Indigenous African Theatre: The Cultural Renaissance of the Disabled Comrade in South Africa

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Academic discussions and publications usually focus on African contemporary theatre which is not oral in nature and neglect the largely unexplored range of indigenous African theatre. The growing volume of contemporary African theatre has produced the notion that the seed of contemporary African theatre came from Europe. Unfortunately it seems that this notion is shared by the schools or departments of drama in South African universities (the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal, the University of Pretoria, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Stellenbosch, the University of Zululand and the University of Durban-Westville), since their drama curricula do not include a study of indigenous African theatre written and performed in African languages.

Scholars in these South African schools of drama consciously or unconsciously entrench the ideology of the original European administrators of colonial South Africa, a ideology that erased the cultural heritage of the African people and replaced it with European art. This ideological tendency is itself a tradition with a history[1]. The curricula of many literature and art departments in African universities (including South African universities) are witness to the neglect of indigenous African theatre.

This article proposes a new understanding of indigenous African theatre, based on the dramatic patterns of human life, and examines a few examples of indigenous African theatre which offer new insights into the peculiar quality of indigenous African theatre. The idea of 'new insights' should not be construed as suggesting that

[1] In 1931 Mary Kelly (1931:10) gave an example of this practice of erasing African art: 'The Holy Cross Mission, Pondoland, has lately been making experiments in drama with the natives of that part, and these experiments have shown several important things. They were concerned with the fact that Christianizing of the natives seemed to mean the removal of much of their natural arts, which were used as an expression of their lowest instincts rather than of any ideal, and they felt that something should be suggested to take their place'. See Mlama's (1991:122) discussion.

indigenous African theatre is a new genre having emerged only a decade, or even a century, ago. The idea of 'new insights' refers to the cultural manifestations or cultural renaissance of theatrical types which have been ignored. My discussion is premised on the belief that the characteristics of indigenous African theatre are

> its communal aspect, a collective working in a symbolic language of the fears, hopes and wishes of organic community, a placation of the gods (the natural elements) and a place for the dead who are called upon to intercede for the living. There is no proper "script" and therefore no single author, sometimes not even a proper audience since the audience itself is fluid and indefinable, constantly merging with performers (Nkosi 1981:176).

As a pre-colonial indigenous dramatic art, African theatre continues to be a visual and performing art dependent on forms of communication other than verbal language (Amankulor & Okafor 1988:37).

Clearly a wider concept of theatre is necessary to understand African indigenous theatre. This involves rethinking the concept of theatre as a heuristic device (Fischer-Lichte 1995:1). A concept of theatre as 'cultural performance', which Milton Singer (1959:xii) developed in his introduction to *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, can be used to describe 'particular, instances of cultural festivals, recitations, plays, dances, musical concepts' and the like. According to him, a culture articulates its self-image through such performances and thus represents and exhibits itself to its own members as well as to outsiders. He argues that

> for the outsider, these can conveniently be taken as the most concrete observable units of the cultural structure, for each performance has a definitely limited time span, a beginning and end, an organised programme of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance.

This concept of theatre is wide enough to be applied to different non-European as well as European theatre forms, to which the narrow concept of theatre (box-set stage, realism and a dramaturgy orientated towards the linear development of plot and the psychological development of characters) is unsuited.

My analysis of some indigenous African theatre forms will be located within Singer's model. I will analyse the following examples of indigenous African theatre: oral narratives, an indigenous African wedding celebration, and an African indigenous doctors' celebration. These are some examples of popular indigenous African theatre to be found among ordinary people, particularly unschooled peasants and the illiterate. Such examples can considered as indigenous African theatre because they satisfy the following criteria: limited time-span, a beginning and end, place and the occasion

of performance, an organised programme of activities, a set of performers and audience. Most importantly my study of indigenous African theatre forms is guided by these elements and their collective use within a people's world-view (Amankulor & Akafor 1988:36).

Oral Narratives

The phrase 'oral narratives' denotes various types of narratives such as myths, legends, tales, riddles and proverbs (Green 1981:71). African oral literature has been ignored and condemned as 'primitive', and scholars of literature have regarded oral literature as savage and backward (Bitek 1973:19,20,36). The missionaries and anthropologists treated African literature as strange and curious objects or experiences (Bitek 1973:19-20; Mlama 1983:6). As anthropologists and researchers continued discovering the artistic and social significance of African art, they shifted their paradigm. They came to believe that oral narratives were not, indeed could not be, indigenous to Africa (Finnegan 1978:29). Possessed by an ideology that found it difficult to see Africa as other than savage and backward, it was not easy for them to appreciate oral literature or to regard it as having originated in Africa. It was the post-*uhuru* period that opened gates for oral narratives in Africa to be regarded as literature. However, the theatricality of oral narratives is still a subject of divisive debate. While many scholars appear to have reached a consensus that oral narratives are a form of theatre, some African scholars in South Africa are still opposed to such a view.

