

# THE in

# NIGER

***THIS reflection on the mask traditions of the Niger Valley is a summary of a five-year itinerary, during which I travelled by boat, bush taxi, air plane, donkey and had an extended Sahel hike in the Dogon country, exploring how these traditions have influenced theatre in the respective countries along river Niger's vast basins.*** Editor

# WATER

# the

# VALLEYS



# A

Sola  
Olorunyomi

Hopefully, the giant Jalon phallus would still be discharging its wild excitement of foams into the river's vast, craggy basin. The thought of exuberant foams shrinking into froths in sandy Timbuktu made me somewhat pensive. I needed all possible excitement on this concluding beat of a five-year itinerary, during which I had played part minstrel, part chronicler of the Niger's immense cultural reservoir.

troubadour combing the Niger Valleys, no doubt, is a rarity these days, especially since the influence of our griots of ancient times has been considerably diminished both by colonialism and the impact of the modern media.

Struck by my solitary enterprise, I sat on a knoll by the river's bank at Segou -old Segou of the famed trans sahara trade route. This was midway between the desert (which had been left behind) and the tropical rain forest region of the Futa Jalon highlands source of the Niger, which I hoped to reach. Suddenly, I began to doubt my sanity.

By no means a novel motif, culture researchers have for long trod sources of spring, river beds, and basins - even of extinct rivers, trying to unravel cyphers of places, events and times beyond memory's recall.

Euphrates. Sumatra. Nile. Tigris. All produced valleys that dialogued with the past, that gave a hint about the present; with a fossil here, a hieroglyph there, and multiple evidences of domesticated wilds, of plants and animals, we returned to the library. But what did the ancients think, their spirituality, their aesthetics?

How did their primeval cultural artefacts and codes influence later thoughts? How were they carried over into the diverse performance idioms of the village square, proscenium stage and the celluloid traditions of countries of the Niger Valleys?

The primary valleys of river Niger are Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, through which the river runs, but cultural diffusion and geographical contiguity implicate Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire in an immediate sense, besides other West African countries whose tributaries derive from or end in the Niger.

With an enormous arc stretch of over 5,000 km, straddling and linking the old Western and Central Sudan, the Niger thus becomes both a literal and figurative reference for West Africa, through which the arts of the subregion become the most travelled commodity. In a way, the Niger is - West Africa.

## The New Theatre?

The conservatism in me somewhat strives to be reassured by the sentiment of the old school that tends to suggest that stage theatre is the real theatre of immediacy

and real life concerns; but confronted with the dynamics of the genre today, a genre that has been internally combusted by the reality of the multi-media -accentuated in part by the electronic audio-visual technological revolution, such sentiment can only remain a romantic pastime. Of course, the resolution can not be in the appropriation of the term 'theatre' as an exclusive of the electronic medium, a medium which has greatly reduced theatre's communal sharing and atomised the audience.

It may be more profitable in this context however to simply acknowledge the evolution of this form by investing it with its constitutive ingredients of mask, music, mime, pantomime, costume, make-up, lights, scenery and language, which by and large simply serve the agency of impersonation, that moment once the actor steps out of self.

Angled this way, today's theatre becomes the sum total of what Chris Nwamuo once described as 'all the dramatic and spectacle elements in any drama or theatrical performance with the inclusion of the medium - the physical acting area, the cinema, the television, the video and the multi-media productions through which life's experiences are shared.'

The reality of theatrical practice in the subregion is that it is diverse and harbours many phases and forms. To suggest therefore that the new dimensions are a force-field, elements violently dismantling traditional African theatre, is to misread these developments. The pertinent question is: how are culture workers and policy makers appropriating the changes in the light of the old idioms?

Properly articulated, the new era is indeed capable of integrating the cultural sensibilities of the peoples of the Niger



A Dogon Kanaga dance mask

Photo: M. RENAUDEAU

Valleys. So far, culture workers have continually transformed indigenous forms into the new medium. Oral forms and the mask code have found their ways into both modern literary drama and the celluloid, for instance. Ola Balogun, Nigeria, and Dani Koyate, Burkina Faso, have demonstrated the transpositional character of their art through the incorporation of many folk elements in their films. Balogun revisits the theme of life's cyclicity and Koyate reintroduces the antelope and buffalo masks in *Magic of Nigeria* and *Keita, de bouche a Oreille* respectively. Talk of McLuhann's 'medium is the message'.

## DUSK

Who is she though, this meandering spring - the Niger?

Now listen son, a long time ago, when plants and animals could speak, she was the wife of the thunder one who was himself the king of an old empire... Umh, his name was Sango the one who conjured fire through the mouth and nostril, and her name was Oya.

... but after a spell of a lifetime together, Oya had to return home.

Oya's departure brought great sorrow to Sango who later committed suicide. When the sad news got to her, Oya fell down and sobbed. Her tears gathered into a puddle, into a lake - which swelled and swelled until it burst at its seams - Oya had transformed herself into a river .... whom some would later call - the Niger.

## Mask

Beyond Ibn Batuta, beyond Ibn Khaldun, Leo Frobenius and the Prester Johns, there was the urgency to probe the past in a more embracing manner. We return to the traditional agencies for transmitting cultural heritage such as festivals, dance-guilds and voices of elders.

Despite the values of these agencies in assisting the reconstruction of the past, they remain oral. Unlike those, however, the mask and sculptures even if in part sustained by orality have scribal representations in their creation. It is no wonder, therefore, that the root of West African theatre is to be found in its innumerable masks.

The mask is a code that is capable of embodying both sacred and profane contents. The mask does not offer itself to simple literal interpretation. In the mask is concealed a plethora of meanings waiting to be decoded.

As a storehouse, it is a repository of ancient and current knowledge such as myth, legend and history. Beyond this, it also harbours society's cultural sensibilities, its aesthetics, which invariably straddles all the genres.

In other words, the undecoded mask is fossilised message, a single instance that is representative of other instances, other spaces and climes, other times. Though its language may be cryptic, it is obviously multivocal. This derives in part from its primary intended meaning, and also from other meanings invested in it in the process of interpreting its idiom.

Such diverse and dispersed meanings have been accounted for by problems of distance and dislocation - such as we find with the black slaves in the new world, in their attempt to recapture the meaning of masks from which they were uprooted, or have simply arisen from the limitation of human memory.

What the mask seeks to capture invariably corresponds with the total universe of man as outlined by John Mbiti about

the African past.

*God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things.*

- Spirit being made up of superhuman beings and the spirit of men who died a long time ago.

