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**Ravengai, Samuel**

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# A HISTORY OF THE DECOLONISED AFRICAN THEATRE AESTHETIC

## Projections of an emergent African theatre practice - Afroscenology

*Samuel Ravengai*

The colonisation of Africa was followed by a period of radical nationalism where Africans resorted to the armed struggle to dismantle colonialism. African theatre responded by disbanding Western aesthetics and adopting Afrocentric ones to structure African content which engaged with colonialism. At independence from colonial powers the newly formed ministries of culture and higher education put pressure on the postcolonial university to either start new theatre departments or to significantly decolonise existing ones inherited from the colonial state. Thus, the nature of African theatre from the 1960s was now determined by African or Africanist artist researchers who worked from the academy or ran experimental theatre companies not affiliated to the academy to create new African theatre and theories which would feed the development of an African theatre curriculum in the academy. This chapter historicises this process and formulates the direction and theory of African theatre of the future based on existing evidence.

Nearly 4000 years ago, Bantu people who populate much of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa lived in a single polity on the fringes of North Africa and spoke what linguists have called proto-Bantu. From about 2000 BC, they started to migrate southwards, meeting other African groups like the Khoi Khoi and San and creating new languages like Nguni and Sotho. Today, out of the thousands of languages spoken in Africa, linguists have identified 17 clusters of related languages with varying degrees of mutual intelligibility (Guthrie 1948). In terms of performance, Ruth Finnegan (1970, 2007) and Russell Kaschula (1993) have demonstrated the commonality of performances amongst Africans. They all have cultural performances, ritual theatre, oral performances, social dramas, and the embodiment which these practices encode in their bodies called theatre anthropology. In other words, because of these cultural practices, however varied, the African body has developed a social portraiture/sub-score and or habitus that is difficult to distinguish from one region to the other, unless of course the upbringing happened in a setting like a metropolis (see Ravengai 2011). It is this playing culture/general text that African theatre makers rely on when creating new work, which gives their practice a common identity as I will demonstrate below. Oral storytelling provides the theatrical frame into which other performance texts are keyed to create theatre (Ravengai 2020).


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De Marinis (1993) helps us to theorise how theatrical texts are formed and then make a claim about the connection of African traditional performances with a theatrical text. A theatrical text and its performance text are constituted by what he calls the 'general or cultural text' comprising the entire set of texts available in each culture. These include mime, choreography, design, conception of a story, extra-theatrical texts like storytelling, pictures/paintings, buildings orature, philosophical ideas around all the above. These texts are located upstream and are brought to bear on the creative output that a theatre maker or playwright would have chosen. These texts are close to what Willmar Sauter (2008) called 'playing culture'. It is also a fact that 'general conventions' (De Marinis 1993, 108) also exist before a theatrical text and its performance text. In Africa, these conventions project the stage not as framing fiction, but as part of reality. It does not represent reality, it presents reality. The performer performs self and at the same time character, inanimate object (tangible or intangible) or lack of character. Because of the history of Africans dominated by slavery, colonisation/apartheid, they formed artistic movements to respond to these historical evils thereby creating 'particular conventions' (conventions which characterise a school, movement, or historical period) that were comparable as I will demonstrate shortly. It is these factors upon which I postulate that there was and there is a growing aesthetic that can be identified as an African one.

Before 1884 Africa was made up of kingdoms and empires which allowed people to move across the breadth and length of the continent diffusing skills, performance codes, traditions, and cultural practices that have given the continent a cultural continuum as one moves from one end to the other. This continuum is discernible in traditional dances, the sound of drums, the non-performance codes (bodily expressions in various circumstances), proverbs and other aspects of orature which a perceptive eye and ear will be able to identify even in Africans of the diaspora. For some of these reasons, the founding fathers of Pan-Africanism sought to establish a single polity as soon as several African countries gained independence. The Casablanca bloc consisting of Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Libya, Mali, and Morocco, sought for the re-unification of Africa to foster cultural dialogue and increase the continent's geopolitical influence. They sought a Pan-African government and army to engage colonialists who in the 1960s were still controlling large swathes of African land. Kwame Nkrumah popularised the mantra 'Africa Must Unite', which became a title for his book on the same subject. Clearly once a continent begins to operate as a country, it would seek to unify the country culturally, as in the case of the former Soviet Union's practice of socialist realism and the internationalisation of Stanislavski's psycho-technique. There is sufficient evidence to claim that the African theatre makers, since the 1960s, were beginning to move towards an African aesthetic, a project upon which I make a hypothesis about the nature of African theatre of the future.