It is against this background that I describe and analyse tales as a theatre form as opposed to an oral literary form. With regard to the description of tales, the narration is brought to action by the story-teller. The story-teller does not have at his disposal some of the theatrical devices employed in other theatre forms, such as many actors to take different roles of characters in a story. Different characters in the story are played by the story-teller although he does not employ particular costumes, a special stage and settings to actualise the story. He dramatizes his narration by the use of various other theatrical devices. For example, a deep voice demonstrates a wicked or frightening character such as a monster. Chattering characterises the liar. Mumbling is employed for stupid characters. Voice techniques are used to create appropriate atmosphere. Whispers or low voices indicate appropriate danger. Emergency situations are indicated by the quickening of the tempo of the voice, whereas a slower tempo indicates an atmosphere of relaxation (Mlama 1983:272). These theatrical devices also demonstrate the narrator's artistic ability to captivate the audience. They further hold the interest of the audience because they are used to suit the situation, develop it and move it forward.

The use of the language in the description of characters, scenery, and atmos-

phere in a way that excites the imagination of the audience and their interest in the story is one of the most important elements of dramatic narration. Proverbs, sayings, similes and metaphors are also used to make the descriptions more vivid and to create a picture that is familiar to the audience. Creativity and skilful use of the language are also important in bringing the action of the story to life through narration (Green 1980:77& Mlama 1983:272-73).

The narration of the tales hinges upon human and non-human characters. Human characters are usually employed in stories which are historically based, such as the genealogy of a king or any common person. Non-human characters are usually employed in religious and philosophical stories and referred to as carriers of the religio-philosophical thought of African people. Sometimes human and non-human characters are combined to drive home a particular philosophical thought. All the characters in the actualisation of the tales, be they humans or non-humans, are given human attributes so that people may identify with them.

The theatricality of the tales is determined by a programme of activity: the occasion of the performance, the time and space in which the performance takes place, the performer and audience, and materials that are employed during the performance. These are the theatrical techniques should be satisfied by any cultural performance in order to qualify and be regarded as a form of indigenous African theatre. Unlike other cultural performances, the tales' theatricality is not methodically organized and pre-planned. It is a question of the coming together of the actor or performer and the audience around the fire at home (in the hut or courtyard or in the grazing or hunting field). Unplanned as it is, the performance of the narration continues smoothly and according to a particular sequence as if it was pre-planned, for it consists of a beginning, a middle and an end which flow from one point to another. It is this sequence that draws the audience into the performance. The audience behaves as if it sees the performance on the stage.

The time and space in which the performance is performed are also paramount. For example, in the case of women and children, where an old woman is the performer, the performance takes place inside the hut. Participants come together around the fire-place or hearth. Men and boys perform in the courtyard where historical performances take place. The hunters would come together anywhere in open space and tell stories. In all these cases, the story-tellers sit among the audience and commence the stories. A women and children's performance usually takes place in the evening when everybody has retired from work. A men and boys' performance takes place during the day, in most cases in the afternoon when boys have come back from herding. The hunters perform their tales around the fire in the evening. The time-limit is determined by the language and artistic skills of the performer which captivate the audience. If the performer has the artistic ability to arouse the interest of the audience

the story is prolonged, but if the performer cannot sustain the interest of the audience, the performance becomes short (Mlama 1983:287 and Omodele 1988:83-87).

The occasion also determines a tale's theatricality. Occasions such as pleasure nights, hunting, herding and courtyard discussion dictate the types of stories to be performed. The stories for pleasure-nights are told by women and children. Women and children approach these tales as creative plays which are performed as mere games (Green 1980:76). The men and boys' stories are performed on occasions such as courtyard discussions, herding and hunting. The stories performed during these occasions are taken in more seriously, while those performed by women are regarded as lighthearted.

The most important materials employed by the performer are language, voice, songs and gestures (Mlama 1983:270)[2]. They are employed further to dictate the theatricality of tales; the creative employment of language in the portrayal of characters, situation and mood contributes to the theatricality of a tale. For example, in the *Krwedebe's* tale, the performer describes a picture of a child whose mother has passed away. His father has to re-marry. The performer describes the pathetic situation in which the child finds herself:

> Wahlala kabuhlungu
> imihla ngemihla elila
> kuba kaloku wayebethwa,
> ephekiswa, etheziswa,
> esalusiswa.
>
> She was ill-treated everyday,
> weeping because she was
> beaten, was forced to cook, fetch
> fire-wood from the forest and
> herd the cattle.

[2] Unanimity does exist regarding the identity of the performer in oral performance. Jafta (1978:33) argues that a performer or narrator is a special person, usually an old lady. Leshoai (1981:243-44) argues that the tales are told by the grandmothers. I prefer the account s of Green and Mlama. Green (1981:76) points out that there are stories that are told or performed by women and others by men. She also implies that boys and girls do perform the stories. Mlama (1983:287) is of the opinion that although anybody can be a story-teller (performer), usually these old women become the best performers. The men and the young members of the family, however, are always given a chance to tell stories. The children even as young as four or five years old are encouraged to tell stories, this being one way of training them in the story telling art.

The repeated verbs *'wayebethwa'*, *'ephekiswa'*, *'esalusiswa'* describes the state in which the girl finds herself. Through the inward eye the audience sees this girl. They also contribute to building the plot. It is through them that the performer describes and creates the story's moods and tensions in the family with a stepmother. The verbs in this texts have a musical pitch in order to achieve emphasis.

