

## An Inquiry into The Sense of Drama: Observations on Heroic Recitations and The Contest by M. Rugyendo

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Drama, like so many art forms which are derived from social practice, has controversial concepts. A number of such concepts have been advanced, among them Aristotle's theory of drama as action, the medieval passion drama, the epic drama and the Brechtian theory of conflict. Drama in Africa, especially the type tailored close to the modes inherited from western theatre, has inherited similar theoretical controversies. It is my intention to examine the sense of drama in one African play that aroused a storm of controversy when it was performed in Erlangen, West Germany, in 1980, during a festival called **FACES OF THE THIRD WORLD**.<sup>1</sup>

**The Contest**, a play originally written by Mukotani Rugyendo and later adapted and called **Chuano** by Paukwa Theatre Association, was the Association's entry at two festivals in Erlangen, West Germany in 1972.<sup>2</sup> **Chuano**, a play based on heroic recitations, an artistic expression prevalent among the people inhabiting mostly the interlacustrine area, received controversial reviews. Different newspapers and critics representing varying political views reviewed the play with prejudicial preference. However, the fundamental issue that appeared in almost all reviews was the question of the drama of the play. Some audiences appear not to have seen the dramatic action of the play, its dramatic collision and its tension. It is this "apparent absence" of drama in **Chuano** that will be discussed.

To understand the drama in the play, we first need to understand the concept of drama itself. The paper starts by discussing this concept together with its historical links to the heroic recitations, then deals with drama and **The Contest** in relation to heroic recitations, and concludes with a short remark on the work of Paukwa in adapting **The Contest** into **Chuano**.

Drama, as artistic portrayal, is understood at two complimentary levels: an abstract level and an empirical level. When these two levels are reduced to the barest minimum, the complex concept of drama, to start with, refers to collision. Collision is at the core of drama, and conflict is the form it takes. This understanding of drama as collision goes beyond what other thinkers have defined as drama.<sup>3</sup> It is not based on an analysis of definitions as proposed by any one thinker, it is based on the historical development of society, such development being the source of drama.

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## Roots of Drama

The abstract concept of drama as collision is realised in definite forms according to the various modes of production and the social relations pertaining to those modes. The relationship between drama and epoch is, therefore, causal, or structural.<sup>4</sup>

The simplest form of "oppositional relationship" (i.e. pertaining to conflict) that society through man confronts, is the 'man vs. nature' relationship. This relationship is the manifestation of man's struggle to survive.<sup>5</sup> Man appropriated<sup>6</sup> food and thereby ensured not only his existence but also that of his progeny. Man's confrontation with nature, for instance, provided features relevant to that particular mode of existence, some of which are: individuals being united by some type of kinship or familial bond, tribe or land; man directly appropriating products from the land (mental and physical activity being unseparated as yet); and man hunting and/or scraping a living out of the land and its plants.

This fundamental and primeval collision in return characterised man's forms of thinking.<sup>7</sup> Parallel to these features, we find concrete forms of social expression of this life in a number of complex rituals and cults. Let us take the example of a hunting society. To this society, means of production are evidently natural, e.g. rivers, seas, forests, groves, etc. Man, at this time, is a victim of nature because a situation has not developed in which he can understand the objective laws of nature and harness them to his own benefit. On the contrary he develops formalist attitudes towards changes of all phenomena, an outlook summed up as "world order (being) a reflection of social order."<sup>8</sup> The rituals and cults express this view with enactments taking the form of natural relationships, and the forms of consciousness and ideology being postulated by the understanding of reality. Therefore, in the process of food production, cults and rituals were invoked since they "solved" this contradiction in favour of man. Totemism, to take an example, originated in the quest to multiply food supply; so, as a ritual, it was done at the opening of the breeding season. The ceremony was designed to **represent dramatically** the growth of the totem if it was a plant or, if it was an animal, its distinctive habits, movement and cries...<sup>9</sup> These social forms were an essential element in food production. They were based on the relationship of an individual to nature and to the horde, or human family, as social unit. Since these social forms and social relationships were pre-conditions of that mode of production, they are justifiably referred to as production relations.<sup>10</sup> Evident too, is the fact that in this era it is not possible to separate social relations from relations of production; these are two distinct categories with a structural relationship. Dances of food multiplication and fertility, mimicry, psychic immersions, etc. were not only relations of production, relatively conditioning production, but were also an expression of that daily struggle, the daily collision. This was a major contradiction that man dealt with, mediated by the elements discussed above.