We also know that the Casablanca bloc was defeated by the Monrovia bloc led by Nigeria, Senegal, Cameron, and later Tanzania under Julius Nyerere. These leaders of the newly independent African countries preferred nationalism to Pan-Africanism and wanted to maintain independent states outside a federation. They offered a counterplan of creating regional blocs like SADC, ECOWAS, COMESA which would integrate regions and then gradually coagulate into an African Federation. Plans are now under way for the creation of East African Federation as a single federated sovereign state consisting of Burundi, Uganda, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Tanzania with Swahili as its official language and using a single currency, ID, and passport.

As a compromise, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was created and one of its major achievements was the political decolonisation of Africa. To shift its focus from an accomplished goal of decolonisation, OAU decided in 1999 to revert to the Casablanca idea of Pan-Africanism and re-branded itself to the African Union (AU) in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa. Its new vision was to create an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa. Some of its objectives related to the area of unity, singularity, and common practice include the following:

- Achieve greater unity and solidarity between African countries and their people.
- Accelerate political and socio-economic integration of the continent
- Promote sustainable development at the economic, social and cultural levels as well as the integration of African economies.

*(AU n.d.)*

Since the beginning of 2021, some practical milestones have been achieved towards the unification of Africa. On 1 January 2021, the African Union successfully launched the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Before its formation the percentage of trade between African countries was at most 18%. The other 80% plus was done with the rest of the world (Krah 2021). In their individual capacities, African countries lacked the bargaining power to stand their ground on pricing while negotiating with the global north and the east. The role of AfCFTA will be to strengthen such power on the global market through, among other things, creating a single market for goods and services on the continent, facilitating movement of goods and promoting industrial development. All 54 African countries area signatories to this trade area and has created a combined GDP of US$3 trillion, making AfCFTA the world's largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Krah 2021). The AU now has plans to establish the African Central Bank (ACB), African Investment Bank (AIB), and the African Monetary Institute (AMI), which will facilitate a single Afrocurrency to boost intra-African trade. Many countries, including South Africa, have supported this initiative (see Felix 2021). The AU now has a Pan-African Parliament since 2004 headquartered in Sandton, Johannesburg.[1]

Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of Africa, a structure of feeling is something that operates beyond the boundaries of language and culture. When WW1 was raging, many young artists against the war decided to perform, sing, paint, and sculpt work that deliberately mocked bourgeois values as the war was sponsored by the rich, using the poor to defend the rich. This structure of feeling produced the modernist and postmodernist movements with similar styles and conventions across Europe and North America. The artists did not call for a conference to agree on an aesthetic; they were affected by the same conditions which compelled them to create work projecting certain unified values, techniques, and style. By the same token, Africans were affected by slavery and colonialism in the same way and responded to these historical evils in similar ways resulting in creative works that bear specific features that can be theorised as unique to Africans.

Achille Mbembe (2017) and Paul Taylor (2016) agree that slavery and colonialism condemned Black people as a unified and undifferentiated race in what Mbembe called 'one side of black reason' (2017, 29). African people embraced this unity and responded to both evils with a single voice conferred to them earlier on by colonial discourse. They accepted their difference, distinctiveness and singularity, as denying it would have made them weaker in their response. They also accepted the colonial tag of 'non-similarity' but used the sign to

their advantage. This is what Mbembe has called 'the second side of Black reason' which refutes the emptiness conferred on it by Western consciousness. The Black people as a collective affirmed themselves by refusing to be captured and controlled by colonial discourse.