- Man, including human beings who are alive and those about to be born

- Animals and plants or the remainder of biological life

- Phenomena and objects without biological life.<sup>2</sup>

There are, broadly speaking, two types of masks. One represents a living person and therefore serves profane uses, mostly entertainment and amusement. The other type is employed for the purposes of ritual. There are however moments of dilution of forms. By virtue of designation (e.g. invoking the spirit of the dead to enter into the masquerade during the dance), the mask and the dancer are sacrosanct.

The process of deriving meaning from the mask in dramatic sense is such that once the mask has been foregrounded as the primary genre, a dramatic genre can consequently be constructed from its code. 'The dramatic genre becomes transformed historically as it develops in new situations and environments. In this sense, the mask serves as the enabling conceptual metaphor of African and black drama itself.'<sup>3</sup>

The mask code contrasts sharply with the mimetic code as it will become obvious in the succeeding pages in the performance of the *Mambissa*, (Jos Nigeria) *Ki Yi M'bock*, (Abidjan, Cote d' Ivoire) and *Kalakuta* (Lagos) experiences. This includes a myriad of other similar efforts across Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso. What we now have though is no longer the old mask, but a reconstruction in the context of popular arts.

## Twilight

The theatre traditions of the region defy a cut and dry classification due to the fact that there are too many in-between phases and the evolution of the different forms is continually being renewed. This partly explains the rich repertoire from which creative workers in the region (perhaps more than the other regions in the continent) are able to tap.

For ease of comprehension however, we may have to contend with this broad schema; dramatic ritual, the traditional theatre (popular and modern traditional), the literary tradition and secondary orality (Television; Film; Video).

The Igbo *Egwugwu*, Yoruba *Egungun*, Nupe *Igunuko*, Dogon *Kanaga* and Bambara *Chiwara*, even as dramatic rituals, share something in common: *Nommo* energy. *Nommo*, a concept of the Dogon language, denotes utterance-power, the 'magic' force of the spoken word, the sacred instance of word's

efficacy, word as latent energy.

In the creation myth of the Dogon, *Amma*, the only God, created the earth as a woman, and then married her. His seed, *Nommo* is water and fire and blood and word. *Nommo* is the physical-spiritual life force which awakens all 'sleeping' forces and gives physical and spiritual life.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond being invested with utterance-power *Nommo*, like the Yoruba *Ase*, is the invocatory gift of its mask medium. Its ultimate theatrical direction is to reveal and invoke the reality of the particular mode that it has ritualised. It is a theatre style, as Jahnheiz Jahn has observed, that depends on power and power invocation. It is word power; it is dance power; it is music power.

This was further buttressed by the Hogon of Dogon (comprising the Malian communities of Djiguibombo, Teli and Ende), HRH Emkoungan Guindo and reputed carver Yusuf Guindo who explained in our chat the significance to the Dogon of the large *iminana* mask, which is carved and performed during the *Sigui* initiation ceremony that comes up only once in 60 years. These elders revealed that during the *Sigui*, the Dogon performs dances using the *iminana* to help recount the story of the origin of the Dogon. Only women born during this initiation rites in Dogon land, can wear the mask.

The mask in this sense is invariably, also, a symbol of power relations. The *Sigui*-license granted Dogon women born in this era to wear the mask is indeed an exception in the region. Traditionally, gender disqualification has been effected with the mask. Even where the woman, as among the Dogon, had been the originator and agency of mask's medium, she was promptly emasculated from being its bearer once the mask became a source and symbol of communal authority.

In the north west of Cote d'Ivoire we have the *Krobia*, which is still sacred, unlike the *Gbon* of the north east, which has been influenced by Islam and is thus limited to entertainment.

The *Ndali*, among the Mande, falls into this category, as well as *Koteba*, which is indigenous to the Malinke worlds of Guinea and Mali. There is also the Nigerian *Kwagh-hir* puppetry (and theatre) of the Tiv, which shares a lot with the Bornu puppet show.

The Fulani *Gerewol* and Tuareg *Illoudjan* of Niger Republic are more of dramatised initiation performances. No doubt, the Niger serves more than a grazing ground for the appetite of the Fulani. I saw in the river a courier of ethnic cultural identity on arrival at the Malian town of Sivera. Almost feeling a sense of *deja-vu*, I watched single Fulani men participate in a dramatised beauty contest in order to win the attention of eligible women. The main event is the *Yaake*, a late afternoon performance in which the men dance, displaying their beauty, charisma and charm. Suddenly, I realised I was watching a replay of similar motions from far away Niamey (Niger), Gusau and Kotonkarfe (Nigeria).

The *Wodabe*, an extension of this performance, could slide into fierce rivalry, when youngsters take part in *Soro*, an event where a suitor stands smiling while he is being hit with sticks.

As we move into the modern traditional era, the influence of both Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo of Nigeria becomes compelling. For one, their theatres embodied, more than any other group in the subregion, the soul of the traditional and experiments of Western dramaturgic forms. They were, in a way, direct descendants of the Yoruba *alarinjo* theatre and were evidently the first crop of trado-modern theatre professionals.

In the duo, there was the attempt to make the play the



**Nguessan Ayateau, Ivorian comedian says: 'I have a tall order of jokes'**  
All photos by Sola Olorunyomi

ritualised context of reality. Said Susanne Wenger, the Osogbo-based Austrian artist and Yoruba traditionalist in a conversation:

*'Duro was a genius. He was the first that really made the myth of Sango and other Orisa alive on the stage... With Duro Ladipo and the older Ogunde, it was possible to get the religious experience on the stage.'*

So intense were some of these outings that our informant revealed that she and her family had to escape from the theatre during the performance of *Oba Koso* because, 'It was like a

violation of taboo, a violation of privacy for the Olorisa.'

## Script

Basically, these traditions have influenced modern dramatic forms. According to Sidibe Valy,<sup>5</sup> that icon of Ivorian and West African theatre, the first level is through the transposition of cultural artefacts, both verbal and visual. Modern Ivorian drama uses proverbs, for instance, and traditional artefacts such as cowrie shells to adorn the stage for specific effect. Besides this, characters wear masks and there is sufficient synthetic assimilation of the old forms. Apart from costumes, myths and legends, the new theatre also takes on board a certain sense of irony which the traditional form utilises.

Why did these forms not evolve into a travelling theatre troupe, apart from the experiences of Nigeria's Yoruba travelling troupes and Ghana's concert parties? While research is still apace on this, it is significant to note that one factor, at least, that assisted the popularity of the *alarinjo* travelling theatre was the fact that early enough, Yoruba masq-dramaturgy broke out of the cocoon of lineage practice and became a property of the social guild. This way, it became multiplied by dispersal.

If modern drama was influenced at all by the travelling troupes in francophone West Africa, according to Valy, it must be from these sources. He cited Amon Dabie and Bernard Dadie as representing such groups because of their proximity to Ghana in the coastal areas.