The other 'collisional relationship' that man had to contend with was his fellow man. "Man enters into definite relations which are independent of their will..." says Marx.<sup>11</sup> At the gathering and hunting stage, man lived in hordes, or nomadic bands. Amidst a hostile environment of which man was by all means a victim, the only reliable source of social affirmation was his fellow man. Since an individual was not capable of surviving except as a member of a family, a powerful primeval social relation, it is only natural that this social unit defended itself against aggressors. The nature of confrontation at this early stage can best be explained as non-antagonistic in so far as crucial social movements were concerned. Divergence in interests came about as a result of social collisions which were not predetermined in a largely homogenous society. These situations were not based on a permanent social praxis. Again, kinship relations subjected the individual to various forms

of familial loyalties, so much so that antagonism and its resolution as feature, arising out of that social practice, were unnecessary. The emergence of classes, however, undermined this base. Antagonism came about with the owning of property. This was preceded by the differentiation of productive activities and therefore more products that were disposable. As Terray writes, "divergent and even antagonistic interests appeared requiring the establishment of rules and the introduction of arbitrators."<sup>12</sup> Prior to classes, morality solved contradictions and pre-empted their appearance. In a class society, morality as a principal way of resolving contradictions became largely ineffectual. Classes, a priori, refer to interests particular to those classes and since those interests are incompatible, the defence of interests becomes paramount. These defences are part and parcel of those interests; they are a central feature of classes, and collisions therefore are impossible to avoid.

We find, again, different social forms that related causally, or structurally, to these new forms of social relationships. It is this sense of conflict that is of interest to me, and that will form the core of the next discussion.

### Historical Notes On The Interlacustrine Areas (Ankole)

Rugendo notes that he wrote *The Contest* after researching among some ethnic groups of the interlacustrine area. The basic material for this drama is woven in a theatrical form currently referred to as "*heroic recitation*". The most interesting concept here for our purposes is *heroic*, which differentiates heroic recitations from other recitations such as praise songs. Heroism is a historical concept and as such it can be found in definite epochs as the ruling idea permeates social thinking, not just the thinking of individuals. The emergence of *heroism* is tied to several factors. Heroism in society becomes a ruling idea when, to ensure its existence against enemies, and to defend communal or individual ownership, members of a society have to carry arms, or develop a war—like readiness and aggression.

Heroism therefore emerged as a ruling idea when man had to win in the absence of modern means of warfare. Defence and offence under the banner of heroism manifested itself in a new form during the feudal era when the landed gentry had to carry arms and defend themselves against classes that threatened their property, virtues and members of their class.<sup>13</sup> As a ruling idea, then, *heroism* becomes a total phenomenon. It manifests itself not only through external action, but also through strong spiritual virtues deeply instilled in the ego, the I. In Africa, the Masai and the Bahima serve as examples of societies for both types of *heroism*.

To understand the cultural history of the interlacustrine area, it is necessary to go back five centuries to when the *Bahima* (singular *Muhima*), a pastoralist ethnic group, migrated south into the interlacustrine area and superimposed themselves on the peasantry, the *Bairu* (singular *Mwiru*). The *Bahima* and the *Banyankole* were constantly engaged in wars over grazing lands. However, a process of assimilation occurred between the *Bahima* and the *Bairu*, based on cattle ownership. A *Mwiru* who had distinguished himself in battle could be given a *Muhima* wife and cattle. Cows were a factor in reproduction of more cattle, so sometimes bulls would be given as rewards, in which case the recipient could not increase his cattle numbers. Therefore a *Muhima* could be poor and a *Mwiru* could become a *Muhima*. Distinction became a matter of class, not caste.<sup>14</sup>

It is evident that in a society where wars were the principal means of defence and economic growth, values like chivalry or heroism were held in pre-eminence. Wars were political actions as they continually strengthened allegiance, economic dominance and jurisdiction over other peoples. Heroism as a virtue pervaded the whole social fabric. Wars because a personal test of allegiance to the king, and in subsequent years when the feuda

of production changed, when the basis for the war era was superseded, heroic inspiration came from, and was strengthened by, the image of military confrontations and a mere scuffle was recited as a mighty war.