## Phases of the development an African aesthetic

In regard to the above history of Black cohesion in responses to evils of their time, I want to make two points clear: one, the first manifestation of an African aesthetic can be explained through a primordial argument. The African black race came from a region north of the equator where it shared one culture and language. Migrationist historians support this fact as well as the Judeo-Christian history, which proffers Kush as the oldest known ancestor of this race. Indeed, the remnants of Kushites are still domiciled in South Sudan, a place close to the area where this group started. This aesthetic which I have chosen to call traditionalism[2] is the one that travelled to the rest of Africa reaching the southern Cape by the sixth century AD (Beach 1984). While Africans were moving southwards, they encountered merchants from Phoenicia, Saba, India, Persia, and Judea, some of whom, like the present day Lemba, made families with Africans and settled permanently in Africa, eventually acquiring African phenotype through biological processes. The traditional aesthetic contained in the general/cultural text/playing culture moved with people and was tweaked as they made contact with Nilotes, Khoi Khoi, San, and Asian merchants. I would call this phase of the aesthetic, creolisation, a term also used by Patrice Pavis (2003) and Paul Taylor (2016). In their usage, creolisation means inter-ethnic mixing and inter-weaving with the ability to change the traditional aesthetic into something that is not quite like the original. The creolised products will eventually be accepted as part of the African tradition as the cross breeding happens between African people or their mixed-race cousins.

The second point, which speaks to all other phases, is the way Africans responded to colonial presence on their land or to oppression under colonialism/apartheid or slavery. At the moment of encounter with Europeans, the response was always contested between African agents. Some Africans preferred acceptance into Western modernity through a traditional aesthetic: for example, the Congolese performers who were observed by Camille Coquilhat, a white military officer of the Congo Free State, who witnessed what he called a 'dramatic art' performance by the Congolese indigenes in 1888 (see Fabian 2004, 42). Other Africans, called New Africans (because of their reception of Western education) preferred a variation of the traditional aesthetic through a process which Loren Kruger (2020) calls 're-traditionalisation'. This implies not a return to precolonial custom, but rather a re-appropriation of customary practices for present purposes.

Colonial discourse rubbished the above practices until the black subject accepted their inferiority and the backwardness of his aesthetics. The solution was to assimilate into Western culture to prove to the attackers that they were human too, but the entrance into common humanity could be accessed through assimilation by agreeing to embrace Western civilisation. Taylor has called this emerging aesthetic 'civilisationism' (2016, 14), which is the second phase in the development of an African aesthetic. The same trend was observed in African literature by Frantz Fanon and called 'the first phase' (although of course it was not the first). Fanon writes that 'the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country' (1963, 178).

In South Africa, 'New Africans' formed artistic organisations, but most of them used these platforms as conduits to assimilate the new Africans into Western culture. In 1933, the new Africans formed Bantu Dramatic Society. Even though the lexis of the society suggests a preoccupation with black people, their plays were Western and mentored by white liberals. In 1952/3 the Union of Southern African Artists (USAA) was formed with its training arm as African Music and Drama Association (AMDA). It was sponsored by the Anglo-American Corporation, and it is important to highlight the assimilationist interests of the sponsor as captured in a speech by the Managing Director, HF Oppenheimer: 'within the framework of the primitive social, economic and political system of the Africans (…) advancement of the Africans takes place only if the African way of life and thought (…) is abandoned in favour of a state and society built on European foundations' (in Kavanagh 1985, 89).

Assimilation and/or civilisationism came at a great cost, that is denying the African subject their culture. Those who had been assimilated into the Western culture, especially the black elite of the Francophone and Lusophone extraction, soon found out that, even after seeking co-habitation or co-belonging to the human race, they were still excluded from full citizenship on the basis of their colour. By 1900, Black intellectuals had had enough of civilisationism and decided to launch Pan-Africanism. Underpinning this decolonisation of African theatre was the paradigm of Pan-Africanism, which is a concept, a movement, a worldview as well as a philosophy illuminating much of African intellectual output. Henry Sylvester William organised its first conference in July 1900, responding to the colonisation of Africa and specifically the Berlin Conference. It was also against slavery, colonisation, racism, and neo-colonialism. Its leaders wanted to restore a sense of pride in their African people's identity. This was to be achieved by re-writing history to give Black people their rightful place in the past and the present. The 1945 Manchester conference convened by Du Bois was attended by 100 delegates including Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah later to become leaders of Kenya and Ghana respectively (see Watson and Thompson 2000). Pan-Africanism can perhaps be best described through some of its strongest features as adumbrated by Watson and Thompson:

- It is an association or movement aimed at giving Black people full participation in the political, social, cultural and economic dimensions of world affairs.
- It is unmistakably and emphatically Afrocentric, it takes Africa as its starting point for all its ideas and beliefs.
- It assumes that all Black people around the world constitute a single family, descended from a common African origin.
- It stands for the decolonisation of Africa and the independence of all states. It is totally opposed to any form of racial injustice or discrimination.
- It is committed to the universal recognition of full dignity of Black people and their equality as citizens of the world.