The portrayal of the many roles played by the performer is achieved by the use of voice. A big voice characterises a boy who comes to save the girl from the stepmother. A soft and low voice indicates or characterises the unfortunate girl and her state of trauma:

Boy:	*(with a big voice)* Xa ndisithi masiye ekhaya uye kuba yinkosikazi yam ungavuma na?
Girl:	*(with a low voice)* Ewe ndingavuma.
Boy:	*(with a big voice)* If I say we must go to my home in order to get married, will you agree?
Girl:	*(with a low voice)* Yes, I will agree.

The dialogue between the boy and the girl is indicated by the quickening of the tempo of the voice of the performer. This quickening of the tempo indicates an emergency situation which is intended to rescue and save the victim.

Another role played by the performer is that of a monster or wicked and frightening character. For instance, the girl has been to her home for a few weeks to bury her stepmother. On her way back to her new home, in the big forest she meets a monster. The frightening situation is demonstrated as follows:

Monster:	*(with a big voice)* Krwebede! krwebede! krwebede! uveli phi?
Girl:	*(with a small voice)* Ndivela ekhaya.
Monster:	*(with a big voice)* Krwebede! Krwebede! Ekhaya kukho bani?
Girl:	*(with a small voice)* Kukho umama notata.
Monster:	*(with a big voice)* Krwebede! krwebede! krwebede! ndingabulawa, ndibulawe ujike uze kuhamba apha? Hi?
Monster:	*(with a big voice)* Krwebede! krwebede! krwebede!
Monster:	Where do you come from?
Girl:	*(with a low voice)* I am coming from home.
Monster:	*(with a big voice)* Krwebede! Krwebede! Who is at home?
Girl:	*(with a small voice)* My mother and father.
Monster:	Krwebede! Krwebede! Krwebede! How can you walk here having killed me? Hi?

Song is one of the most important materials or techniques in the creation of theatrical narration. Apart from contributing the development of structural patterns and the development of the story, it is usually used as a communication technique between characters especially human and non-human characters (Mlama 1983:283). For example, in the story of two doves that went to look for Malkhomese who left her two children starving the doves come across many people in one family. The people and the doves communicate through the song:

People: *(shouting)* Wabethini?
Doves: *(singing)* Asimahobezana okuthethwa,
Thina!
Sifun' uMalkhomese
Thina!
Wasishiya sisodwa,
Thina.
Sadl' umhlaba sakhula,
Thina!

People: *(shouting)* Beat them.
Doves: *(singing)* We are not the doves to be beaten!
We are looking for Malkomese!
She left us alone.
We lived on dust and grew up!

Song is also employed by a performer in order to expose the culprit to other people. Malkhomese, for example, is not known by the people to have left the children alone. The above song is sung by the doves to expose her. Indeed she is exposed and the people respond by chasing her away. Song is employed to entertain and educate the audience (Jafta (1978:63), Green (1981:80), and Mlama (1983:320)).

It could also be argued that the song is used as sympathetic magic to make what is naturally impossible happen (Mlama 1983:284). For example, the above song makes it possible for the doves to fly and carry Malkhomese back to her children. Furthermore, the singing birds in the story can be used for many purposes. Since the birds are able to fly long distances, they represent the carriers of news. Birds are often present in trees and they become witnesses of events, although their presence is often ignored. As such, the birds are often the only witnesses to crimes committed in the absence of human beings. They therefore always provide the missing link in solving the mystery of the crime committed (Mlama 1983:284).

For example, a tale of children who lost their father's bird is told. The children were worried by their father who had warned them not to open the hut where the bird

was. The children, however, invited their friends to come to their father's bird. They opened the hut and it flew away and was lost. The children were worried and went to look for it. The pedagogical lesson in this tale is simple and to the point. The importance of love, co-operation and kindness is taught in many oral narratives. An example is the story of Ndudula and Ndudu, who were twins. Ndudula was caught by a monster while she was collecting firewood from the forest. Her twin brother Ndudu was very frustrated. As a result of love for his twin sister he risked his life for her sake. He found her married to a monster and with two children. The story of an old woman and the jackal cautions people about trickery. This particular old women lived with her grandchildren. They were school-goers. A jackal came and cheated the old woman while the children were at school. The jackal suggested that they should play a game that involved getting into a pot with boiling water. They were going to alternate. The old woman agreed. When it was the old woman's turn to get into the pot, the jackal closed and tightened the lid of the pot. The old woman cried until she died.

Some oral narratives demonstrate how intellectual supremacy triumphs over physical power. For example, the animals had a meeting. The main item under discussion was a solution to a great drought that had befallen their country. The chairperson of the meeting was the king of the animals, the lion. The first animal that came with an idea was the hare, one of the small animals. The hare suggested that they should collect water. Its idea was undermined by the leopard and the lion and the water remained in the well. But eventually, the hare's idea was accepted and water was collected into a big dam that was dug by animals for water. The animals took turns in protecting the dam and water against anybody who might come and drink. The elephant was the first to look after the water. The jackal who had refused to be part of the scheme came to drink water. It sang a beautiful song that made the elephant fall asleep. The jackal drank the water while the elephant was asleep. All the big animals were given the chance to guard the water but all fell asleep when the jackal came singing. The tortoise's chance came. The jackal attempted the tricks it had performed on the other animals, but the tortoise caught it because of its intellectual acumen.