Otherwise, there is little evidence of indigenous travelling theatre in other parts. It is important to make a distinction here, from the griot tradition where the *Jali* could move from place to place but was neither conceptualised nor developed along the lines of a travelling troupe. An experience close to this form is that of students who during the long vacation perform from one place to the other.

Even for the griots, their sphere of activities is receding. They may still play a role during funerals or baptism, but the practice has somewhat receded to Malinke area and other urban areas where you have the Malinke community.

The griots themselves are complaining of their slow disappearance. They try to explain this effacement as a manifestation of social alienation and regression. In a way, it is the destruction of an identity.

If we focus attention slightly on the role of the Chief in black West African theatre of French expression, it is due largely to what Colin Grandson's study since the William-Ponty Teachers' College, Senegal, in 1933 revealed:

'the historical Chief and his present equivalent, the political leader, appear as the main character in more than fifty percent of the Black African plays of French expression since independence.'<sup>6</sup>

Although these plays did not initially challenge in any

profound sense the colonial order, they evoked a pre-colonial past based on legends, as in the play *La Ruse de Diegue*. The theatrical experiment of William-Ponty was to have a profound influence on French West African theatre, being the 'nursery' of the region's elite.

The basic imperative of this theatre is drawn from a French desire to perpetuate an Aristotelian tradition of tragedy but beyond this, it required that the characters be of noble birth or illustrious men and that the themes be drawn from history or myth. With a region where historical traditions have been kept alive by the griots, equivalent local references were easily found in the likes of Soundjata, Samoury Toure and Abraha Pokou - the Baoule female saviour figure, who risked her life and sacrificed her daughter to save her community like Moremi of Ife who has resurfaced in Femi Osofisan's theatre as Titubi in *Morountodun*. Titubi's similarity with Nokan's Pokou is further demonstrated in that she strives to be not only a nation-builder, but also a figure of democratic principle.

With independence in tow, the playwrights tried to reconstruct historical figures in a larger project that negated earlier attempts by colonialism to render superfluous the spirit of African history and civilisation. Dadie revisits in his plays the essential themes of Senghor's negritude, showing the contradictions inherent in European rationalism by its own materialism.

Other writers turned inwards, in the sense of questioning the new order and emphasising the need for accountability in the new nation. Bernard Zaorou Zadi, who is the current Ivorian Minister of Culture, belongs to this tradition. By stressing the need to uphold (not merely glorify) aspects of the past that symbolised courage, honour and self-sacrifice, his *Didiga Theatre*, like other recent theatres, links up with the traditional theatre which had as its main function 'to offer the living the lesson of the noble deeds of the ancestors' as a collective means of positively mediating the future.

Zadi uses his theatre to query basic assumptions of society; for example, he made a woman to wear a mask on stage and there was some uproar against it. Zadi justified this to me one drizzling August morning at his make-shift amphitheatre in the Lyce Technique area of Abidjan, saying:

'We have moved to the phase of modern theatre, so I can ask a woman to wear a mask. What I have on stage is no longer tradition, but a revision of it.'<sup>7</sup>

The writer for him should be free because the play is not a faithful representation but a recreation. Traditional forms can be incorporated but the writer is not obliged to respect the rules of tradition.

Mali's modern stage theatre is relatively underdeveloped compared to its neighbours. This is however surprising in relation to its rather high showing in celluloid production. Partly due to the paucity of theatre troupes in the country, a prominent playwright like Moussa Konate had written 'mental' plays in the tradition of

Hakim El-Tewfik's *Fate of a Cockroach*, even if his primary impulse and social circumstance differ slightly from the latter.

Between *Le Dernier Pas*, *L'Ordu diable*, *Le Cercle au Feminin* and *Fils du chaos* we find a theatre oeuvre of denunciation, almost anarchic, which Konate prefers to the *engagee* tradition.

Konate espouses his 'non-interventionist' stance as informed by a belief that 'Literature can not change society.' With the demise of this influential playwright, it is still unclear in what direction the Malian theatre will go.

Wole Soyinka represents another important moment in the evolution of the region's literary drama. His 'mythopoeic' attitude to history, his 'constant penchant for transforming experience into metaphysical trans-historical, mythic dimensions'<sup>8</sup> stands him out. This attitude partly explains the suggestion in the preface of *Death and the King's Horseman*:

'The colonial factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind - the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, and the numinous passage which links all: transition. Death and the King's Horseman can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition.'

But beyond the dramaturgy, Soyinka's attempt at professing an African theory of tragic art, remains the most promising up till date. He says in *The Fourth Stage*:<sup>9</sup>

'Tragedy, in Yoruba traditional drama, is the anguish of this severance, the fragmentation of essence from self. Its music is the stricken cry of man's blind soul as he flounders in the void and crashes through a deep abyss of aspirituality and cosmic rejection. Tragic music is an echo form that void, the celebrant speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images from within the abyss. All understand and respond for it is the language of the world.'

Despite such acknowledgement of the essence of African aesthetic, a writer like Soyinka still remains relatively obscure even to the Nigerian theatre audience. What explains this?

Generally speaking, the literary tradition is more tempered than the popular tradition, the latter being more impulsive, conventional and affective. It is no wonder therefore that quite often, there has always been the attempt to negotiate the stricture of this divide.

Biodun Jeyifo may be correct to suggest that a schism between the literary and the popular traditions in drama need not be mandatory, but the same historical, cultural and ideological underpinnings of art which he alludes to, are at the very core of the inevitability of such a schism.

The division does not simply end with the literary and the popular, because even the literary is capable of either a popular

or esoteric approach. No doubt, Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, *Trials of Brother Jero*, and Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* are cast in the popular mode in spite of being in the literary idiom.

Once we acknowledge the division of society into classes, then it should be possible to see how even a supposedly popular cultural event like a literary drama can be turned esoteric by merely making it inaccessible to some publics. The walls of the university, where these theatres thrive, still intimidate the average Nigerian, in the same way that the French cultural centres, which harbour most of West African francophone modern theatre habits, are somewhat put-offish elite outposts.

Above all however, generating a popular tradition will



**National Institute of Arts, Bamako, Mali**

depend on the ability to develop an interpretive community. It is ultimately this community that can decode and relate to the new cultural expression. If our literary drama has not sufficiently become popular, it is due largely to the fact that it has not sufficiently developed an interpretive community or put differently, integrated itself into the codes of that community. And this would be due not only to textual but also extra-textual considerations.

A relatively new theatre sub-genre that has gradually worked into public reckoning in the last two decades is the

experimental theatre, a popular theatrical idiom that is geared towards stimulating community development.