*(2000, 10)*

Pan-Africanism has hardliners (neo-traditionalists) and moderates (Negritudists and syncretists). Cultural production in Africa has tended to take those forms as well. Hardliners like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), Ngũgĩ wa Mirii (1988), Chinweizu and Onwuchekwa (1980) advocate for a rejection of Western canons in African cultural production, while moderates like Chidi Amuta (1989), Stephen Chifunyise (1986), Wole Soyinka (1976) and others advocate for the appropriation of vitalising contributions from Western cultural production. Not

all African theatre makers formally belonged to the Pan-Africanist movement or even deployed the term as a descriptor of their works but reveal in part or in total the core values of Pan-Africanism as described by Watson and Thompson (2000). Several African thinkers followed the Negritude route, wanting to counter modernity by using its forms but carrying African content. African theatre makers returned to the old rituals, ceremonies, social dramas, oral poetry, celebrations, festivals, legends, myths, history, storytelling, panegyric poetry, dances, recitations, songs, and supplications and brought them into African theatre. However, they had not fully exorcised themselves from the ghost of civilisationism, which continued to haunt their productions/plays in terms of form. Fanon, talking about African literature of the same period, says something equally true to African theatre and its aesthetic:

> In the second phase [not the second in African theatre] we find that the native is disturbed, he decides to remember what he is. This period of creative work approximately corresponds to that of immersion (assimilation) which we have just described. But since the native is a part of his people, he is content to recall their life only. Past happenings of the bygone days of his childhood will be brought up out of the depths of his memory, old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of borrowed aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies.
>
> *(1963, 179)*

Fanon makes it clear that while the content is African, the form is borrowed from the West, usually Aristotelian. Most early Negritude plays sought to re-habilitate the African by re-interpreting history and putting Africans in their proper place in history. This is a theoretical tenet of Asante Molefe's Afrocentricity, which he called 'Diopian thought' to refer to the spectacular work credited to Cheikh Diop, where he disproved colonial historical falsehoods and proffered evidence for new paradigms. All regions of sub-Saharan Africa produced work of this nature speaking to the uniformity of content and form in African theatre making. In West Africa, Leopold Senghor of Senegal and Seydon Badian of Mali produced versions of the Zulu king, Shaka. The Benin playwright, Jean Pliya created *Kondo, le requin* (1966) on the same subject. In Nigeria, Ola Rotimi created *Kurunmi (1971)*, about a Yoruba king and the subject was repeated by Wale Ogunyeni in the play *The Ijaye War* (Etherton 1982). In South Africa, Herbert Dhlomo wrote four plays about four Zulu/Sotho kings, *Dingane*, *Shaka, Moshoeshoe* and *Cetshwayo* (collectively called *The Black Bulls*, 1936–1938). Commenting on the nature of this Negritude work, Michael Etherton notes the following:

> All the historical dramas focus upon a leader, a king or warrior who is a hero. The drama creates the heroic stature of the leader. Each play is structured so that the central figure rises above adversity and all efforts to undermine his authority and position through inherent nobility of his character. […] ceremonial scenes which establish his greatness in the public eye alternate with intimate scenes which manifest an inner turmoil; the audience are allowed an insight into the hidden processes which determine his decisions. Such agonising decisions are often the climax of the drama: the hero is faced with hideous alternatives, and his decisions result in some degree of self-sacrifice. It is through this self-sacrifice and through a revelation of depths of personal resourcefulness that the Negritude hero is established.
>
> *(1982, 144–145)*

This kind of work was not only evident in Africa, but in the United States amongst African Americans. What was shared by this counter-modernity Negritude thinkers was to save the Black race from Eurocentric condemnation. They used theatre and other creative arts to showcase the beauty and novelty of African artistic expression by deploying African content within a Western dramaturgical frame, defending the African personhood damaged and invisiblised by colonial discourse.