Finally, this descriptive analysis of oral narratives shows that indigenous theatrical forms do exist in South Africa. Such narratives contain pedagogical elements while simultaneously including entertainment values. When performed in the presence of the audience, they convey their meanings and functions by means of exciting and imaginative theatrical techniques. The stories communicate through symbolic images. As we have seen, the human and non-human characters employed in these stories represent images of various aspects of human behaviour and also represent animal and human characters involved in positive and negative events in everyday life (Green 1981:7; Mlama 1983:321).

The Indigenous African Wedding Celebration

Despite cultural diversity, which is attributable to different social, economic, political and geographical circumstances, all African communities in South Africa, that is, Ndebele, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu, practise the 'wedding-celebration' form of theatre. I take my example from a Xhosa indigenous African wedding celebration which I observed and in which I participated in my own region, the Eastern Cape. My approach will be, first, to give a brief description of this celebration by outlining its structural pattern and, second, to present an analysis.

There are two broad structural sections in the celebration: (i) the negotiations or preparations, and (ii) the wedding celebration, *umdudo*.

(i) The negotiations

The negotiations involve members of the families of the prospective bride and groom. This is a beginning of many of the dramatic episodes, and is marked by rhetoric, music, praise-names and dance. While the dramatic dialogue is between the prospective in-laws, music and dance are performed by the bride's family. Just as the whole performance is characterised by multivoiced dramatic developments in the sense that various performance-types are performed simultaneously, here the performance includes rhetoric, music, dance and praise names. Men called *oonozakuzaku* represent the groom's side in these negotiations. In fact, *oonozakuzaku* are sent by the groom's family to negotiate with the bride's family. Both families go out their way to choose people who are known of their rhetoric. Their manner of speech is often not dictated by any formulaic style. The dialogue between the *oonozakuzaku* and the bride's family begins as follows:

Bride's family:	Khanitsho ke. Tell us.
Oonozakuzaku:	Sibone isitya kweli khaya. We have seen a vessel in this family.

The *oonozakuzaku* start describing the qualities of the prospective bride. After the descriptions the bride's family summons girls who act as pseudo-brides. The pseudo-brides are presented by the bride's family to the *oonozakuzaku*. The reason for the presentation of the pseudo-brides to the *oonozakuzaku* is to test the *oonozakuzaku*'s sincerity about what they claim to have seen. When the *oonozakuzaku* have finally identified the prospective bride among the pseudo-brides, the bride's family say:

Bride's family:	Betha. Go on.

One of *oonozakuzaku* stands up to name the beasts and their features for *lobola*. If the negotiations are for princes, *lobola* may amount to a hundred or more beasts. A voice from the bride's family is heard saying: *Ubuziqhuba ngantoni na?* (What did you use to drive these beasts?). The groom's family responds by dramatic action, namely by putting tobacco in front of both the bride's family and the groom's family. A second voice from the bride's side says: *Yenza lingasitsarhi* (Continue to avoid suffocation). The groom's group starts smoking and the bride's family follows their example. After some time the bride's family will make it clear that the tobacco is nice or not nice (*liyaqhuma* or *aliqhumi*). The performers are *oonozakuzaku* (groom's family) who stand up and demonstrate by gestures and movements the features of the beasts. The members of the bride's family become the spectators. I should, however, mention that this part is an introduction to the actual theatre performance, for this part involves, as the performers and the spectators, the friends and relatives of the prospective groom and bride.

Linked to this part of the section of the celebration is a communal aspect which is a characteristic of indigenous African theatre. Another important issue to be noted is that a groom's family does not necessarily spend only one day with the bride's family. Sometimes, for example, in the case of the royal family, when the bride's family is satisfied by the groom's side, a national meeting is called in order to welcome and rejoice with the bride's side. During this period speeches, songs, dances and oral poetry might be performed . It is through these speeches, songs, dances and oral poetry that the participants and the audience express their feelings. Their dreams and hopes have come to realisation. As they think of the whole occasion, their hearts become filled with joy and exhilaration. The songs involved are for entertainment and thematic significance. Speeches are intended for communication and expressing of deeply felt feelings and joy.

(ii) The wedding celebration (*umdudo*)

The wedding celebration *umdudo* is located within and guided by a limited time-span (three to eight days), a beginning and end, an audience, performers, an organised programme of activity, and a place and occasion of performance. These criteria determine its theatricality. These techniques are the most basic elements observable in *umdudo* that suggests that it is a form of indigenous African theatre. It is open for everybody, as other nations are invited. Once the nations arrive the celebration starts.

When the negotiations between groom's family and bride's family have been finalised, an organised programme of activity is planned as follows: artistic preparations including making of costumes, drums, rehearsals for actors, musicians and dancers (Amankulor and Akafor 1988:37), and finally the wedding celebration takes place. The bride's side, called *uduli*, goes to the groom's family for the purpose of the wed-

ding celebration—*umdudo*. The wedding celebration takes place in the courtyard, referred to as *inkundla*. This section is dominated by music and dance. The repetition of music and dance does not bore the participants because repetition pleases them, especially if one considers the fact that 'when something pleases the Africans, its repetition pleases them even more' (Traoré 1972:55). The climax of the wedding celebration is on the day of marriage vows—*ukunqumla inkundla*. This day is viewed by Africans as a culmination of various events.