This practice has been variously described: Theatre For Development (TFD) Theatre for Integrated Development (TIDE), Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (THIRD), Community Theatre (CT) and Community Theatre for Integrated Rural Development (CTHIRD).

This tradition of theatre practice seeks to provide an alternative medium and approach through which the marginalised rural and urban poor can address their own problems. To this effect, it utilises a dramaturgical procedure that is collective and emphasizes participation.

In addition, the experiment operates from within the cultural matrix of the people using forms like song, music, dance and also puppetry, mime and story-telling. Chuck Mike of the Performing Studio Workshop (PSW), Nigeria, in order to show fidelity to this matrix has somewhat strained his practice by working from stage to script, not from script to the stage.

Oga S. Abah, an influential popular theatre practitioner at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria identified three levels with which the oral medium is incorporated.

*'One, it defines or names the problems which need to be addressed ... or What Paulo Freire calls codification. Two, it is through the oral medium that analyses of the issues are carried out. And thirdly, the oral may work in combination with gestures to concretise the issues and thereby provide a visual dimension.'*

Along with Ross Kidd of the International Council for Adult Education, Toronto Canada, Tar Ahura, Michael Etherton and David Cook, this theatre form was introduced in Igyura, Benue state, Nigeria among many other site projects that have been accomplished over the years.

Then there is also modern Cameroun's children's theatre which can be traced back to the cultural practice of the people with the many children games, dances, initiations and folk-narrative performances.

While such theatre has somewhat receded to the provinces, where some elder on some moon-lit night would narrate the age-old stories of the clan, through which society's ethics are imparted, what we now have for the urban child are radio, comic strips, and the television's world of Sesame Street.

Some amateur efforts in schools and colleges, at times in the Sunday Schools, have also contributed to this development and there has been some excellent results. The example of Guillaume Oyono Mbia with *Three Suitors, One Husband* (

1956) written as a student at the *College Evangelique de Limbamba* has often been cited as a case in point.

It has been suggested that the most prominent troupe working exclusively for children is Etoundi Zeyanga's *Bobo et Mange Tout*. Based in Younde and founded in 1984, the group of two stand-up comedians perform a number of slap-stick comedies to children. Its plot is always weaved around the two stock characters: Bobo, who is small, witty, intelligent and Manage Tout: fat, stupid and ugly.

Another group working in this area is Bounya Epee's *Trotty Show*, founded in 1988. This theatre has also moved into the television studios. The only independent children's theatre troupe in the country so far is Yaounde Children's Theatre Collective founded in 1989.

But across the subregion theatre has been the victim of the development of cinema and other media. What cinema has done, generally, is to take the best of the theatre and poaching along with it, the theatre audience. The likes of Sidjiri Bakaba, Isaac Bankole, Thérèse Taba and Bienvenue Neuba came from the stage theatre, but can only be watched now on Ivorian screen.

## Television

Since 1956 when the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) was established, TV plays have become very central to its programme. Today, Nigeria has over forty TV stations, thereby expanding the scope of such plays.

Plays by Duro Ladipo and Hubert Ogunde formed the nucleus of that pioneer effort, and they were mainly in Yoruba Language. Soyinka's first short play, *My Father's Burden*, in English, had its premiere production in 1960 on the same station.

This pattern is somewhat replicated among the other large language groups such as the Hausa and the Igbo. Multi-linguistic regions such as the Niger delta areas of Nigeria and the old Mid-West have resorted to either English or Pidgin language for the production of their TV plays. Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Enugu's popular play *Masquerade* and *Hotel de Jordan* of NTA Benin are two such compelling features. The *Masquerade's* pidgin idiom is by no means suggestive of lack of linguistic homogeneity among the Igbo, but due more to the national accessibility of pidgin as a medium of (cultural) communication.

The *Village Headmaster* was one experiment that tried to serve as the melting pot of Nigeria's babel cultures (not language) in its junction setting of Oja village.

The *Masquerade's* attempt in this direction was limited largely because only southern voices were represented.

The popular agricultural Jos TV play *Cock Crow at Dawn* reversed the situation whereby northern voices became more prominent.



The three most popular soap operas up till date are *Ripples*, *Supple Blues* and *Checkmate* - which is the equivalent of America's *Dynasty*. This latter trend in Nigerian TV genre represents, perhaps, the most radical rupture with the old cultural matrix of the mask code.

However, the Igbo video scene is replete with mask motifs. *Living in Bondage*, acclaimed as the first Igbo video film, narrates how the lead character uses charm to become rich, by killing his wife. *Nneka the Pretty Serpent* merely intensifies this supernatural ambience, with Nneka casting spell on any man she sufficiently has interest in, turning him into her zombie.

In *Ikuku* we find the finest expression of this tradition. A nouveau riche Igbo in Lagos faces problems with his business which is on the decline because he had abandoned his duties to ancestral masks, of whom he was supposed to be a custodian. In a spirited attempt to find a resolution to the impasse created by this supersensible intervention, he returns home. However, unable to cope with the rigour of self-effacement and communal responsibility, a burlesque scenario is created as he tenders to the gods, through the elders, a letter of resignation!

With the introduction of the home video, no doubt, an additional channel was created for theatrical expression. The stylistics of this medium is quite diverse. While the mask code is quite trenchant, it is by no means the only outlet in terms of style. Themes of 'modernisation' are becoming increasingly popular and the commercial impulse of producers have driven many to dilute their art to serve this end.

Besides this, there is another tendency to expand the income space by accommodating the resolution of plots in favour of Judeo-Christian and Islamic positions, a factor that in itself subverts mask narrative.

There are however complaints of proliferation of the medium. In this regard a timely caution has been given by the maverick Ibadan based screenwriter, Charles Ogu, during the shooting of his new title *Harry's Crew*. In a rather anecdotal style he quipped: 'now they are flooding the market, but let them remember that you don't learn to fall into a pit, all it takes is the first step. A lot of our video practitioners may soon get flushed off in their self-impelled deluge.'

## DAWN

... I have started building the nucleus of the type of studio I am advocating.

'I will name the centre The New Culture Studio where I will

try to develop my ideas on African art with any African artist who has a philosophy identical with me..'

## Carnavalesque

Sometimes though Demas Nwoko, that prodigious theatre practitioner of the *Mbari* era, comes off like a dreamer gone far beyond an early rise. And somehow, too, he gets a multitude of fellow travellers.

His ideas of working with 'any African artist' is informed by what he had elsewhere alluded to as the need to perpetuate 'our artistic traditions'. What he is calling for is a medley of sorts, the stuff of which the carnivalesque is made.