Within Pan-Africanism, there was no agreement on the best way to counter Western modernity. While several theatre practitioners followed the Negritude route, there was a small group of hardliners who wanted to return to traditionalism uncontaminated with colonial forms. As mentioned, Loren Kruger calls this group 'neo-traditionalists', with a 'de-historicised view of tradition as timeless and immune to present politics' (2020, 23). Soyinka called these thinkers 'neo-Tarzanists' to denote those who uphold African precolonial cultural purity. The idea of neo-traditionalism is unambiguously connected to the Guinean thinker and politician, Amilcar Cabral and his *Return to the Source* (1973), and represented in African literature by the troika of Chinweizu, and Onwuchekwa (1980). The intellectual debate between Soyinka and this troika spoke to neo-traditionalism and syncretism as ways of entering and countering modernity. What is demonstrated in this discussion is that there is sufficient evidence that Black people in the whole world always converged on how to respond to colonialism, racism, and slavery and in their response created content advancing the same ideology, more often than not chosing a coherent aesthetic to express those ideas. It is often the case that content determines form leading to an aesthetic sharing fundamental commonalities. This is a basis upon which I build an argument for an African aesthetic.

We also know that when all the above aesthetic choices did not yield the desired result at the pace Africans wanted, the entire African continent decided to wage a war against the white oppressor at different times and at different scales, some more brutal and sustained than others. This period of African nationalism created a new structure of feeling which was more radical than at any other time of the development of an African aesthetic. Even though the above approaches were seeking a certain level of decolonisation this fifth phase was more radical than the rest. I have decided to apportion the term 'radical decolonisation' to this phase. In literature, Fanon calls it fighting literature, or revolutionary literature, or literature of combat or national literature (2003, 179) as it was moulding national consciousness. In theatre, the terms used to describe a fighting theatre: guerrilla theatre, struggle theatre, theatre of determination, liberation theatre, theatre of resistance, protest theatre, political theatre, combat theatre, and so on. In this decolonial phase African creatives decided to drop nativism, assimilationism (the aesthetic compromise of the Negritude movement), but created an African aesthetic which took something from the re-traditionalists and used past forms and performative modes to deal with present challenges of oppression. Ravengai and Seda (2021) argue that it is this theatre which provided the DNA for contemporary African aesthetic, which I have called elsewhere Afroscenology (Ravengai 2020). I will return to this aesthetic shortly.

Invariably a theatre emerged in most African and diasporic countries that waged a liberation and/ or cultural struggle. In the United States of America, the Black Power movement arose which found cultural expression under the banner of Black Art, with names like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Addison Gayle (see Taylor 2016). The evolution of an African aesthetic reached its zenith during this period. Writer Etheridge Knight asserted: 'unless the

Black Artist establishes a Black Aesthetic, he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live' (in Taylor 2016, 16). Fanon raised similar issues in his widely acclaimed proposition:

> So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions and societies that draw inspiration from it. Humanity expects other things from us than this grotesque and generally obscene emulation. If we want to transform Africa into a new Europe, then let us entrust the destinies of our countries to the Europeans. They will do a better job than the best of us. But, if we want humanity to take one step forward, if we want to take it to another level than the one where Europe has placed it, then we must innovate, we must be pioneers.
>
> *(1963, 254)*

In Africa, many liberation movements relied on war generation artists to advance their ideologies. When I look at this type of theatre, I can see clear similarities which allow us to conclusively theorise on an aesthetic of a continental nature, something that Taylor saw as feasible and not just a conjecture. Jane Plastow (1996), Samuel Ravengai (2016), and Preben Kaarsholm (1994) have covered sufficient ground on how this theatre was used by liberation movements in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. In South Africa the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), established on the same principles of the American Black Power movement, crafted theoretical tenets of this movement, which are worthy to explore at length. The philosophy rested on three pillars, viz, self-reflexivity amongst Black people, the marginal place of colonial material in the new aesthetics, and the praxis of the ideology. After reading the BCM philosophy as written by Steve Biko, who called for self-reflexivity amongst Africans, wanting them to self-realise that White oppression was directed at all Black people based on their colour of skin. There was therefore call for all black people not to surrender their lives to white people, but to begin to generate group pride and determination to rise and attain the envisaged self. Black unity was a prerequisite; as asserted by Biko 'we are oppressed because we are Black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group' (2004, 110). The Black Consciousness philosophy refuted the notion that BCM was racist, because the organisation and its people did not have the power to subjugate anyone. It was a philosophy that was responding to white provocation by rallying together those who are being provoked. Biko believed that the struggle against oppression was not a class struggle, but a race struggle. The poor whites were not on the side of blacks but had an exaggerated reactionary attitude towards black people, as they voted for the National Party which protected them from competition against blacks. The self-reflexivity demanded by Biko required his members to notice that the major threat to the Black's existence was white racism and the Black was complicit in his own oppression by refusing to rally together to fight this racism, as the white person perceived that action to be racist. The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor was the mind of the oppressed, which needed to be emancipated.