It is this historical reality, in the ultimate sense, that provided fertile ground for the growth of recitations as an artistic expression and elevated the ego to heroic fantasies, matching only the heroic spirit of the area.

### **The Contest and The Roots of Its Drama**

As mentioned earlier, drama entails the conflict of opposing forces. This conflict, though manifested in a personal way in recitations, must be rooted in a social movement.<sup>15</sup> Movement in this case provides the base for the individual will, and interacts with it in the dramatic quest for its resolution.

Earlier, we saw that the aristocratic Bahima were in an antagonistic contradiction with the Bairu and Banyankole, the former as their subjects, the latter in provincial wars to raid cattle and obtain grazing land. The society was irrevocably maturing into a feudal system, strengthening the relationship of the king and the land, entrenching the division between mental (courtly) and manual labourers and the basic tenets of loyalty and allegiance. Within this historical perspective it is not hard to find the roots of antagonistic contradictions. But interest here is the double reality, i.e. history and its artistic reflection, the drama, that is based on similar historical realities. Allegiance and loyalty were compulsory values, insubordination being cruelly suppressed, at one time by the king's freestanding army, or at another time by fellow class allies. But here, the mode of resolving the drama grew out of the opposing objective movement, contrary to **The Contest** which refuses to accept direct collision that would otherwise have involved the collision of the heroes.<sup>16</sup> The drama in **The Contest** turns and twists leaving traces of competition rather than collision.

Rugendo wrote this play, and based it on a realistic model of the recitation spectacle, but has not based it in the historicity. In attempting to create a collision of the heroes, he has taken upon himself the power to tailor the resolution of this confrontation by putting it in the audience. Here again, we find that there is a parallel model of audience participation both in the reality of the heroic recitation in the society and in the reality of the play. The audience plays the arbiter's role. The heroes cannot confront each other and typify the objective conflict of the two colliding movements, rather they address themselves to the audience, who accept or reject their heroic deeds. It would seem, therefore, that it is this reciter/people or actor/audience dialectic that is the kernel of the problem of dramatic sense, because in the eventual analysis it comes between the direct collision of the two characters.

The mode of solving a contradiction is a necessary consequence of the mode that created that contradiction. This causal relationship manifests itself in a progressive nature, so that finally the resolution qualitatively supercedes the original contradiction. Now, when we survey societies that did not have antagonistic relationships, we find that familial bonds, allegiance and blood relationships are dominant in holding the community together. These social relations created an affinity of values, or an ideological unity. This homogeneity is a result of the commonness of the struggle against one enemy, so that at the level of ideological awareness interests have not yet diverged and created antagonistic contradictions. This is the era when morality appealed to individual conscience and polarised the reality along a simple axis of good/bad, brave/cowardly, cunning/foolish. Morality was not only a way to solve contradictions, it also pre-empted similar situations.

Furthermore, in terms of daily affairs, there was no imposition of values and ideology from ruling classes. Hierarchy and social authority were derived from patriarchal allegiance,

or from the strong hand of tradition. Here we find that there was a broad social participation, which is a manifestation of the democratic will of the people with more or less equal rights. Equally, in storytelling or recitation, audience participation is theoretically designed to assert the reality of the art form. Story tellers and reciters have no base in themselves or elsewhere from which to pass their ideas on to others. They can excel in the manner of presenting their art forms, but they still remain the voice of the people themselves—the VOX POPULI. Audience participation, therefore, develops out of a pattern founded on the same ideological and artistic source for participation. It fails to grasp the social and artistic process that is crucial in understanding the concept of drama and participation, since familiarity of values does not exclude vicarious experience which does not have to be rooted in the same awareness.

Neither does audience participation here find explanation in the theory of play.<sup>17</sup> Play, in artistic engagements only, does not liberate the inhibited audience of adults. Aesthetic enjoyment does not provide enough push for the audience to participate with abandon. At most, it allows people to laugh from a distance, from a position of people alienated from their own lives, people who now lack the honest and internalised will to share in a creative moment.