That passion to identify and claim Africa's artistic personality is a feature that we can readily identify with Tar Ukoh, Werewere Liking and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti through their respective experiments: *Mambissa*, *Ki Yi M'Bock* and *Kalakuta*

## Mambissa

It did not take too long after a first encounter with this Nigerian artiste about a decade ago, to whiff the presence of a visionary, cultural Pan-Africanist, even if a little unorthodox in his ways.



**En route Djenne: 'the Niger is both the literal and figurative reference for West Africa, through it the arts of the subregion become the most travelled commodity'**

With braided hair - his modest register of alternative outlook, and a dangling ear ring, Tar Ukoh comes off as an intriguing bohemian. He is also a philosopher and multi-genre performer, who skilfully captures the essence of Africa's artistic legacy. His 'total theatre' compels the audience to notice a master singer-dancer, puppetry expert, choreographer - with the directorial energy of late Hubert Ogunde.

Listening to Tar's music, watching him perform, you are

trapped into a colourful spectacle of mask stagecraft comparable only to the Riviera // mad house - Ki Yi M'Bock of Werewere Liking in Abidjan. Like Ki Yi M'Bock, Tar's *Mambissa* strives towards the melange and aesthetic hodge podge of Africa's diverse theatre traditions. His renditions are usually in the various Nigerian languages, as well as in Swahili, Zulu, French, Spanish, Portuguese and English. This has made his expressive art a unique and dynamic cosmopolitan entertainment genre.

When again I fielded questions to Tar last harmattan he revealed a resume of superlatives that ran like eternity. His *Best of Africa* won, in 1986, the first prize of NTA National Merit Award in dance drama. He returned first prize winner in 1988 with a musical opera, *Songs of Wisdom*, at the Nigeria Festival of Television Programmes (NIEFETEP). Six other consecutive awards were won in the variety/ light entertainment on the same occasion. The group's performances in the 1980s have been well applauded, a factor that led to its nomination for the 1990 Nelson Mandela Prize in African Music by URTNA, Nairobi Kenya. While the *Mambissa* strives to collapse distance by re-enacting and re-interpreting Africa's rich cultural reservoir, the primary imagination of the group has been influenced by the best of the *Kwagh-Hir*.

The Tiv *Kwagh-Hir* theatrical repertoire is infused with a variety of poetic forms ranging from the heroic, didactic, religio-medicinal to the elegiac and romantic.

A single thread that runs through them all is the interrogation of essences - what is man, his place in the universe, the nature of human existence, the basis for his cornucopia of problems and above all, why is man replete with foibles?

For an exuberant art form that had thrived since ages, it was not until December 1973, during the festival of traditional dances held in all states of Nigeria, that the *Kwagh-Hir* puppet and masquerade theatre of the Tiv communities settled in Gboko, Makurdi and Katsina-Ala began to work itself into national reckoning.

But what is *Mambissa*? Tar responds in a detour: 'You watch the performance, you listen to the music, you dance to the pulsating rhythms and the curious question comes back again: what is *Mambissa*?'

*Mambissa*, he finally offered, is a historical and cultural excursion into the deep, troubled soul of Africa. *Mambissa* is a RETURN TO SOURCE, as we approach the dawn of the 21st century and its challenges. *Mambissa* is African pride.

Tar located *Mambissa's* etymology in the resistance against slavery and colonialism. Those brave sons of Africa who fired the forge of resistance were called *Mambi*, while the courageous daughters of Africa were called *Mambissa*. Children of lion, wounded but unbeaten!

In a tone similar to Werewere Liking's, Tar preaches the rediscovery of Africa. A *Mambissa* performance is therefore

geared towards a re-affirmation of faith in ourselves. Today, the *Mambissa* has resurrected, like the undying phoenix, from the ashes of cultural despair into a colossus of cultural self identity with a mission to take Africa's place in world history.

## Ki Yi M'Bock

'That idealist who fled her native country for Cote d'Ivoire', was the way an angry, cynical Camerounian critic described her. When I met Werewere Liking during rehearsals at her Village Ki Yi, she still wore the looks of a dreamer.

She did indeed have the ambience of a roamer - like the Fulani cattle rearer, with eyes gazing at, through and beyond me into a distance you could not decipher. She was perhaps wondering what to do with a dishevelled knap sack carrier who had just intruded into rehearsal well space. Somehow, we eventually fix an appointment and an interview got underway after three failed attempts.

Liking had left her native country, Cameroun, some say, out of spite, after starting as a singer, to explore the cultural environment of Cote d'Ivoire.

'That is not true' she fired back, 'although I did sing from age sixteen to eighteen, but I was painting already. I moved on to writing poetry, and then to theatre. When I left my country at twenty-seven, I was already known as a coming painter, a poet and playwright, a woman with ideas, and a wife and mother! I exhibited in Abidjan in 1975, as part of a series of international exhibitions. I returned to Cote d'Ivoire in 1978 to work at Abidjan University doing research into Negro-African traditions and aesthetics for six years, before I founded the Ki Yi group'.

And what is Ki Yi M'Bock?

'Knowledge of the Universe', she says, drawing from the sagely wisdom of her South Cameroun Bassa.

In the context of artistic creation, however, the micro-village, Ki Yi M'Bock, operates as a community in a living and work space equipped with infrastructure for creating, promoting and diffusing the arts.

There is an art gallery, a museum, a photographic and audiovisual laboratory, studios for sculpture, painting, weaving, sewing.... Beside the home-made costume for each show, a commercial clothes label now exists: Ki Yi lines, a new source of income in addition to recipes from all over Africa.

Liking further enthused:

'Young people from all over, and from all ethnic origins, have seized this unhoped for chance, taking up dance, singing, writing, acting, in a harmony where team spirit, change and discipline constitute the basis of an undertaking that is, to say the least, singular. Nothing is left to chance at Ki Yi village, for not only must each member master his daily programme, he must also

interest himself in what the others do, so as to be able to fulfil any role, especially in a tour abroad.'

Founded in 1985, the Ki Yi group is conceived as a Pan African movement on contemporary artistic creation. It comes out as a mini-African multi-artistic project and hopes to give Africa the reasons to look towards the future with hope.

Liking hopes for an aesthetics that can unite in one Ouvre the creativity of writers, poets, plastic artists, actors, singers and dancers with a view to presenting a 'utopia' of a new Africa that would at least dream for herself.

Sidibe Vally said of her effort:

*'What Werewere Liking is doing is positive. She is associating theatre, dance, puppetry and choreography. She has an approach of theatre which is global and this is a direction in which African theatre should move. To that extent, she is to be encouraged as she is opening paths to the future development of African theatre. She is bringing together different forms, to create a total theatre. So, what else is hidden about this woman who has made such a great impact on African Youth?' And she continues:*

*'I am also a Pan Africanist. My earliest influences were from Kwame Nkrumah, Azikiwe...people who spoke of a great united Africa. I was a child during independence when the women sang praise to those heroes....*

*What I learned about African culture, I learned through women's songs, women from my ethnic group are very patriotic. They have fought to create the image of a great Africa, within their children's minds.'*

If Liking has dedicated her songs and studies across Cote d'Ivoire, Mali and Cameroun to women, it is because she is convinced that spirituality is important for human development, of which the woman must be availed.

