, but I wrote a satirical play about the Student Guild. Instead of using two characters as Noronha had done, I made it three, and I also acted in it. It went well and we won first place. (Lindfors 1980: 83-84)

This account shows the dynamics of the inter-hall drama competitions and affirms the presence of untapped talent just awaiting the right catalyst.

Nazareth's *Student Guild* (1959) was a situational play with a confrontation scene between a flippant student and the Guild official over seats in the canteen that had melted and ruined the student's shirt and trousers, an incident based on the playwright's own experience. "Within a week of the production, the seats were covered" (Lindfors, 1980: 84). Here are signs of a didactic theatre responding to an immediate social need and remedying a situation through humour. The play offered indications that, despite the institution's bias against traditional cultures, the moving spirit of original, didactic drama had found its way. Thus, Nazareth's play was simply one more part – in drama form – of the literary tradition about which Mohammed Bakari and Ali Mazrui wrote:

It was a generation of the fifties in the twentieth century, which was to lead the way towards establishing a legacy of literature in English language, and Makerere College in Uganda was to become the eminent center of literary activities. It was there that the first examples of literature in English drawing on the East African experience were created. (1986: 868)

The writers of late 1950s and early 1960s were soon challenged by Okot p'Bitek's dramatic poems *Song of Lawino* (1966) and *Song of Ocol*, (1970), both based on Acholi oral poetry, to redefine their cultural reference. In *Song of Lawino*, p'Bitek challenges the educated elites against sinking into "ape-manship." A similar conviction is expressed by Rose Mbowe¹⁵, one of the pioneers of the travelling theatre in early 1960s, who pointed out "the lack of commitment to tackling of social ills in contemporary playwriting in Uganda," implying that theatre had deviated from its commitment to being the mirror of the society – a commitment it had displayed at Uganda's independence. It can be seen from these accounts that the writers of late 1950s and early 1960s were committed to balancing Western and Ugandan dramatic structures and addressing the immediate social needs.

The 1960s proved a turning point in drama and theatre at Makerere University. During the early 1960s, students exhibited commitment and with the support of their lecturers started a student journal, which they called *Penpoint Journal*. C. Warner justified the name thus: "you made a point – with a pen" (Lindfors 1980: 82). Inspired by the content of *Penpoint Journal*,

Rajat Neogy, a graduate of Makerere University in 1961, started *Transition*, an independent journal committed to the publication of literary works. Both *Penpoint* and *Transition* provided opportunities for emerging writers to see their works in print. Although not comparable to David Cook's groundbreaking collection of South and East African plays, these journals still provided much of the history of playwriting for the 1960s in Uganda.

At about this same time the intensity of theatre and drama activities at Makerere through the 1950s caused a rethinking of theatre spaces. The theatre facilities at Namirembe Social Centre, which had served as performing space for the colonial administration and a few Ugandans, could no longer accommodate the demands of the plays that were emerging from the students at Makerere University. This realisation led to the building of the National Theatre, which opened in 1959. At first it was run by the colonial administration, who observed strict production standards.

The Makerere Dramatic Society (formed in 1960 as part of English Department) soon saw an opportunity of staging their dramatic pieces before a larger public. According to Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, the fermenting experience came in 1961, with the first visit by a group of American high school teachers to Uganda. Nat Frothingham, the group's leader and a Shakespeare buff, insisted on producing a play by Shakespeare. He produced *Macbeth* in an all-African setting, the first to attempt to produce a full-length play with students.¹⁶ In his all-student cast, Frothingham worked with both the Africans and Americans and proved that it was viable. Suddenly, following *Macbeth*, there was an upsurge of creative output at Makerere. Actors wanted more action and so the playwrights were more in demand than ever before.

The following year, 1962, the students were anxious to act in another full-length play, and they asked Ngugi wa' Thiong'o to write them a play. He wrote *The Black Hermit*, a play that marked the beginning of his ideological writings. In *The Black Hermit* an educated man causes the suicide of his village wife as he tries to distance himself from that tribal bigotry that hampers national consciousness and unity. Makerere Students Dramatic Society performed the play that year at the National Theatre, but a conflict caused the group to abandon the performance. The conflict resulted in the dismissal of the director whom the colonial administration accused of trying to Africanise the National Theatre. On the eve of

independence, when the whole nation was anticipating a transition of power, the National Theatre of Uganda was silenced.

These events at the National Theatre in 1961 and 1962 led the elite to abandon the National Theatre, which they now viewed as a colonial setup, because it rejected the blending of traditional forms with contemporary issues (Sentongo 1975: 8-12). By late November 1962, shortly after independence, Makerere University's Main Hall was again hosting theatrical activities of the newly formed Makerere Students Dramatic Society (which is not the same as the Makerere Dramatic Society). The group premiered full-length plays.

Soon theatre again spread out of the confines of the Makerere Campus. Makerere's influence on the national theatre scene began to show, especially as private theatre groups such as Kampala Shining Star Association, Kampala City Players, Kayaayu Film Players, Kintu Players, and Baganda Dramatic Society began to emerge. The most prominent of these earlier groups was the Kampala City Players, which in the words of one theatre critic, was "founded to cater for those graduates who wanted to continue with theatre as a hobby."¹⁷ At about the same time the administration of the National Theatre founded a drama school to cater to the growing theatre public who wanted to participate in theatre, but could not qualify for admission to literature studies at Makerere University.