The bride's family and the groom's family sit facing in opposite directions, on the open stage or space in front of the huts or kraals. The bride and groom are present at this meeting. Both sides sing, dance and shout. The men put on their attire, called *isidla* and *isidabane*. The women are also in traditional dress, *isikhaka* and *incebeta*. Young people in general are also present. They are costumed or disguised in indigenous attire. The bride and the two or three girls called pseudo-brides emerge from the bride's family. They go and stand in front of the audience, facing the groom's family. The bride uncovers herself from the head to the abdomen and from the thighs to the feet; that is, the breasts and the thighs are naked. The groom's family looks at her with analytic and critical eyes. The audience reacts positively or negatively depending on whether or not the bride looks like a virgin. The groom emerges from the groom's group and goes to the bride. They exchange *iintshinga*—African wedding necklaces. (African wedding necklaces were and are replaced by European wedding rings at the dull wedding ceremony at the altar where the bride and the groom repeat words that nobody believes in—'I will never look at another woman or man again in my life' (Bitek 1973:3).) The bride starts by taking her *intshinga* and putting it on the groom and then the groom does likewise. Then they go to the kraal. The bride holds up a spear in her right hand. They stand in front of the gate of the kraal. The bride spears the gate at the left and leaves the spear there. They go back to the audience. As soon as the bride spears the gate the *imbongi* recites the praises. The women shout *kiki-kiki-kiki-kiki*. The two groups of the bride and the groom compete by singing and dancing until the end of the celebration.

Apart from an organised programme of activity as discussed above, there is no fixed time of the month and year that is set aside for the celebration of the indigenous African wedding ceremony. The date is decided by the in-laws once they have agreed on *lobola*, which is part of the preparatory phase. Before the actual celebration the performers from both sides learn and rehearse new songs and new dance-forms for the wedding celebration. Larlham (1982:105) in support of this view writes:

> Although it is used to be customary for the party of the bride to repeat old and new well-known songs, the bridegroom generally preferred, for his own party, to introduce something entirely new to mark the occasion. For this purpose, he would secure

> the services of some professional 'composer' (*umqambi*), of whom each district could boast of one or two. No fee was charged for the service. A few days before the wedding, the *ukufunda* (to learn) would be announced among the surrounding kraals. The bride, or the bridegroom, would first lead their party through all the proposed older dances. Then the *(umqambi)* would initiate them in his own special new composition.

However, some forms of indigenous African theatre can be performed without rehearsal but from past knowledge and experience. The whole performance becomes episodic, for it consists of different unrelated and related organised programme of activities. Oyin Ogunba (1978:22) is correct to suggest that indigenous African theatre

> ... is organized on an episode basis. An actor comes forward and dramatizes a historical event or a myth or simply creates a scene with his appearance and general bearing and this act may have little or no relationship at all with preceding or subsequent act; indeed two acts mimed in sequence at a festival may in history have been separated by centuries.

Ogunba's description of an organized programme of activities of indigenous African theatre will be understood as the discussion unfolds.

The bride is usually accompanied by young and old girls, young men and a few old men. They form a group called *uduli*. The *uduli* arrives at sunset and is welcomed by its in-laws by being accommodated it in any home prepared for the purpose. While the most important part (the actual celebration) is dominated by songs, dance forms and oral poetry, the climax and most exciting episode is the scene of marriage vows—*ukucanda inkundla*. Singing and dancing are a means of expressing appreciation of the bride and the groom. This is a social occasion in this celebration with messages of joy, well-wishes and blessings which are directed to parents of both (bride and groom) through songs, dance forms and oral poetry. Culturally, *ukunqumla inkundla* is meant to assure the groom's side that the bride is a virgin, hence she has to uncover her head to the abdomen and from the thighs to the feet so that her in-laws are able to make the critical analysis which will determine whether or not the bride is a virgin. The main focus of the analysis is the breasts and thighs. The exchange of *iintshinga* is a symbol of cleavage between the groom and the bride. The bride's act of spearing the gate symbolises commitment to the marriage vows. This scene is used as an important means of providing the African society with an opportunity of evaluating its quality of life. The bride is used as the main character in determining whether or not the African women still value the purity of unmarried women.

Another scene begins with a performance by women of the groom's side, who perform various dances and songs and also imitate various duties to be performed by

the bride, such as carrying of firewood, fetching of water, ploughing and hoeing. Apart from the women of the groom's side, this scene is an important means of acknowledging the contribution of individual poets, dancers and singers to social living. The creativity of these individuals is used to enhance collective social experience while at the same time providing a critical means of evaluating the creativity of individuals (Agovi 1980:143). The performers move to and from the audience and they interact with the members of the audience. Since there is no blueprint script the performance is marked by spontaneity which forms part of performance. The sequence of performance is determined by performers who come forward as individuals or in a group and perform as they wish. The presence of an active audience influences the direction of a performance as a result of its involvement or participation (Agovi 1980:148). If the audience does not respond it becomes very difficult for the performers/actors to enjoy and rise to the level of the occasion.