Her belief in Pan Africanism is informed by an assessment that poses the ideology as the only way to correct the many wrongs done to Africa. Therefore, Pan Africanism is the only way to bring Africa together in solidarity between brothers and between sisters.

The themes of her production are quite diverse. They range from the struggle of the African woman in contemporary society to Pan Africanism. There are also environment related themes and social dilemma narratives. Her 1985 'Mixed-Up Woman' narrates the instance when a woman is latent energy invested with enormous power by the cultural context. Thus, we find a woman who does not need power because she is herself power

'Caesarean', 1986, explores Africa's vicious circle which makes her tomorrows difficult to have a natural birth, while 'Singue Mura', 1990, is a hymn dedicated to African and universal Woman. A measure of her diversity is seen in the environment sketch, 'A Touareg Married a Pigmy', 1992, a

musical comedy about desert and forest meeting.

By 1992, Liking refocused her imagination on the diverse social malaise in the continent. 'Widow Dilemma' is about the condition of African women up against some strange traditions, while 'Ya Match' is a lyric choreography on the subjects of money and misery. This concern spilled into 1993 when 'Water Hero' was produced, and she denounces the evils of secrecy.

'Cradle Awakening', which was premiered in 1993, was taken on tour to Accra, Ghana in 1996. This theatrical concert, in a way, marks the group's recent musical inclination, and what it has achieved in two years with Zairean musician Ray Lema. In the movement dedicated to the late Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the stage grew dim, the drums slower, paces heavy and studied and the visage of the lead actor became sombre - as the cast floundered, eyes dilated, with hands stretched skywards groping, groping, they ask: what happened to the continent he slaved for?



**Elder Carver: Yusuf Guindo, Ende village, Dogon, Mali**

The Ki Yi M'Bock theatre repertoire is indeed multinational both in content and in form. While the persistent message is the integration of the African Peoples, the aesthetics of delivery is drawn from different sources in the continent.

Costuming at any session is always a pool of Africa's

medley of histrionics. The stage is adorned with raffia stripes, gourds and rattle gourds, cowrie shells and the like. The *Attoungblan* drum - the conveyor of secrets, the *tam-tam*, maracas and flutes carved locally, are some of the musical equipment used. In one breadth, Liking pushes to prominence *Kuntu* drama; *Kuntu* being a Bantu concept of evolving the African aesthetic. This is given meaning by her mask code of presentational style, buttressed through action, structure, characterization and audience reaction.

If what you expect in the structure of a Ki Yi performance is some arcane linearity, set in historical time, then you will be disappointed. For rather, what you will probably get is a simultaneity of both historical and mythic time - with a participatory chorus and audience.

Announcement: There will be no rehearsals tomorrow. Sunday is a rest day in the village

## Kalakuta

Whereas Werewere Liking merely glared into space wondering what to do with me after I had intruded into her rehearsals, with Fela in Lagos it was different. He hauled invectives at me and punched holes in my rather calm posture, suggesting that my knap sack reminded him of the fabled eternal bearer of sins. 'Aren't old men expected to be more guarded with their utterances?' I hit back and Fela dissolved into a mischievous grin. 'What again do you want foolish boy?'

We settled into an interview session that lasted some two hours, during which he threatened thrice to terminate our discussion grumbling that foolish 'University people' like me could ask foolish questions.

By evening I was back at his shrine (self-styled Kalakuta Republic by the 70s) and like many other shrine members sat patiently under drifting marijuana smoke clouds. But unlike many, I was this time not particularly anxious about his musical performance, rather, it was his 'invocative Saturday Divination Night', that I was awaiting.

As I soon realised, a *Kalakuta* performance embodies the mask code in several ways. The inscription of white chalk (powder) on the faces of band members at the beginning of the performance, relates to the symbol of man conquering death in Yoruba ritual drama. Fela's communion with the past is a sort of ritual device to affirm presence with the ancestors. This merely complements Fela's last names: Anikulapo (one who conquers death), a cultural signifier which refers to this concept of continuity. It is more than an ideational category; it implies both sameness and difference. By the power of the mask, you cannot die; when 'death' is reckoned with, however, it is deemed to represent a transition to other spheres of performance. Life is believed to be a sort of self-regenerative, transformative, universal energy wound off by a first cause in the breath of Olodumare.

Since colonialism sought to explain away non-Islamic, non-Christian Africa as simply indelible, Fela's aesthetics seems to

emphasise the inscription of a unique practice and theory of counter-culture. His mask display of ancestral sculptures triggers off a vibrance of figuratives. Their simultaneous evocation of several dimensions of time is realized through the congealed narratives of these figural sculptures, their condensation of myths, engagement in current dialogues and ability to prognosticate.

His performance venue is called a shrine, reflecting that he intends it to be more than a nightclub; it is meant to be a place of communal celebration and worship. Rather than the 'tribal' communalism of old, however, his new society is a rallying point of Pan-African progressivism. Fela alludes to this stylization of the African shrine as a place of worship that embodies all the attributes of the performative arts.

The ritual paraphernalia at the shrine include the statues of Esu, *Sango*, *Ogun* and *Orisa Obeji*; with these, portraits of Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti adorn the worship cubicle. There are also earthen

mounds containing honey, palm oil-soaked wick and cowrie shells. Some kola nuts are placed in a covered calabash. A keg of palmwine and three bottles of Gordon Gin are tucked in a corner. A sacrificial cock in the cubicle, looks away expectantly. The musical accompaniments for divination rites are only four: metal gong, wooden rattle, conga drum, and a Western, brass drum-set with cymbals. The cubicle has red, blue and green bulbs on. The wick is lit for the ritual to commence, but the proceeding ritual is a revision of an ancient practice. At another level, it reveals the impact of the city and urbanity on erst-

while folk aesthetics and the rippling changes in their figural devices and meanings.

The ritual commences with the clanging of a metal gong and wooden rattle, followed by the conga. Then the drum set and cymbal is unleashed on the shrine in an upbeat, high tempo pace. For a while, it is repetitive but suddenly takes a faster tempo, reaching a crescendo with the rising smoke of the burning wick. At that moment, Fela appears, with a few votarists — all masked in white (chalk) powder on their faces. In these few minutes, one begins to observe a gradual encoding of

**H**is mask display of ancestral sculptures triggers off a vibrance of figuratives. Their simultaneous evocation of several dimensions of time is realized through the congealed narratives of these figural sculptures, their condensation of myths, engagement in current dialogues and ability to prognosticate.

diverse signifiers in the performance.