In 1963 University students, with the assistance of David Cook and Betty Baker, started the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, which began to take theatre to rural communities. By 1964, the Free Travelling Theatre involved students and patron lecturers who toured the country during their summer holidays with a repertory of plays. Most plays produced during the early tours were foreign classics, either because of the continuing influence of foreign culture or simply because of the troupe's lack of experience with rural audiences. The Travelling Theatre soon learned, however, that these classic pieces had to be adapted to the local demand. Students and lecturers began to do approximate translations, which added humour to the characters. After people became acquainted with the Makerere Travelling Theatre, responses to its arrival in the communities were overwhelming, reducing the need for the rigorous publicity that previous trips had required. Theatre's success came, in part, from the dynamics of theatre audiences. In the words of Otojok, "People loved to be part of this rare

opportunity of seeing live theatre and pulsating with living characters, unlike the big screen cinema that was sponsored by the information services".¹⁸

This travelling theatre was sponsored through a combination of support from the communities themselves; the Department of Planning and Community Development; the British Council, which put Landrovers at their disposal; ESSO, which provided petrol, the National Theatre allowed performances on condition that Nyanza Textiles Industry commit itself to sponsor their costumes; and Coca Cola industry's commitment to cover publicity costs (Epskamp 1989: 107). Makerere University contributed towards the allowances of the staff and the feeding of the students, despite their being on official vacation.

The Uganda theatre required the leadership and dedication of talented men and women who loved to see it progress. These figures included a number of professors and students, who should be considered architects of theatre and drama at various stages of its development. S. J. and Rebecca Colman, for instance, supported the students' protest against the missionaries' objections to students' holding dances in 1953, and the Colmans continued to organise the monthly dances until 1956 (Colman, 1998: 102). David Cook and Betty Baker initiated the Makerere Free Travelling Theatre, and David Cook continued to be a patron of theatre at Makerere and in East Africa more generally. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Sentenza Kajubi (former Vice-Chancellor of Makerere University) constantly advocated for educational drama in the curriculum.¹⁹

Margaret MacPherson, as head of the English Department, played an essential role in establishing the Department of Music, Dance and Drama in 1971. Although the department started with the teaching staff from the English Department, it quickly recruited A. W. Kayper Mensah from Lagon University in Ghana. In addition to his academic qualifications, he brought fourteen years of experience in African theatre to Makerere, thereby expanding the horizon of theatre studies. In addition, Rose Mbowa, then the youngest member of the teaching staff, was sponsored to go to Leeds University in Britain to read for a Master's degree in theatre. On her return in 1973 the department began offering courses in production skills in addition to its academic programmes. Indeed these skills became the survival kit for the Travelling Theatre, which continued in 2000 to take theatre to the communities. The response of both audiences and communities has continued to be enthusiastic. Their support

can be seen in the way they provide spaces for performances, offer accommodations to the company, and attract large audiences for the shows. Under Mbowe's directive, too, several curricular changes ensued. As part of their training, senior drama majors began to select and direct plays of their choice, adapting them to the local demand. This change, in force since 1975, increased awareness of theatre throughout the country and allowed development agencies to integrate theatre and drama as tools for communication.

Simultaneously, integrating theatre with development meant employment for theatre graduates as consultants and facilitators with development agencies. This direct contact with communities led to changes in the admissions of students to drama at Makerere University and to a diploma programme, which by 2000 included training certain skills with the hope of improving the semi-professional theatre groups whose numbers had been on the increase since 1992. On graduation, many of these theatre students joined with businessmen to form still more performance ensembles.²⁰

In October 1992 Alex Mukulu with a group of Makerere students collectively improvised and produced *30 Years of Bananas* (1993). Mukulu's revolutionary approach used historic facts blended into experimental forms that had been used by artists of the 1970s and 1980s to camouflage political criticism against the autocratic leaderships. The production *30 Years of Bananas* was based on the traditional epic style, but it leaned toward an operatic form of the sort earlier popularised by Byron R. Kawaddwa's *Oluyimba Lwa Wankoko/The Song of the Cockerel* in the 1977. The latter had used traditional allegorical techniques, but the operatic arrangements in the text are similar to those of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Mukulu, it can be said, combined his predecessors' styles to form an outstanding form of mixed medium that communicated and reinforced messages in multiple ways. The production seemingly dared both the politicians and theatre conventionalists among the audience to condemn it, but no condemnation came.

The production of *30 Years of Bananas* became the first box-office success and Uganda's longest running play in the history of the National Theatre with sixteen weeks of performances.²¹ Government officials, including the head of state, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, attended the production of *30 Years of Bananas*. In the preface to the text, Phares M Mutibwa (Mukulu 1993: vi) comments: "In Alex Mukulu's play, history is not only recorded and

interpreted but is also transformed into living reality that epitomises the life of Ugandans during the first thirty years of independence.” This connection with social realities had its own impact on theatre activities and led to an increase in the number theatre groups. According to Uganda Theatre Groups Association (UTGA), the registration of theatre groups increased from 35 in 1988 to 400 in 1993, a galloping rate that UTGA's president attributes to Makerere University's theatre activities in the communities during the same period.²²

Although a history of drama, as distinct from theatre, is well beyond the scope of this study, some notice must be taken of shifting dramatic practices between the late 1950s and the turn of twenty-first century.²³ Two major forces directed these shifts: Ugandans' struggle to find their own voices, separate from that of their colonial administrators, and Uganda's shifting political fortune, as it overcame colonialism and fought to overcome a series of repressive regimes before installing a duly elected and democratically functioning president.

The period surrounding Uganda's independence (1960s) was characterised by exuberant cultural nationalism and an enthusiasm for breaking with the cultural domination of Europe. Austin Bukenya (1984: vi) has observed that Ugandan writers wanted to include the traditions of Ugandan culture in theatre and to be revolutionary in addressing serious social issues.