I should also comment on the functions and meanings of the songs involved in this performance. For example, the song

> Amalongwe hay' amalongwe,
> Amalongwe soze siwabase ,
> Saya kwamkhozi sacel' inkuni,
> Batsh' ukusinik' ingxowa yamalongwe.
>
> Dried cow-dung no dried cow-dung,
> We shall never make use of dried cow-dung to make fire,
> We went to the in-laws,
> They gave us a bag of dried cow-dung.

is used for entertainment and thematic significance. It arouses the feelings of performers and audience. The manner in which the performer renders the song provokes the audience to respond with great enthusiasm. They become co-participants, patrons, chorus, as well as critics or judges of the performer's communicative ability (Mvula 1991:13). The song also warns the bride against looking down upon unmarried women. It also teaches that marriage should not make her egocentric, for her husband's family is not better than other families. The teachings apply to the groom as well. More importantly, this song combined with dance is used ideologically to arm the bride with knowledge of her social responsibilities. It ridicules laziness and teaches her that laziness will not be accepted by her in-laws.

The performers are not trained specialists. All those members of the community who are gifted in acting are free to perform. However, young children and old people cannot perform in some African communities. While the performers are not trained, together with the audience, they play an important role in the performance. It

is upon performer-audience participation that the theme, style and success of the occasion are determined. They are determined by way of songs, dance and the like. For example, the song

> Namhla siyakushiya, namhla uzothukwa,
> Bath' uligqwirha mntwan' asemzini.
> Namhla siyakushiya, namhla uzokhala,
> Bathi unemicondo mntwan' asemzini.
> Zunyamezele zunyamezele zunyamezele,
> Mntwan' asemzini.
>
> Today we leave you, today you will be insulted,
> They say you are a witch, our child.
> Today we leave you, today you will cry
> They say you have got thin legs, our child.
> Be tolerant, be tolerant, be tolerant,
> Our child.

demonstrates the nature of the occasion. The song becomes a group activity with the performers and audience joining and interacting in singing and dancing. It also teaches the bride to be tolerant since she will be stigmatised by her in-laws. This song represents a foreshadowing of the future that is acted out in song and dance. It is also a kind of window into the future that the brides looks into and sees herself in an endeavour to prepare herself for the awaiting domestic routines. The idea is to make her decide whether she would like to see herself in the image of success or failure like the character in the musical. The song contains a fundamental element of the prophetic message which is hidden in it. Since it is sung in a provocative and trance-like manner, the future is projected in the form of prophetic utterance. The notion of prophetic and visionary beliefs becomes a cultural feature characterising the African marriage. While the message of the song is directed to the bride, the audience supports the performer by way of giving or responding to the performer. Without the feedback of the audience the performer might not succeed in conveying the message. The song is also marked by parallelism. The use of this technique by the performer is intended to achieve emphasis and make a song memorable, sweet, meaningful. It includes an aesthetic device which indicates a performer's mastery of the poetic discourse. The repeated syntactic and semantic forms and resultant rhythm achieved through parallelism carry the meaning of a song (Mvula 1991:32).

African Indigenous Doctors' Celebration

The African indigenous doctors' celebration is one of the oldest celebrations in Africa.

It has always been functional and communal and has always reflected and highlighted the world-view of African communities.

Before I give an analysis of the African indigenous doctors' celebration, it is necessary to establish whether or not this celebration is a form of indigenous African theatre. Jafta (1978:20-21) in her MA thesis discusses the African traditional doctors' celebration as a form of indigenous African theatre. In her concluding remarks she writes:

> This is a ritual song and dance of diviners that is generally regarded as of a communicative kind with the ancestors. The diviners celebrate with it and invoke the presence of the ancestors with it. They also get their inspiration from it so that they become extremely sensitised to the presence of evil and their divining powers are easily aroused.

Similarly Sithembiso Nxiyema, who is one of the powerful African indigenous doctors at Holy Cross, Lusikisiki, argues that the African indigenous doctors' celebration is a kind of drama which is intended, among other things, to reconcile the ancestors and those who are still alive, and also to entertain the unseen and the members of the community (Personal interview 1993). Ngcamphalala, a cultural historian in Swaziland, who has experienced African indigenous doctors' celebrations in other African states, such as Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Malawi, maintains that the African indigenous doctors' celebration is a form of indigenous African theatre whose roots are grounded in the African soil (Personal interview 1993). It is important to mention that there are various types of indigenous doctors' celebrations, such as *ukuthwasa, ukuvumisa* and the like. In this essay, however, I deal with *ukuthwasa.* My analysis is based on the Tsonga community in South Africa. The structure of the celebration is as follows:

(i) A Call to Priesthood

African indigenous doctors are born, not made. One does not decide to be an indigenous doctor. One is called by the ancestral spirit. In support to this view, Broster (1981:24) writes that no one becomes an indigenous doctor, an *igqirha,* by personal choice. Each individual experience a definite call from an ancestral spirit, whom she/he must serve for the rest of her/his life. The period is called *kuthwasa* in Tsonga.