Only the metal-gong and wooden rattle maintain a repetitive, continuous stream of clanging, while the accentuation of the conga and drum set and cymbals denote alteration of tempo. The impact of the repetitive clanging here, as in traditional worship forms, is clearly evocative, a device by which elements of the ethereal and supersensible world are invited into ritual proceedings.

The ritual process continues with Fela leading a few other votarists to the cubicle. He assumes a crouching position, picks up some cowrie shells and lobes of kolanut, throws them on a spread out tray and begins to observe intently. His brows betray different moods from anxiety, perplexion to elation and satisfaction. At this point, he takes a bite of the kolanut, dips his left fingers into the honey mound for a taste. Also, some Gordon gin is sprinkled on the floor for the ancestors, after which he empties the contents into the four fire points. Fire infused with methanol, the flame rises, bathing this Chief Priest from torso up, but he is unyielding, does not move.

The cock is ripped at the neck, with bare hands. Gradually, the Chief Priest stands up, holding the cock above his mouth and sucks the dripping blood. His body is covered with sweat; his eyes, thunder-shot, are glittering; his teeth, blood-red, are grating. He is past concentration; he merely glares into space, momentarily suspended in the middle of nowhere. He is seemingly attempting to move but somewhat restrained by what the rest of us cannot quite see. His biceps are enlarged in this intense struggle to break off; his head gradually drops to the right and he starts to mumble or chant, but it is incomprehensible. Meantime, he seems to finally succeed in breaking this invisible fettering chain - and only then does he seem to regain consciousness of his

immediate surrounding. With unsteady steps, he moves to the right of the cubicle and picks up a long canvas soaked in water. Gripping it with two hands, he swirls it round, moving backwards, eight steps, but with head thrust forward - gazing at the cubicle. He repeats this motion and then replaces the canvas. He finally pours some palmwine into a calabash and takes a sip. The remaining content and an extra calabash are handed over to a votarist, who now takes the two calabashes up stage and feeds the other members of the band. Fela, now back on the stage, is handed a nine-centimetre long wrap of marijuana. He takes a long drag, as if it is some kind of oxygen survival dose. He emits the smoke in one cloud-cluster and momentarily, his head disappears into it. He emerges to start prophesying and recounting the ritual encounter. His ambience is of one who has just returned from a distant journey.

## Melange

The 1965 World Negro Arts Festival in Dakar, Senegal and the 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria, provided the forum for the expression of the various theatrical traditions of the subregion, apart from other cultural events.

It is in this context that *Festival Pan Africaine du cinema et de la Television de ouagadougou (Fespaco) Les Marche de Arts du Spectacle - Aficain (MASA), Abidjan, and the Pan African Festival of Arts and Culture (PANAFEST)* have become important stop gaps.

West Africa remains a celluloid power in the continent partly due to its numerous national film festivals, but above all it



**The Ki Yi M'Bock village, Abidjan mini-theatre under construction**

owes its strength to the bi-ennial Fespaco held every other year. This fiesta, no matter how often you make its pilgrimage, unleashes on one not only a feverish feast of celluloid but also an eerie air of the quixotic. As I walked past Hotel Indépendance during the last edition, I ran into muffled Diabia, medicine men, looking through the hour glass of time, foretelling the future, predicting the past - with their heads bowed. They urged potential clients to buy remedies which - apparently - could cure in one dose, illness as varied as fever, asthma, haemorrhoids and guess what - probably Marquesian bubonic plague?!

All the same, this cultural event provides a forum where West African film makers exhibit the immense and diverse narrative possibilities that abound in the subregion. For instance, at the centenary celebration of cinema in the world and the silver jubilee of Fespaco, Ouagadougou, 1995, the citation of jury

president noted of Mali's Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Guimba*, which was the grand prix winner:

....this extraordinary title, which is as profound in its thematic thrust, as it is steeped in deep cultural codes and figural devices... enhancing its aesthetics...'

A 1993 Kora films production, *Guimba* is the story of Africa, a continent so beautiful and blessed, but one that has been raped and bled white through the actions of its ruling elites.

The occasional 'intrusion' of the narrating griot lends the film an epic ambience.

In the same breath he constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs his narrative, sparing neither ruler nor ruled.

Though its setting is a village - Sitikali - its symbolic



**Werewere Liking setting out**

reference to the present is not lost on the viewer. *Guimba* is indeed archetypal, a statement about the human condition, and the quest to unfetter our shackles in whatever contrasting situations we may find ourselves.

The celluloid expression of West African mask narrative

comes in diverse forms. *Gombele*, *L'enfant terrible* and *Magic of Nigeria* fall under myth, while *Keita*, *de bouche a' Oraille* and *Guimba* receive epic treatment. Even Fespaco's grand prize *Estallion de Yennenga* is derived from a legend. The legend tells of a princess named *Yennenga*, a distinguished warrior who won countless battles for her father Nedega, the Mossi chief of Gambaga people.

Issa Traore de Brahim'a's 1994 *Gombele* relives an old Burkina myth that albinos change into spirits. Just why would this notion not be evoked in the children when, suddenly after Kalifa's (the Albino child) disappearance, a series of terrible incidents befall his playmates in the district.

*L'enfant terrible* (1994) by Mali's Kadiatous Konate is almost an exact replication of the Yoruba *Ajantala* myth. This is the story of a child who knew how to walk, talk and eat from the day he was born. In *Ajantala*'s case he eats a meal of some three dozen wraps of corn mealie and yet yawns of hunger.

In *L'enfant*, few days after his birth, he sets out in search of his brother. He finds him and together they continue their journey.

What follows are the adventures of an ungrateful child who involves his brother in his exploits and misdeeds.

Ola Balogun's *Magic*, 1993, revisits ancestral mask: the bronzes of Ife and Benin, made through the lost wax casting method and the incarnated stately royal masks of the Igala with a singular message: life's cyclicity.

Myth's capacity to dialogue with the past finds an aesthetically profound treatment in Kouyate's *Keita*.

*'Open your ears wide and listen carefully.*

*Everything started with the setbacks of a poor antelope.*

*That day, the antelope was trudging along looking for a*

*water point to quench its thirst when a great diviner*

*hunter happened to pass by...you get me ?'*

The one who tells the story is Djeliba Koyate, an old praise singer. At the twilight of his life, a mysterious hunter entrusted him a last mission: tell young Mabo Keita the origin of his name. A name that carries a whole epic, that of the founder of the Mandinga empire - Soundjata Keita, also called - the buffalo's son, who after a prolonged pregnancy had cried from his mother's womb:

*'Mother ! ... my time is up, deliver me'.*

From one production to another, one discovers that a good number of West African cinema is replete with these motifs.