The first anthology of Ugandan plays *Short East African Plays in English*, published in 1968, included plays from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The plays in this collection cannot be categorised simply as social domestic dramas, for they handled subjects that were far beyond their times. The anthology reflects the spirit of this time and gives evidence of an emerging drama that builds on formal, modern-style Western dramas alongside African traditions and folklore. These plays could be seen as a medley of creative ingenuity exemplifying Ugandan playwrights in search of their identity, as writers with a mission to transform their society (Cook and Lee 1968: viii). Clearly, the tone of these plays cannot be compared with the vigour and radicalism of later works that emerged under the repressive governments that followed the first overthrow of the national constitution in 1967, but they provided a foundation for the later playwrights.

This anthology was characterised by its emphasis on Western conventions: the scripted drama, a proscenium stage, an auditorium, a director and actors. These early writers

contended with the legacy of a colonial theatre that had been superimposed on the traditional theatre based on oral, communal culture. They used dramatic structures aimed at causing the audience to empathise with the staged reality; they did not provide for spontaneity or direct participation of the audiences. In short, their plays were modelled on Western plays, and they have been condemned by some critics as too simple. But in addition to their seeming simplicity, these plays revealed writers in the late 1950s and the early 1960s who were searching for a compromise, a blending of oral tradition into English expression. Hence scripted dialogues such as "Father, I have come" and "Son, it is good," are very common. These writers of the late 1950s and the 1960s were also influenced by the so-called *négritude* movement of Francophone Africa, which was then steadily spreading into Anglophone countries. Ugandan writers found themselves torn between cultural nationalism and relevance to their immediate societies.²⁴ It was a period of great challenge for playwriting as the spirit of cultural nationalism swept through the nation alongside the demand for political independence.

Consequently, these plays, when viewed chronologically, reflected a progression in Ugandan theatre. In their reflection of times past, playwrights blended Ugandan traditions with adopted foreign practices, rendering the pieces rich in anthropological and exotic details. In their reflection of time present, these plays captured the profound changes and expectations of the growing number of educated men and women, the emerging elite who began to question the rationale of zealous assimilation of foreign culture at the expense of indigenous culture.

Two early plays in particular mirrored the writers' situation and explored certain contradictions emerging within Uganda's elite class. Some of the elite rejected the embrace of foreign culture at the expense of their own, while others embraced the foreign cultures and rejected their own as primitive.²⁵ Capturing this contradiction, these two plays explore the tragic consequences of radical destruction of traditional institutions. Such dramatic exploration was necessary for theatrical independence to be realised and theatre had to respond to the social issues created by the years of cultural imperialism in the name of Christianity.

The Exodus (1959) by Tom Omara drew on the heritage of folk culture, following Okot p'Bitek's technique of transposing oral poetry into a written culture, to develop formidable political satires such as *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*. In just such a way Omara used

folkloric culture to construct a theatrical piece to warn Ugandans of the triviality of tribalism and to underscore the consequences of irreconcilability. Omara's accurate analysis of ethnicity in Uganda at the time of independence qualified him as one of the earliest prophets of his time.

The dialogue in *The Exodus* was immersed in traditional oral culture, setting this play apart as a new art form, a type of hybrid, one distinctively different from Western theatre. The narrator's opening lines underscore the oral roots of the play:

NARRATOR: Tell me my Children, tell me whether we people of east of this mighty Nile, think of those living to the west or south of it as brothers.

FIRST BOY: Why should we not be like brothers? (see Cook and Lee 1968: 47)

Why shouldn't they? Indeed, this question was the main thrust in Omara's treatment of the Acholi mythology of Gipir and Labong, leaders believed to have caused the break of one tribe into what is now known as Acholi and Lango. In so doing, Omara reflected on many other tribes whose political past echoes the issues that are presented in the text.

Omara's play (see Cook and Lee 1968) also included stage directions such as, "The narrator sits among a group of children, either in front of the curtain, or among the audience." This direction both disclosed Omara's knowledge of the practical details of traditional theatre and revealed his stylistic recovery of the arrangement on traditional stages.

Sam Tulya-Muhika's *Born to Die* (1962) illustrates the consequences of an outright rejection of traditional values (see Cook and Lee, 1968). Tulya-Muhika's protagonist, Dehota, is at the crossroads, torn between traditionalism and modernism, opposing sides with incompatible values. Dehota, determined to emancipate his society from primitiveness, mobilised the people to discard their symbols of traditionalism and butcher the custodians of the old culture. The anticipated progress turned disastrous and Dehota's attempt to reverse his philosophy of progress was rejected. The people turned against him and hounded him like a beast. *Born to Die* is thus a presentation of an ill-equipped social reformer who has misled the society and caused it to opt for foreign traditions at the expense of the traditional culture that had sustained the society for centuries.

Through the protagonist's search for solutions to heal the new society he helped to create, Tulya-Muhika confronted the audience with the realities of their immediate environment. The educated men and women were being challenged to search from within and not from without, to help society regain its cultural balance. The writer warned, however, that it might be too late if the educated men and women waited for the consequences of a wholesale assimilation of European cultures: for example, when Dehota found wisdom symbolised by two elderly fortune-tellers who had earlier escaped his wrath, he was too late to reverse their fate and his, but the encounter is significant:

LAYERI: What is your aim?

DEHOTA: My idea is to save people, not to destroy them.

AYERI: Yours was a brave ambition my son. But you cannot save people unless you understand them.

LAYERI: And unless they understand you.

AYERI: Fine ideas are not enough by themselves.

LAYERI: They are only a beginning.

AYERI: And if you put them into practice without really knowing what you are doing, they can be very dangerous, as you now know (see Cook and Lee 1968: 10-11).

Though written in 1962, the play's prophetic warning was lived in the events that followed the 1967 overthrow of the Buganda's *Lukiko*, or parliament. Although Uganda's theatre was still in search of the appropriate medium for communicating issues pertinent to the changing Ugandan society, these two plays, *The Exodus* and *Born to Die*, reveal the determination of theatre practitioners to use theatre as a vehicle for crucial messages.