The BCM philosophy engaged with the question on what was to be done with the colonial history and its aesthetic baggage: to integrate or to shift to nativism? BCM called for discarding Negritude assimilation and its acceptance of Blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behaviour set up and maintained by whites and accepted syncretism on the terms of Black people; as suggested by Biko, 'integration is possible when the

thesis and antithesis have inter-played each other and produced a viable synthesis of ideas, a *modus vivendi*' (2004, 55). A viable integration is not the one that is hastily produced, but one where there is free participation by all members of a society, catering for the full expression of the self in a freely changing society:

> For one cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority group in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society. […] a country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style.
>
> *(Biko 2004, 26)*

Biko had a clear idea of how his epistemic articulations could be combined with action to achieve results. This was the praxis of the political movement anchored on operationalising what Asante Molefe has called 'Diopian thought' by revising history and correcting Eurocentric falsehoods about Africans, or what Biko calls 'challenging the white monopoly on truth, beauty and moral judgement by establishing an alternative truth' (2004, 55). He did not consider Christianity as a religion to be jettisoned inasmuch as it had contributed to the mental colonisation of Blacks. He called for decolonisation of Christianity so that Africans did not have to become European or Jewish before they could be saved. They must feel that being African was enough as a basis for salvation, something he called black theology. He created a Black discourse/mantra which was to be said from time to time to enhance the confidence and economics of Black people such as 'buy black' campaign and 'black is beautiful'. In the field of theatre, they started Black theatre which ran conscientisation programmes that grappled with Black people's problems and to find solutions and to develop an awareness of their situation and analyse it. Practically as the oppressor would never hand over power to the Blacks, they were to fight for it performatively and militarily on the battlefield in the manner Malcolm X wanted freedom of Black by any means necessary, including violence.

Throughout the African continent, struggle theatre produced a very specific form. The plays were intensely political, focussing on delivering the message to the people. Content determined form, and as the form was already available in the African playing culture/general text as storytelling, performers relied on it addressing the audiences directly, often in declamatory style. They deployed bifurcated characters where each performer played a variety of roles in the storytelling process, not one as in a Western playtext. As transitions from one character to the other were many, there was no room for character development and the establishment of a three-dimensional character. The characters were flat and one-dimensional. Space was fluid and got activated by performers moving in it and creating multiple worlds through recourse to their bodies and voices. Performers exploited the aleatory technique where actions happened by chance. The message was roughly sketched and rehearsed, and the songs were known beforehand, but their order and timing would be determined by the performance and the response of the (audience/*artispants*). In most cases, there was no formal training of performers. Colonialism/apartheid was the 'master trainer' who gave the performers the script by supplying real life performance of violence on Blacks, which they took and performed to their fellow oppressed. Many pieces of protest theatre combined a variety of artforms including music/song, dance, mime and the spoken word. The plays were often workshopped in accordance with the principles of democracy rather than have one writer as the all-seeing eye or brain.

## The postcolonial African academy and Afroscenology

The African university which, during colonial times, had been the centre of assimilating Africans into Western culture, played a different role when the first African countries attained independence. Realising the importance of arts and culture in the decolonisation of Africa, the newly formed governments quickly established ministries of art and culture, and directed that their state universities start training in the arts to recuperate the battered images of the African. In almost all cases, pressure was put on the English Departments to deliver an African theatre programme. As there were very few Africans trained in drama/theatre/performance, the postcolonial African university relied on white Africanist volunteers from the English Departments who had the passion and zeal to deliver such training. They then recruited African scholars, most of whom established their reputation and are celebrated today as having pioneered in canonising the African aesthetic. Some of them include Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Micere Mugo, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Hussein Ebrahim, Efua Sutherland, and of course theatre practitioners working in the professional world, like Stephen Chifunyise, Ama Aita Aidoo, Dambudzo Marechera, Herbert Dhlomo, Gibson Kente, Kabwe Kasoma, Ngũgĩ wa Mirii, and several others.