These days Fespaco secretariat seems more interested in creating structures and diversifying its operations. Two such

recent structures are the Pan African Association of Film Makers, (FEPACI) and The International African Films and Television Market (MICA).

Fepaci is geared towards assisting a collective action by African film makers, in an environment that is generally as hostile to celluloid promotion. Mica on the other hand, seeks to promote sale, help to establish contacts and exchanges among directors, producers and distributors.

Fespaco details basic regulations governing participation, competition and selection of jury in the bi-ennial festival. While the event is open to all African film makers and their films, the National Organising Committee (NOC) reserves the right to accept films with a special interest to the festival.

The committee requires all directors and producers of entry films to send documents on each title and advertise them forty-five days prior to the opening of the festival. Copies of the film must also have been sent thirty days before the opening date of the festival.

Any film at the festival may be shown at least four times, after which the consent of the owner must be sought for further showings.

All West African countries observe either an annual or a bi-ennial national festival of arts during which, among other events, the different theatre troupes make their presentations.



**From *L'enfant terrible*: Film by Kadiatou Konate (Malian)**

Though excluding the anglophone world for now, MASA has considerably integrated the different national festivals. A MASA event may be more than what is needed for a kaleidoscope of the different theatrical traditions of the subregion. The MASA creates a medley of forms ranging from music and drama to dance, puppetry and song.

In the 1995 edition, Atavi-G Amedegnato's *Coagulated Words* attracted critical observation to its compelling performance.

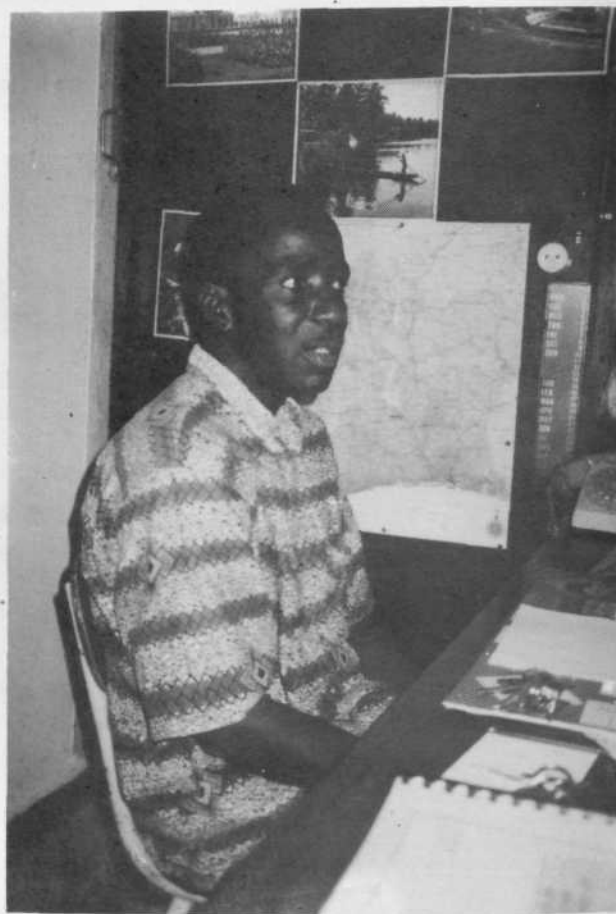
Amadegnato is a founder of the Zitic story teller's company in Lome, Togo, which had great success with more flexible structure. Hence, the Zigas company, which he found in 1993. The name is a combination. Zigvidi is Ewe for 'big nose', and

'gaskia' in Hausa means 'truth'. So the name means something like 'artistic reminder of echoes of truth'.

Here is indeed the truth of the marvellous world of stories. The company of three action-storytellers conducts research into stories, proverbs, riddles, children's game and traditional African singing and dancing.

The Zigas show marks a sharp break with classical theatre, deliberately so, to achieve real, genuine audience participation. The group proclaims of itself: 'Zigas: a new genre, born of traditional evenings.'

Actor Yoshua Kossi Efou's *Attoungblan Theatre Workshop*



**Sidibe Vally: Professor of theatre, University of Abidjan, Cocody, Cote d'Ivoire**

in Cote d'Ivoire is also a highly experimental group. His stage direction uses the technique of theatre-within-theatre quite close to groit theatre, with its recounting and intense living of 'the past for the audience of today.'

The group's name: *Attoungblan*, is an Akan word meaning talking drum, Akan being the language of the ethnic group in Southern and Central Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana. The *Attoungblan* is regarded as a repository of all secrets, its words functioning at several different levels depending on the circumstance, and it is the most sacred.

For the *Sonongnien* group of Burkina Faso, whose sub-genre is traditional dance, the group's history is perhaps, as interesting as its performance.

The group was created in 1985 in Zoula, Sangue province. It includes the leading village dancers and musicians among those selected to perform during the national cultural week. Most of the Bezemo (or Baziamo, or Bazioma), all seem to claim descent from Wangara, the mythical ancestor to whom the spirits revealed the art of singing and dancing.

'One night in the time of the ancestors, a man named Wangara went into the bush where he came across spirits dancing in a circle in the moonlight. He admired the performance unobserved;

until he could resist it no longer. He leapt into the circle - but because he did not know how to dance, he simply got in the way.

'Annoyed, they stopped and taught him a couple of steps to improve things. When he at last decided to go home, the spirit gave him a magic tail. Back in the village he had magic powers, and all learned of his skills at singing and dancing. And his descendants, the Bazemo, inherit his gift.'

The story could have been retold, with only a slight variation, by a Malinke *Jali* or Yoruba *Ayan*, the Bazemio mythology merely attempts an explanation of the

evolution of the caste. Initiative at sub-regional cultural integration has however been left almost entirely to the culture workers themselves without any semblance of assistance coming from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This has greatly reduced the possibility of interaction among the competing theatre traditions of West African Countries. According to Simeon Berete, an Ivorian poet and translator, the refusal of member states to honour Article (iii) of ECOWAS treaty - which abolishes obstacles to free movement, and thereby cultural motion, is tantamount to 'cultural negation.' By this stance, he says, the community is serving the interest of recolonisation rather than integration. **GR**

## Notes

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4. Jahnheinz Jahn attempts to evolve critical terms from the Africa cultural environment in *Muntu*. New York, Grove Press, 1961.
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6. Colin Grandson in 'Chief in Contemporary Black Africa Theatre', *Theatre in Africa* Ed. Ogunba and Irele, Ibadan University Press, 1978.
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