Audience participation drastically changes its role in class society. An incompatibility of interests, and a sense of class survival reject morality and broad social participation. Class society holds antagonistic contradictions in its very womb and, therefore, brings about a totally new actor/audience dimension. Antagonism grows out of the womb of the ownership of the means of production, ownership of labour power, and the appropriation of the products. Herein arises the question of basic class interests and the defence of such interests, a question which involves both persuasive and coercive means, the latter attesting to the forceful nature of the collisions. It is not within the confines of this paper to discuss domination, but it is relevant to add here that art has been used as a means of domination, by subtly exploiting the aesthetic factor. Heroic recitations offer ample evidence of this use of art for domestication, as reciters take pride in being subjects to a king, strutting for oppressing women and killing enemies who are in some cases allies.<sup>18</sup> In these heroic recitations, as far as audience participation is concerned, in relation to the employment of art for domestication, we witness an artistic process that has successfully taken over the role of audience participation, and which, through systematic indoctrination and related social processes (kinship, allegiance, etc.), has continually created false consciousness. The audience, in participating in the recitations, is duped into participating in their own oppression. Exploitation, to ensure survival, is subtle and develops the element of play to ensure domestication of people and, therefore, continued submission and allegiance. This is the reality of heroic recitation as found in a normal spectacle. The material of recitations speaks of this systematic process of creating false consciousness.

Contrary to this reality of creating a false consciousness through aesthetics, Ruyendo has created an opposite tendency. He has given the audience a decisive, progressive role in his drama. He has, therefore, developed the role of participants to the extent of determining the direction of the heroes' collisions. Drama in *The Contest* is not, therefore, confined to conflict as portrayed in modern European Drama, in spite of the fact that objectively we have two movement colliding, principally because of the audience factor. The drama is not locked in four walls, nor is it journalistic; instead it employs dramatic poetry. This drama is, in a more important way, not confined to the will of two people, and therefore does not develop into a conflagration. Here the dramatic is merely in relation to the audience, since all

drama is resolved through the audience. This is a meeting point for the two models in that both **The Contest** and the heroic recitations make the audience a crucial arbiter without whom the drama cannot be resolved.

This points to the fact that audience participation has become a remnant of a once powerful artistic and social tendency that united the reciter with the community, whose base was democratic and creative participation. The actual roots of audience participation have already passed away, and reality today scares audience participation. The scary element is best seen when Ruyendo induces socialist victory by using the audience. This induction concurs, however, with historical reality, i.e. the destiny of the working class as exemplified by the events of the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and after. So reality has it right, both without and within the play.

Nevertheless, one feels that the artistic logic has been imposed on the audience. The audience is too simplistic in its thinking. It associates, for example, mechanised farming with capitalism, which does not at all have to be. Socialist planning also places high the question of agricultural transformation since mechanised farming ensures higher productivity. The audience sees things in black and white, almost reminiscent of the era of morality, so that to those who have found an empty pot at the end of the "socialist" rainbow, this argument will fall on deaf ears. Of course, the artistic reality allows audience participation in spite of all that has been said so far about its implications, but in practice the audiences in Dar es Salaam and in West Germany were restive. A writer puts words into the mouth of the audience easily, but for a director it is less easy. This elements, therefore, questions the compatibility of artistic logic in the play and its counterpart in traditional heroic poetry. Today we witness working classes actively taking it upon themselves to confront oppression and seek solutions to contradictions. Reality today refuses to involve the audience in a reality they know to belong to their oppressors.

Play and ideological affinity are in open conflict with social contradictions and, therefore, audience participation sounds farcical. The material ground of audience participation would require a play to be composed by those very people, dealing with their far and immediate issues, a real VOX POPULI—a play matured through their experience.

### *Chuanu: An Adaptation Of 'The Contest'*

The PAUKWA THEATRE ASSOCIATION adaption of **The Contest** supports this analysis. The play is too simplistic. The two heroes, who are the main characters, present themselves as unrealistic types. They engender attributes that are not organic, and cannot realistically react to situations. Similarly, the final arbitration that makes the hero of socialist ideology win, is subjective and appears from a dramatic development that does not justify the victory although, as mentioned above, the destiny of the working class supports the victory in **The Contest**.