Critics of early Ugandan drama might find these plays tepid in comparison with the outright radical plays encountered in neighbouring Kenya and Tanzania during this period, and so they might argue that the post-independence drama in Uganda lacked the vitality and vigour of the revolutionary theatre experienced in countries that had experienced political struggle for their independence. (Uganda, unlike its neighbours in East, Central and Southern Africa, had received her independence without armed struggle.) Ugandan playwrights, however, had to contend with the cultural crisis of assimilation, hence their bid for cultural nationalism, demonstrated in their use of legends and themes that reflected the incompatibility of the colonial and traditional cultures. There was a remarkable effort on the part of these playwrights to deconstruct the imposed structures of the Western theatre through the reintegration of the traditional aesthetics: the use of a narrator, a return to a kind of arena

staging, and the effort to refocus the society on self-exploration in order to remedy both cultural and socio-political problems.

With the post-independence political changes of 1966 and 1967 in Uganda, theatre practitioners found themselves with a new role, functioning as political watchdogs of their own society. This situation was rather tricky, and it was relatively new in sub-Saharan Africa. Playwrights had to find ways of addressing political issues without being confrontational because the civil society had lost its voice upon Uganda's independence.²⁶ Before independence it had been easy to identify – and so to target – the oppressor, but after independence it was difficult. The oppressor was harder to see, and there was a clear rift between the politicians and the intellectuals, both of whom claimed to represent the interests of peasants. The uncertainty of the situation led several playwrights to adopt historical approaches to present critical political issues of the period.

Austin Bukenya's *The Secret* (1968), for example, presented serious political issues of the mid 1960s in a historical setting. Although the characters bore fictitious names, they were recognisable as those of the ruling figures. The dialogue, though cast as far-off events, was specific to the moment:

NDAGIRE: Oh, my little, simple sister! Don't you see that since the king has turned slave to his wife, by serving him we are only slaving for Nannono's slave? It is just opposite of what I had hoped for. I thought we came as royal ladies to wait upon the King, our brother, while his maid served us; but now we slave for the maid! (Bukenya, 1968: 84)

Indeed, Bukenya's dialogue was culturally specific because it was a direct reference to the coalition of political agendas of Buganda's monarchic institution and the national politics. *The Secret* can be seen as an alarm ringing out the rising suspicion of the coalition between the two political parties, Kabaka Yeka and the Uganda Peoples Congress. *The Secret* questioned the legitimacy of the coalition and illustrated its consequences from the cultural perspective. Noticeable in *The Secret* is the shift from the earlier speech pattern; the language is very aggressive, more direct and discomforting than that of the earlier plays.

Theatre in Response to Politics

In the mid-1960s theatre activities, both in the rural and urban communities, laid the foundation upon which theatre in the 1970s was to function under the perilous challenges of the dictatorial regime of Idi Amin. The theatre practitioner could no longer sit on the fence and leave it to the politicians, as in the previous post-independence era. Theatre artists had to communicate to the people directly because the civil society, through which the people ought to be represented, could not. Now the principal perpetrator of human rights abuses was the government itself. The government and its officials, instead of over-seeing the protection and promotion of human rights, flagrantly violated them. The situation became similar to that which had led Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa to comment, "to many ordinary Africans, the only change [after independence] is the complexion of the oppressor".²⁷

In order to address social, political, and cultural needs of this time, writers had to establish new theatrical forms that communicated to the people. Hence, reflective words, idioms, movements, and people's lore was adopted to capture the social malaise of the Ugandan society. Because of severity of the censorship, theatre in Uganda during this period became quite challenging to both the author and consumer. Ugandan theatre dynamics therefore changed in the 1970s from the medley of simple and domesticated dramas to the extreme symbolic and wordless dramas. This transmutation of theatre was prompted by the need to disguise important political messages that the writers were disseminating through theatre, but as in all arts when threatened by extinction, the theatre forms were transformed simply to ensure the survival of theatre in Uganda.

A good example of the extreme transmutation of theatre in Uganda was the practice of Robert Serumaga and his Abafumi Company (The Story Tellers). Serumaga wrote and staged two powerful political plays, *Majangwa* (1971) and *Renga Moi* (1972), whose details Mercy M. Ntangaare and Eckard Breitingner (Breitingner 1999: 254-259) discuss at length in their article "Ugandan Drama in English." Worth noting also are Serumaga's subsequent improvised stage productions, in which he powerfully integrated art forms such as poetry, song, dance, and symbolism to, in the words of Soyinka (Soyinka 1993: 342), "disseminate dangerous sentiments under the watchful eye of the oppressor." This ability to camouflage themes with folkloric elements enabled him to "manipulate Idi Amin as long as he could, [so that he] succeeded in staying alive longer than any artist creatively active" under the dictatorial regime

(Soyinka, 1993: 248). His experimentation with forms in search of a truly African theatre and his camouflaging of the message that led to the extreme of producing wordless dramas at this critical moment in Uganda's political history, however, has been criticised. Austin Bukenya has pointed out that the danger with this kind of drama was that "theatre could completely forget how to speak up even when there was no need to remain muzzled" (Mukulu 1993: viii):

Serumaga seemingly had no choice, however, considering the fate that befell a vocal artist like Byron Kawadwa, an accomplished theatre artist who was murdered after producing *Oluyimba Lwa Wakoko*, or *The Song of a Cockerel* (1975). The play was cloaked as traditional opera, using events in nineteenth-century Buganda to comment on the usurped power of Uganda. By using the court, where most of the political mistakes were committed that continue to plague Uganda today, Kawadwa went to the root of Ugandan political problems.