Ghana got its independence in 1957 and by 1962, the then School of Music and Drama was established at the University of Ghana, quickly recruiting a theatre professional, Efua Sutherland. By 1963, she had built and founded Ghana Experimental Theatre with its training arm called Ghana Drama Studio. The focus was on developing African theatre around storytelling, known in Ghana as *Anansegoro* in the Akan storytelling tradition. Ghana Drama Studio was incorporated into the University and set a formidable foundation on how the African performer training could look like. Storytelling was the generative matrix. A closer look at her play *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) would reveal that actors were for first time in written playtexts called 'players'. She incorporated musical performances called *mboguo*, initiated by the storyteller or by members of the audiences (artispants) as an integral part of telling the story. Ama Aita Aidoo's play *Anowa* followed a similar schema and got rid of acts which were replaced with 'phases', which I will call compressions.

Nigeria became independent in 1960 and, for the same reasons as in Ghana, the University of Ibadan English Department was pressured by government to create a new Department of Drama which was established in 1962 as the School of Drama. Africanists Martin Banham and Jeffrey Axworthy, who had joined the English Department in the 1950s, were re-assigned to the new School of Drama and utilised the University's Arts Theatre built in 1955 as their production house. They recruited Joel Adedeji in 1964 and established a resident acting company in 1967. Soyinka was to join the school in 1970 after the Biafra war. Soyinka's creative thrust was centred on deploying the word within a ritual context. He contributed to the acceptance of syncretism as a creative method rather than solely rely on traditionalism (neo-Tarzanism). This is a tenet that has been accepted in the theory of Afroscenology. Indeed, some of his plays, like *The Strong Breed* (1964), rely on the dominance of the word, but following a cyclic structure built around a Yoruba ritual. While most of the features are African in origin (structure, typical African content and characters, and ritual), the performance would be delivered well by psycho-technique trained actors. Igweonu (2017) indeed confirms that at its inception, the School of Drama was training its performers using the Stanislavskian psycho-technique, but with a strong connection to African plays.

Tanzania became independent in 1961 and by 1967 the University of Dar es Salaam had established the Department of Theatre Arts. Hussein Ebrahim was part of that history. The University of Zambia was established in 1965, a year after Zambia's independence; it did not open a Theatre Arts Department, but used artist-scholars, Michael Etherton and Kabwe Kasoma, based in the English Department, to advance a theatre programme. Etherton was no stranger to the decolonisation agenda, as he had co-edited *New Writing from Zambia* in the early 1960s (Primorac, 2013: 482). He initiated a course in the English Department which examined the style and function of a Zambian national theatre. For his theory to be informed by practice, like in Ghana, Etherton and Kasoma established Chikwakwa Theatre Company "in 1969–70, with the support of support of [John] Reed, the university authorities, his students and fellow cultural practitioners" (Primorac 2013, 482). His biggest asset and collaborator was Kasoma, who had just joined the university as a mature student after an impressive practice in theatre, writing, and social work. Cultural workers included Steve Moyo and Masautso Phiri, who had deserted the New Writers Group hoping that Chikwakwa would afford them the opportunity to create a truly African theatre. It did by tapping from playing culture of Zambians, working with them as in the case of Kenyan Kamiriithu theatre and developing works that featured Zambian dance, song, and mime (Caul 2008, Primorac 2013). This template had worked quite well in Kenya, where lecturers based in the English Department, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kiman Gecau, and Micere Mugo, ran a community theatre programme at the Kamiriithu centre which became Ngũgĩ's core for the writing of *Decolonizing the Mind* (1987) and some of his subsequent writings on theatre. I have incorporated some of his theoretical tenets in the new theory of Afroscenology as discussed below. Afroscenology is a new theory that I have propounded, which provides a science of the African playtext and performance through generating new terminology to explain the structure, design, acting/performing, lighting, and sound of plays located in the African great tradition/canon.

When Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, the country recruited all the artist-researchers associated with Kamiriithu (except Ngũgĩ) to run similar workshops at the Zimbabwe Education with Production (ZIMFEP). From 1984, the University of Zimbabwe English Department also started running practical drama courses under Robert McLaren (alias Robert Mshengu Kavanagh), with a new Theatre Arts Department being formed in 1993 under his headship. For Zimbabwean theatre to be relevant McLaren adopted a decolonial process of 'democratisation, Zimbabweanisation, Africanisation and socialist transformation' (1993, 36–37) of Zimbabwean theatre, by which he meant involvement of majority communities in creating theatre as well as employing their popular media – song, dance, and mime in a work of art that utilises socialist realism as a creative method. In Zimbabwean theatre practice, McLaren (1997) canonised workshopping, mime, dance, song, tableaux, and referring/opening out which he brought into the training curriculum. I have incorporated also these tenets into the theory of Afroscenology.