(ii) The Training Period

The period of training differs from community to community, but among the Tsonga people it takes from three to ten months. During this period the trainee wears a particular attire and avoids smoking, sex and drinking. Language usage also changes. More importantly there are evening gatherings involving dance, songs and drumming that bring the trainee very close to the ancestral spirit. These gatherings are open to the

public. There are also dramatic scenes 'of a rather private kind, with a minimal audience and often no audience at all' (Okpewho 1992:262).

(iii) The Graduation Ceremony

This takes about two to three days. It is a public gathering of African indigenous doctors, friends or visitors, community members and relatives. The doctors sing, beat drums, dance and so forth. The African indigenous doctor who has been instructing the trainee is presented with gifts. The graduation ceremony is dominated by songs and dance, which perform the same function as the dialogue in a play. Generally, the occasion is marked by one theme which runs through these songs. Okpewho (1992:263) states that

> the exchange of songs plays much the same role as the dialogue in a play. Though it does not lead to a conflict of wills between characters, it certainly yields an emotional counterpoint that brings the performance to a charged climax. The language of the songs and the dramatic movements contribute to the sublimity of the representation in the performance.

It is important to mention that in contemporary times the indigenous African doctors are organized as the Association of African Indigenous Doctors. They attempt to revive and promote their cultural activities as theatrical performances. They are mobile theatre groups. It is not uncommon to see them in their best costumes moving from village to village competing with dance and songs.

The African indigenous doctors' celebration as a form of indigenous African theatre is performed for and by individuals who have been visited or caught by spirits or dead relatives. Like the indigenous wedding celebration, the African indigenous doctors' celebration is performed at no fixed time of the year. The determining factor is the afflicting spirits and the afflicted person, who becomes a patient or candidate for initiation into the indigenous African medical field, which is called *ukuthwasa*. During this period of *ukuthwasa* the candidates, the doctors and the audience usually meet in the evenings almost every day for a performance. Various dances, songs and drumming are performed. The candidates and the doctors raise their hands to the sky and point down to the floor as they dance and sing. They also look up and down. For example, the song

> Ndza kayakaya minoo,
> Hoo aha hee, hee!
> Ndza kayakaya ndzi na maxangoo,
> Hoo, aha, hee, hee!
> Wa kayakaya n'wanangoo.

Hina hi losile,
Vangoma hi yo haa!
Hi losile, vangoma hee!
Tonga siya duma.

I move from pillar to post,
Hoo aha, hee, hee!
I move from pillar to post because of trials and tribulations,
Hoo aha hee, hee!
My child is also suffering.
We greet you,
You diviners haa!
We greet you, diviners, hee!
The famous ones.
(Translated by D.J. Risenga)

signifies that the candidates and doctors are communicating with the deceased relatives. It is also intended to invoke the ancestors, for the whole performance is an occasion for divination. Apart from evening performance, the candidates might perform at any time when the spirits move them to perform.

The actors, that is, candidates and doctors, become para-human actors, for they are believed to have taken the form of the ancestors, that is, actors who could be described as non-human. Since this is a religious occasion, the actors put on a costume, which has been chosen according to the choice and taste of particular ancestors, and make-up that relates directly to their dramatic intentions and may also reinforce their act through improvisation (Agovi 1980:149). When the ancestors are possessed by the spirits their bodies are transformed and muscles ripple up and down. The audiences rejoice as they see the actors being possessed by the spirits, for it means the spirits are ready to help, bless and heal the actors. Since this phase takes place in a relatively small space or in a hut, the audience is very small. Its involvement in the performance is through clapping of hands, drumming and singing.

The most important phase is the graduation ceremony, which takes about two to three days. Doctors, friends, community members and relatives are invited. The notion of two to three days satisfies the criteria of limited time-span and a beginning and end that determine the theatricality of this performance as a form of theatre. The main actors in this episode are the graduands and doctors. The relatives, friends, and the head of homestead are members of the audience, who become co-participants at a later stage.

The programme of activity is organized as follows: this part is divided into different phases with different episodes, such as ceremonial beer drinking, sacrificial

beast slaughtering and the actual performance which involves dancing, singing and drumming. Some of the episodes are related and some are not. They take part in the courtyard. In fact the programme of activity is the continuation of the performance which has taken place in a hut. The act of beer drinking and sacrificial beast slaughtering during a graduation ceremony means that conferring of the status of a doctor upon the graduands by the doctors who have been supervising them. It also shows the co-existence of rituals with cultural performance. After conferring the status of a doctor upon the graduands, the doctors and graduands as performers begin to dance and sing. The dancing and singing are accompanied by drums. The performers sing and dance in a circle. The theme of the song is the same as *Ndza kayakaya minoo* above. However, in this context the function of the song and dance is to arouse feelings of joy and gratitude to the spirits and those who contributed to the success of the whole occasion of divination. As the performers dance and sing, the audience become co-participants by way of supporting the audience. They also express their joy and gratitude to the spirits for blessing and healing the graduands. The audience's hopes and dreams are expressed through the dancing and singing. The interaction between the performers and the audience is also regarded as a communication between them, for it is upon the interaction that most of the members of audience express their joy, appreciation and congratulation to the performers whose dreams have been realised on the one hand. It is through interacting with the audience on the other hand that the performers show that they are grateful to the members of the audience for their help and support.