An eye-witness account of the play revealed the use of traditional forms, such as the music, dance, proverbs, gesture, movement, and the extravagancy of court scenes. However, the vulgarity and rendition of speech used by the actors brought the audience back to the absurdity of the moment. The absurdity is in the Prince's failure to see through the cunning antics of Wakoko, a mass mobiliser. This play has all the makings of a people-oriented drama, especially in its use of direct address; for example, Wakoko spoke directly to the audience and engaged them in discussion and justification of his actions. It must be said that for the first time modern Ugandans were experiencing a traditional opera-epic theatre, one filled with traditional elements even though it remained on a proscenium stage. The effect of this staging could be seen in the audience's reaction to play and the actors: they remained neutral in their sympathies because the villain was no worse than the victim who chose to remain a victim. It was obvious that in this play the society was on trial for producing such pathetic characters.

Kawadwa's use of history as a disguise in *Oluyimba Lwa Wakoko*, however, was too transparent. It did not take long for the State Research Bureau to connect it to the politics of the day. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Oluyimba Lwa Wakoko*, which was well received at the Festival of Black and African Art (FESTAC) in Nigeria in 1977, cost the author his life. Kawadwa was murdered and this murder brought serious theatre to a halt for several years.

The practice of camouflaging sensitive political issues using traditional elements was now out of question because political symbolisation carried a death penalty. A play's meaning was henceforth not determined by the oppressed author alone, but now also by the oppressor. Intellectuals, who long had opted for the traditional epic form in their effort to avoid political confrontation, could no longer count on fooling President Amin and his men. Hence, both the Western conventional and the Ugandan traditional theatres lost their political functions to censorship at the very time they were most needed.

As a result, many theatre artists went into exile in neighbouring Kenya and other foreign countries. This artistic exodus led to a regression of once enormous energies that had gone into artistic production, resulting in hesitation and social unease about how to handle socio-political issues. This uncertainty among theatre artists left them powerless. This was not the case for too long. By the mid-1970s many of the social infrastructures no longer functioned because of the total breakdown of law and order. Then theatre, like the Christian religion, was driven underground, forcing theatre intellectuals and practitioners to adopt new strategies of survival.²⁸

Although the socio-political situation inside Uganda was too traumatic for intellectual drama to thrive, in neighbouring Kenya John M Ruganda, a Ugandan theatre artist in exile, was active and produced outstanding written plays that have become Uganda's modern classics. Ruganda's plays are studied in all East African universities as well as high schools, because his plays are expressions of the collective consciousness of his own people and times. For all their diversity Ruganda's plays have tended to concentrate on a few central themes which are of immediate relevance not only to Uganda or East African region from which he comes, but to the rest of Africa and indeed other nations of the world which have undergone similar historical experiences.

The moving themes in Ruganda's plays include, for example, the depiction of the oppressive machinery of the State Research Bureau. While the world was stunned by the advent of the murderous regime in Uganda, Ruganda, unlike many of his colleagues who opted for armed struggle against the regime of Idi Amin Dada, took up writing plays that analysed the politics of Uganda. In his plays, *The Burdens* (1972), *Covenant with Death* (1973), *Black Mamba*

(1973), *The Floods* (1980), *Music without Tears* (1982), and *Echoes of Silence* (1986), he explored the human motivation for being both authors and victims of wanton destruction. Of these plays, *The Floods* and *Music without Tears*, expose the consequences of flagrant rejection of the collective self as symbolised in cultural institutions such as monarchy, religion, traditional education, and communal meaning of existence.²⁹ Ruganda touched on the social, life boundaries that had been overlooked by earlier writers who had accounted for Ugandan society in terms of humankind and their history, overlooking underlying structural patterns and relations that reproduced the conditions for repression by the state.

Ruganda picked his themes or moments carefully. His strong narrative captured those moments that depicted the deterioration of Uganda's political situation until its government had become little more than a murder squad. *The Floods* is a good example of his selection of apt moments in reality. The play made clear that the reasons for the government's blatant killing were as varied as the methods used. Of the central characters, Kyeyune, noted that killing could come because a person, in a moment of enthusiasm, uttered an unwelcome word to his masters; or perhaps, because through his own sweat and unscrupulous saving, he accumulated a bit of wealth which his extravagant mates had set their eyes on; or because he knew the secret ambition of his masters; and so on and so forth. Kyeyune continues to detail various ways of killing: the government can "rip our bellies open, drill nails in our skulls and stuff our mouths with our own genitals" (Ruganda 1980: 9-10). Such instances are abundant throughout the text, revealing Ruganda had well read the brutality of the regime that ruled his motherland.

Although Ruganda's plays mark a leap in the development of theatre in Uganda, his plays, like those of Serumaga, his contemporary, were not popular with the public because they were very intellectual and did not sit well with the audiences who were enjoying the light entertainment of musical performances, like "Kadogo Kamu" and high-life bands.³⁰

By the late 1970s, in addition to the serious political plays, political drama had adopted yet another strategy for avoiding censorship – the farce. But at this time theatre fell into the hands of amateurs, who used it for profit to the exclusion of those serious social and political issues that had only just begun to characterise it. As Mbowa (see Breitingner 1999: 234) has observed, this theatre popularised improvised drama that operated on sensationalism and

sentimentalism, a drama similar to *commedia dell'arte*'s loose scripting. Many groups sprang up in and around Kampala and soon spread to other major Ugandan townships. In the process of their unprecedented spread, they cultivated a big following and became very popular in the late 1980s, when there were no other forms of entertainment. All the cinema houses had been closed in late 1970s, and the entertainment infrastructure was destroyed during the liberation war of 1978-79, which ousted dictator Idi Amin from power. Thus it was that farcical theatre that replaced all earlier forms of theatre. By the early 1990s it became the Ugandan popular theatre and that theatre became a monopoly.