Based on examples drawn from the work of artist-researchers and my own work as a theatre maker in the postcolonial African university, I have drawn two conclusions: that there is a theory of the playtext – theatric theory, which can be contrasted with the Aristotelian dramatic theory; and secondly, that there is a theory of performance – performance theory, which can be contrasted with the psycho-technique or its various Western versions. Together, these two theories constitute the theory of Afroscenology. A discussion of the following Afroscenological tenets would constitute a chapter on their own. I only summarise them here to make a claim based on evidence that there is a developing writing and performance technique begun by the pioneers in the 1960s postcolonial African academy, on which

contemporary decolonial scholars are relying to build a new curriculum for training students in the theatre and performance departments. At Wits university I am intensely involved in teaching and developing this curriculum. The following tenets are based on what De Marinis calls 'general conventions' and 'particular conventions'. In the Afroscenological sense, general conventions take the performance space as part of reality as opposed to the Aristotelian general convention which takes the stage as representing reality or endowed with the ability to turn everything framed onto it into fiction. Thus, in the Afroscenological sense, metaxis allows performers to engage with the audience (artispants) while the Aristotelian stage separates the audience from actors. Particular conventions refer to rules of genre/school/movement/culture/historical period and the following tenets refer to this

*Table 40.1* Theory of the text

| | |
|---|---|
| Dramatic theory | African theatric theory |
| Dramatic text | Theatrical text |
| Logos | Macro-text constituted by micro-texts |
| Hierarchy of signs | Parataxis |
| Stage Frame | De-framing |
| Exposition | Exposition |
| Character | Bifurcation/character/self/noncharacter |
| Freytag pyramid structure | Cyclical structure |
| Linear | Postlinearity (wobbling) |
| Story/plot | Stories/ non-plot based |
| Acts | Compressions |
| Scenes | Micro-compressions |
| Scene ending | Dislocation/discontinuity |
| Climax | Spectacle |
| Resolution/denouement | Deformation |

*Table 40.2* Theory of performance

| | |
|---|---|
| Acting theory | Performance theory |
| Imitation | Symbolism |
| Dance (in certain genres) | Dance |
| Melody (language with pleasurable accessories) | Song |
| Magic if | Hyper-Imagination |
| Diction/logos | Afrosonic mime (non-Lecoq) |
| Conversation | Declamation |
| Monologue | Ngonjera/bard |
| Soliloquy | Imbongi/ panegyric poet |
| Duologue | Narrator/Sarungano |
| Neutral accent/white accent | Ethnic voice/Relexification |
| Actor | Non matrixed performer |
| Neutral body | Embodiment |
| White/Neutral voice | Cultural/ethnic voice |
| Non-animal energy | Animal energy |

category. I have left out distinctive conventions as these relate to individual playwrights and may not be shared by creatives affected by the same structure of feeling.

As a way of concluding the discussion, each playwright/director/collective can introduce what De Marinis calls 'distinctive conventions', by which he means new rules imposed by the playwright/director or the performance itself not contained in the general or particular conventions. These are established from scratch and increases the difficulty/noise in the theatrical reception channel. I have left these tenets out as they are not common to all theatre makers, and this is what makes each one of them unique. These conventions have the right to transgress both general and particular conventions. When they establish a language of their own, then there may be a reason to craft another theory which comes from that practice. Thus, this theory does not pretend to cover all things African but is a contribution to an entirely untheorised field. And this is the future of African theatre and aesthetics.

## Notes

1 I venture into politics, trade, and commerce to demonstrate that, despite the often-cited reasons that Africa is too diverse to constitute a practice that can be called African aesthetic, there is overwhelming evidence that artistic and theatrical conventions crafted in Africa can be identified and offered to the world as Africa's contribution to arts and culture.

2 I use the term traditional to describe the first phase of the African aesthetic to avoid a term that is constituted by a colonial marker of time used by Taylor (2016) as premodernity.

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