The drama was therefore given more twists and turns. The characters were humanised. The skeleton idea of the "conflict" of the heroes was vested in a festival. The drummer became the Master of Ceremonies, and instead of one drummer there were two. They introduced the recitation by a "mini-recitation" of a dance-competition, musical rhythms, drum dialogues and proverbs. To each hero was attached several chorus girls who cheered and encouraged the reciter. PAUKWA added a third hero, who was dressed in a suit and played a guitar. He challenged both heroes as being quite idealistic and he showered praises on money and what it could accomplish.

The Master of Ceremonies went out into the audience to animate response. Also, as pointed out earlier, direct conflict between heroes was absent and the audience became the

arbiter, with the result that PAUKWA created moments of direct confrontation. These moments were actually out of the general form of *Chuano*. Heroes used songs as a means of conflict and by singing simultaneously, created disharmony, typical of a fight. Finally, stick fighting, a traditional and famous game was added. This fight was proposed by two elders (again an addition by PAUKWA) who thought it the only decisive test for the two heroes. In this fight that had elements of fairness, the hero who supported capitalist development lost.

In Dar es Salaam, *Chuano* was received as a festival, though audience participation was not outstanding. In Germany, the audience remained largely passive, and blank at times. At certain moments there seemed to be no communication whatsoever. To induce audience participation is to admit that there exists a gap between the audience and the play. The play wanted the audience to act as arbiters in the confrontation of the heroes. The basis for this acting, however, was a past reality.

Audience participation of the past does not hold a similar role today. Our reality holds that audience participation is too simplistic in a form such as heroic recitation in *The Contest*. The play, therefore, succeeded in being a big theatrical festival even after the adaptation. Drama hid itself in new songs, dramatic dances, poetry, stick fights etc. There is no doubt that the adaptation sharpened the tension. However, the efforts to sharpen the play did not touch its fundamental nature. They ended up creating a mixture of dramas, that are otherwise impossible to meet, and the show remained exciting but nevertheless quite controversial.

#### Notes and References

1. Paukwa Theatre Association Archives. The group participated in *Gesichte der Dritten Welt* and *Volktage Festivals*.
2. I will use both titles, *Chuano* and *The Contest*, interchangeably since the dramatic movement in both versions runs along similar lines.
3. A lengthy discussion is avoided here so, as will be shown later, the basis of drama is social movement and, therefore, is the ultimate determinant of artistic portrayal.
4. The danger has always been to be mechanistic and simplistic by assuming a rigid base/superstructure determination — whereas reality refuses this simplistic reductionism. There is a need to discover structural links between base and superstructure, since drama displays both types of relationships.
5. This struggle to survive was at the centre of preservation and annihilation. If man did not struggle to live he faced annihilation, the opposite assured him sustained existence.
6. Appropriation here does not relate to simple appropriation but rather to a general mode. E. Terray, *Marxism and "Primitive Societies"*, Modern Reader, 1972, p. 99.
7. G. Thomson, *Studies in Ancient Greek Society*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1961, Chapter 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
9. G. Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973, p. 38.
10. D. Sayer, "Method and Dogma in Historical Materialism," Mimeo, University of Dar es Salaam.
11. K. Marx, Preface to "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Moscow, Progress, Publishers, 1970.
12. E. Terray, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
13. E. Kamenka, R.S. Neale, E. Arnold (Eds.), *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond*, p. 33.
14. H.F. Morris, *Heroic Recitations of the Bahima*, Oxford University Press, 1964, Chapter 1.
15. Movement here refers to a social-historical tendency of particular social classes vis-a-vis other classes at a particular time.
16. *The Contest*: In this play, two heroes are reciting competitively in an attempt to win the hand of a village belle, Maendeleo, in marriage. The winner is acclaimed by popular vote.
17. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* — Translated by R.F.C. Hull, London, 1949.

18. T. Kaijage, "The Kilenzi Epic", Third Year Literature Special Study, Mimeo, University of Dar es Salaam, 1979.

This though is in no way to say that all heroic recitations were used to subdue people. There is a remarkable sense of protest in the heroic recitations. The protest in the recitations, though, used definite forms (irony and satire are two of the most common) to register the message. Heroic recitations, therefore, were not the monopoly of the ruling classes, but served the interests of the oppressed groups as well. However, this paper is confined to the recitations of domesticated people, in order to show clearly how social classes addressed themselves to such recitations, both in the traditional Bahima community, and that of today, for which Rugyendo wrote his play. (See also note 15).