During these years it did not matter so much what types of performances were produced; what mattered for proprietors of these groups was earning enough money to sustain them till the next performance. The aesthetics of theatre had changed, and the practitioners avoided political and social issues to ensure their own survival. Playing safe was the golden rule for all theatre groups. Although they provided the entertainment that kept people diverted from the pains of wars, especially between 1981 and 1987, something worse than persecution of theatre had transpired. Because of its influence – with more than 400 registered performing groups³¹ – and the large following it had, this popular theatre had become an obstacle to the development of serious theatre in Uganda by 1990s.

Theatre and Development Agenda

Ugandan theatre got a major boost in the late 1980s when the Secretariat of National Resistance Army/National Resistance Movement (NRA/NRM) revived the use of theatre as an educational tool in its programmes for mass mobilisation, political mobilisation and politicisation of its cadres and the public. By its "Ten Point Programme," especially the NRA's *Siasa*, or politicisation activities, an outgrowth of the Zimbabwe Freedom Fighters' experimentation with *Pungwe*, or nightly meetings in the guerrilla camps, the government adopted theatre as a tool to promote its agendas.³²

Between 1981 and 1986 the NRA/NRM emulated the examples of *Pungwe*, while they were engaged in the battle against Milton Obote and his successors. The adopted form proved successful, as it had for the Zimbabwean guerrillas. This success in using theatre in the dissemination of social information and socio-political education attracted many development agents, especially the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that were battling with the

problems of implementing developmental programmes in rural communities, where 80% of Uganda's population live. Thus theatre became an essential component of communication in the NGOs' programmes. This use of didactic theatre at the helm of development activities evolved rapidly with the support of Department of Music, Dance, and Drama at Makerere University, which instituted a course on Theatre for Development (TFD). Theatre once more gained rapid significance mainly due to the kind attitude of the regime. Rose Mbowe, the initiator of TFD at Makerere University (see Hansen and Twaddle, 1998: 262), observed in this regard that, "In Uganda, Theatre for Development has really been significant only since the accession to power of the National Resistance Movement", because earlier regimes had paralysed attempts by conventional theatre to arouse popular consciousness.

The unprecedented freedom of speech and movement of the late 1980s and 1990s produced yet another spate of theatre activities in a bid to reach the most disadvantaged population in rural communities. Theatre became the focus because print and electronic media, Uganda's official media of communication, had not been successful in reaching the majority of the people, who were illiterate and who had no access to electricity, radio sets and television sets. Further complicating this situation was the lack of a common language that the development agents could use to communicate their messages. Thus, with the help of the Department of Music, Dance, and Drama at Makerere University, both the government and the NGOs began to use theatre in the hope that performed messages would have a more lasting effect than speeches and lectures. Some of the initial exercises were not successful, however, perhaps because they followed old conventions of didactic theatre and offered prescriptive solutions, oftentimes hatched in far-away capitals of the world, with no bearing on local needs. Because the so-called drama hackers presented situations and solutions dictated by donors who wanted immediate results, many projects failed. Therefore, the NGOs, in conjunction with the government, began a search for a more integrative method of implementing various development projects, such as those for health and self-help finances. This search led to the studying of project reports from other third-world countries, citing successful stories of TFD in neighbouring Tanzania, Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and the Samar experience in Nigeria. Accordingly, Makerere began to experiment with a new kind of TFD methodology.

In September 1986 Jonathan Muganga, an official in the Ministry of Health, then taking a course in music, dance and drama at Makerere University, put the basic theories of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* to the test. He offered to work with Nattyole Primary Health Care project using popular theatre. Muganga sought to involve the community actively in discussing ways of overcoming their critical problems in health and socio-economic development. He followed a practice of Augusto Boal, where everyone present at the rehearsal or performance scene is a participant-performer and a participant-spectator. This was the first time that Boal's theories had been practised in a real-life situation in Uganda.

The Nattyole Health project was a success by all accounts. After the social mobilisation phase of the project which lasted seven months, the community had been completely integrated into the ownership of the project. They were able to sustain the project on their own after the external assistance was withdrawn. This project was replicated by the Ministry of Health, in conjunction with UNICEF's Kampala office in undertaking some of their projects elsewhere. This popular, participatory approach gained recognition and soon prompted demand for TFD by other rural development agencies. This strong wave of demand, in turn, led to a further demand for theatre practitioners, which left TFD vulnerable to opportunists who saw theatre as a means of earning a living.

To protect development agencies and its own programmes, the staff at Makerere University insisted on helping the donor agencies, UNICEF, IFAD, DANIDA, Habitat International, and other NGOs, by providing expert advice or directly recommending students who were working on their final projects in TFD. This intervention in the early 1990s helped to popularise TFD in Uganda and changed the perception that TFD was merely a money-making strategy.

In summary, Uganda has had longstanding, rich traditions of theatre. The early chroniclers, who communicated important cultural information through a complex mixture of music, dance, language and audience participation, persisted through much of the colonial period and often adapted to its pressures. Colonialists and missionaries added to Uganda's traditions of performance their own version of theatre as a teaching tool (for English and Christianity), and they patronised a European theatre imported especially for them and the local elites. These two traditions continued both independently and in blended form as Ugandans began to write

and produce their own English-influenced plays in churches and schools and, later, at Makerere University. By this means, a foreign theatrical culture was laid over the local cultures, and Ugandans participated in both layers.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s Uganda boasted a new theatre National Theatre, a drama school, two dramatic societies and a travelling theatre. The 1970s added a university department and the 1980s more than thirty registered theatre groups, a number that grew to four hundred by the early 1990s.

Similarly, from its modest beginnings in the 1940s, Ugandan drama had Africans teaching Africans through drama by the 1950s. Its written drama metamorphosed from the hybridised plays of the 1950s, through the censor-sensitive historical approaches of the 1960s, to the symbolic, wordless dramas of the 1970s – plays that strove to avoid censorship or, worse, execution of the author. The dangerous political climate led to the prevalence of apolitical plays, musicals and farces through much of the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1980s, however, Uganda's long tradition of using theatre and drama as tool of education resurfaced as both the government and various NGOs harnessed drama and theatre as ways of reaching rural people who were often illiterate and media starved.

From this summary, several conclusions can be drawn. Ugandan theatre and drama have regularly shifted in response to shifting culture and political climates. Epic narrators became praise singers as their teaching role diminished. Ugandan written drama blended English-language dialogue with traditional staging techniques from Uganda during the years of colonial rule. After independence, theatre opposed the new forms of oppression with a series of plays designed to elude censorship and political assassinations, serious political dramas gave way to musicals and farces, histories, satires, symbolic and wordless plays. When such camouflage no longer worked, playwrights wrote from exile or wrote trivial, escapist plays, waiting out the oppressive regimes. After the successive brutal regimes that ruled the country from the 1970s up to the mid-1980s, a new regime under Y.K. Museveni ushered in a freer environment that enabled theatre activities to flourish. The new government used various kinds of didactic theatres to advance its agendas.

Today's Uganda has several theatrical and dramatic traditions from which to draw, but each carries, sometimes, strong associations with a particular groups or ideologies. Traditional Ugandan performances, European theatres of several kinds, blended Euro-Ugandan practices, and several kinds of theatre for development were in the theatrical mix by the end of the twentieth century. Traditional Ugandan performances meant for some, at certain times, strong cultural roots that evoked a proud heritage; for others it marked a primitive past – an object of embarrassment or shame. Similarly, European traditions for some meant civilisation and pride, for others oppression and anger. The several syncretic practices denoted conflicting cultures, or enriching threads, or dreaded assimilation, depending on time, place, and persons doing the interpretations. Indeed, for some, theatre and drama at certain times served as markers for the whole range of cultural practice. When a new government wanted to teach the people how to rebuild their social order, didactic dramas, in both new and old interactions, were hauled back for use. The one phenomenon that has been constant over time and place has been the ubiquity of theatre and drama in Uganda.

Notes

- 1) *Theatre* in this study refers to performances by live actors before a live audience, while a text of such performance is referred to as a *play* or *drama*.
- 2) Mzee Mpaka, "New year's Day Festivities" (Commentary remarks made at Kibingo community Square in Hoima on January 1, 1969), Special Documents of *Obyobuhangwa bwa Bunyoro*, compiled by Mikairi Kimera, Private Documents of *Omukungu wa* (the sub-Chief of) Kibingo Kyaitara, Yacob Rwegaba, Hoima.
- 3) "Ira omuzani wa' abanty akaba ali kalimangezi muno, kukira muno yaikaraga nayekenga abakalimangezi omurukugano. Kubaculeza akaba aina engalabi eyiyabuturaga, aho naho abantu bayetegerezanga ngu obuire obwokuhanura kwekitekerezo kuhoireho. Obundi yateranga endigindi obuyabanga amalirize okuzana kweihure." All translations are mine unless otherwise noted and are based on my understanding of Runyoro dialect, my native dialect. See also John Beattie, *Bunoro: An Africa Kingdom*, eds. George and Louise Spindler (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston) (1960:1).
- 4) H.H. Kabaka Daudi Chwa, "Education, Civilization, and Foreignisation in Buganda, 1930," in *The Mind of Buganda: Documents of the Modern History of an African Kingdom*, Compiled by D.A. Low (Los Angeles: University of California Press) (1971:106).
- 5) "Omusaija akatandika kuzaana omwihangwe gwe izoba – ixoba likagwa na kyazana," Transcript in the hand of Mikairi Byekyaro, 1936, Special Collections, Nyensi Byekyaro Private Collections, Kirisa, Bugahya county, Hoima.
- 6) Imperial administration is used interchangeably with colonial administration.
- 7) Based on data gathered by Cliff Lubwa p'Chong, "Drama in Education" (Lecture presented at the Department of Music, Dance, And Drama, Makerere University, Kampala, December 4, 1992).
- 8) Makerere University was established in 1939 to provide higher education for all of British East Africa: Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zanzibar.
- 9) SJ Colman lived and taught at Makerere University during 1953-1959. He was influential in organising, along with students, the first series of monthly dances at Makerere campus
- 10) A statement by PW Cooper as a District Commissioner of Kampala, in *Annual Report Buganda 1909-1910* (Confidential Document: Secretariat Minute Paper Batch 1138, 1910), 2.
- 11) "The Education Status in Uganda," British Information Services--An Agency of the British Government (England: Swindon Press Ltd., 1962), 27. This material is filed with the Department of Justice (BIS) under 56 Stat. 248-258 and is available for inspection.

- 12) This date has been variously cited in several books. See David Cook, "Theatre Goes to the People," *Transition* 5, No. 25 (1965): 8; David Cook and Miles Lee, *Introduction to South East African Plays in English* (London: Heinemann, 1968), viii; Kees P. Epskamp, *Theatre in Search of Social Change* (Hague: CESO Paperback No. 7, 1989), 107; Oscar Brockett with Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 645. Kerr, 135-136. Note: The information of this period relies on a single source – David Cook, a scholar in East and Southern African literature, who joined Makerere as a lecturer in the Department of English in 1962. He actively supported the earlier popular theatre tours in the rural areas. He has published several anthologies on East African literature in English, one of which is cited in this study.
- 13) There are other reliable sources, mostly from the surviving participants, which include: Peter Nazareth, Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, Sam Tulya-Muhika, David Rubadiri, Mukotani Rugyedo, Austin S. L. Bukenya, Robert Serumaga, Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu, John Ruganda, Nuwa Ssentongo, and Joseph Balikuddembe.
- 14) Taban Lo Liyong, "Interview with Taban Lo Liyong," interview by Bernth Lindfors, *Mazunguzo* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), 49. There is no record of this play's having been published, but there is corroborated information of writing and performing of play by Okot P' Bitek, who was then a student at Sir Samuel Baker School in Gulu.
- 15) Rose Mbowa, "That's Life, A Sickening Entertainment," *The New Vision Newspaper* (Kampala), 19 July 1994, Women's section, p. 4. Mbowa was involved in theatre for more than four decades. Until her premature death in 1999, she was an active professor in the Department of Music, Dance, and Drama—where she continued to supervise experiments in both academic and non-academic, popular theatre. Apart from her scholarly endeavours, she was a versatile actress. In April/May, 1998, she performed the role of Mother Courage in Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (*Nnalukalala Nnezadde Lye*) in the Luganda language at The Kennedy Center, Washington, D. C.
- 16) Ngugi wa' Thiong'o acknowledges Frothingham in *The Black Hermit*, a play that came out of the experience and the first full-length play to come out of Makerere and East Africa. See Ngugi wa' Thiong'o, "Acknowledgement," in *The Black Hermit* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1968).
- 17) Nuwa Ssentongo, "Theatre and Media" (a speech delivered at Institute of Public Services, Kampala, March 14-17, 1994): 3.
- 18) Adolu Otojok, "Celebrating 25 Years of Existence," in Celebration of MDD's Silver Jubilee (6-8 March 1997), Special Collections, MDD Library, Makerere University, Kampala.
- 19) Uganda Government, "The Kajubi Report on Education Policy," Education, Administrative Code (1969 and 1976), sec. 45 and 32.5 in later, available at Makerere University Main Library, Kampala.
- 20) In addition to A. W. Kayper Mensah, the earliest lecturers in the Department of Music, Dance and Drama were Rose Mbowa, Fr. A. Okello, Mbaabi Katana, Moses Sserwanda, Joan Kamanyi, and George Kakoma, whose contributions shaped theatre and drama in more ways than can be enumerated.
- 21) National Theatre Stage Performance Records 1959-1994.
- 22) Jackson Ndawula, Theatre: Uganda Theatre Groups Association (UTGA)'s status report (Kampala: National Cultural Center, at the Theatre Guild-Directors Workshop, Sponsored by the French Embassy, February 8-12, 1993), available in the National Theatre UTGA Files.
- 23) The playwrights, whose play texts provide useful textual evidence for an analysis of both style and purpose during the period, were equally important to the development of Ugandan drama and theatre and the East African region. Most of the plays in David Cook and Miles Lee's *South East African Plays in English* were developed through the early productions of the Makerere Travelling Theatre and were also popular with the audiences of schools, colleges, and community centres in the mid-1960s. These plays reveal the prevailing social, political, and economic situation of the period and the grounding of the African playwrights in the conventions of European theatre. The themes of these plays, however, introduce a wide spectrum of issues, which include social relationship and institutional changes affecting marriage and family life, ethnic taboos, prejudices, chauvinism, and social responsibility thus adapting the Western structure to address local issues.
- 24) *Négritude* was a conscious movement started in France in 1939 by French-speaking Africans with the express purpose of creating awareness of Black people (especially Africans) of their cultural heritage, together with an affirmation of the distinctive qualities and values of this heritage.
- 25) This is a situation to which Margaret MacPherson, refers in 1946: "the young educated men and women tended to despise their own languages and culture. In their mission school days they had been discouraged from dancing their traditional dances as primitive." Margaret MacPherson, "Makerere: The Place of the Early Sunrise," in *Uganda: the Cultural Landscape*, ed. Eckhard Bretinger (Kampala: Fountain Publishers Ltd., 1999), 24.

- 26) In this paper, *civil society* is defined as the way society is collectively organised outside of a state's ruling apparatuses with clear separation of powers so that the collective can challenge the repressive practices of both state apparatus and ideological state apparatuses. The 'collective' is constituted of individuals who form interest groups and carry out collective action. Akiiki B. Mujaju, "Civil Society at Bay in Uganda," in *The State and Democracy in Africa* eds. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja and Margaret C. Lee (Trenton NJ.: Africa World Press, 1998), 42, and Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.
- 27) Eileen McCarthy-Arnolds, David R. Penna, and Debra Joy Cruz Sobrepenna, eds., *Africa, Human Rights, and the Global System: The Political Economy of Human Rights in a Changing World* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 18. In addition, this description echoes Paulo Freire's claims in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that after independence, the oppressed become the oppressor. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970), 30.
- 28) In order to escape state censorship and oftentimes executions without trial, artists employed their ethnic dialects and idiom to camouflage crucial socio-political messages intended to reach the targeted population. This practice was prevalent among the Gandas of the central district of Uganda, and a number of Makerere University graduates participated as they were close to those organs of the central government that reinforced the reign of terror.
- 29) John Ruganda, "A Conversation with John Ruganda," interview by Mikaele Dolfe, December 1980, published in *New Africa* 51, quoted in "John Ruganda the Playwright," *Imbuga*, 275. Ruganda reiterates the flagrant rejection of traditional institutionalised systems of self-governance as responsible for the chaos and upheavals, which have characterised post-independence African states.
- 30) *Kadongo Kamu* refers to one-man guitar bands. These bands were very popular and were supported by the state, because they seemed harmless to pose a political threat.
- 31) Uganda Theatre Groups Association figures in their March-May 1994 report to Uganda Theatre Guild, at the National Theatre Conference for Directors, sponsored by the French embassy.
- 32) See Yoweri Museveni, "Ten Point Programme" (Kampala: NRM Publications, n. d.). According to David Kerr, "[Pungwe] was a combination of indigenous Zimbabwean performing arts and attempts by freedom fighters to mobilize peasants against the Smith regime." Kerr, 212.

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