In most cases the graduands and the doctors put on their special costume, powdered white clay and white beads. They (the costume, powdered white clay and white beads) signify the kind of occasion being celebrated. They also stand for the deceased relatives and powdered white clay and white beads are used because ancestors are believed to be white. According to African ways of life, everything representing the deceased relatives is white in colour. The graduands and doctors are believed to be representing or to have taken new identities as spirits, ancestors and deceased relatives. The graduands and doctors become the para-human actors since they are believed to be the integration and fusion of spirits and matter. To put it differently, they are a fusion of human beings and non-human beings who assume completely new identities as actors. As a result of the force of the role concept, the audience accept their new role identity and are prepared to enter into their (the actors') world of conscious impersonation. Acting in this context becomes an attempt to act out an imagined identity that is credible to the audience (Agovi 1980:152).

The graduands and doctors, as para-human actors, employ songs, dances, mimes, sounds and expressive gestures of the face, hand and feet. The songs and dances are intended to drive the para-human actors to the point of being possessed by the ancestral spirits and they might be in a trance. They also mean to tap communal or indi-

vidual understanding of an event (Balistreri 1979:171). Through the songs and dances, emotions are raised and expressed. As Ola Rotimi (1990:255) states:

> ... the traditional African theatre appeals to the emotions as it does to the intellect. ...[T]o the performer in the traditional African theatre, it is just as pertinent to involve the spectator emotionally as to become himself involved with the spirit of the character which he sets out to portray. It can therefore be inferred that in traditional African theatre the emotions and the intellect are both complementary gateways to the human essence.

In addition, the songs as they are sung by both the actors and audience serve to strengthen the theme of divination. They also become a source of aural enjoyment for the audience. Rotimi (1990:255) argues similarly that songs serve as a medium of accenting theme (as usually evinced in a refrain), for commenting on topical issues, for according auditory pleasure, and for providing stimulus to dance.

Concerning movements and mimes, the para-human actors convey thoughts and feelings that are representational and religiously vital. The para-human actors occupy the stage as individuals or groups of three or so. An individual para-human actor comes forward, in front of the audience and performs or dances. She/he might be followed by another individual or group. Their appearance before the audience creates a different sequence of scenes, which might be related or not related at all to preceding scenes. This occasion necessitates the definition of the term 'audience'. Agovi (1980:154) defines 'audience' in indigenous African theatre as a group of people to whom a message or performance is directed. It includes different categories, such as spectators or observers, who may be present at a performance without necessarily being the focus of attention or the focus of the message. It may also include non-human audiences such as spirits and ancestors, who are often the focus of attention in religious indigenous African theatres. This implies that the indigenous doctors' celebration involves both human and non-human audiences and performers because it is a religious occasion with messages that are directed to the human beings and to the spirits and ancestors.

The human audience participates in singing, clapping of hands and, in some cases, verbally. When the audience responds actively as a way of showing appreciation, the para-human actors become more spiritually involved in their performance, leading to a heightened evocation of voice, an intensified projection of group sentiment and an expressive interpretation of the songs. The songs become a direct channel for communication between the actors and the audience (Agovi 1980:153). At one stage, the following song is sung:

Ha wu vona ntirho, ha wu vona,
Thokozan' thokoza bakithi!
Ha wu vona ntirho wenu,
Thokazan', thokozan'bakithi!

We see the ceremony we see it,
Thokozan', thokozan' dear people!
We see your ceremony,
Thokozan', thokozan', dear people!
We see it, it is marvellous.
(Translated by D.J. Risenga)

As the actors sing and dance, the audience become co-participants as a way of giving moral support. Some members of the audience sing and some beat drums. As the audience continues to support the actors by way of providing a dynamic rhythmic background, the actors dance and sing, looking up and down, raising their hands and arms. At times the actors move graciously and beautifully, holding up their sticks. The whole process is an indication that the spirits are with them and the occasion is blessed. The repetition of 'ha wu and thokozan' bakithi' reflects joy and blessing that come from the spirits. The message of the song is intensified by the repetition of blessings and joys as expressed in each sentence. The use of the exclamation mark 'bakithi!' indicates the communication between the actors and the audience. The actors seem to be informing the audience that the occasion has been graced by the spirits.

With regard to the non-human audience, such as spirits and ancestors, the communication channel is established by the para-human actors through songs, drumming and dances. The requests and messages are directed to them and in turn they should possess the actors. Once the actors become possessed by the spirits and ancestors, it is believed by the human audience that the spirits and ancestors are physically present to bless the occasion. The celebration continues until everybody is satisfied and that would be an end of the occasion. The doctors' celebration satisfies the criteria that determine the theatricality of performance.

Conclusion

Indigenous African theatre forms distinguish indigenous African theatre from contemporary African theatre. The characters are both status and creative roles and are not developed. Peformance is dominated by songs, dance and drums which are performed in the open space theatre. Among many of the theatrical aspects are forms of episodic actions which are not determined by cause and effect. More importantly, African theatre forms do not only make use of action and speech but also dance, music and mime

in presenting their experiences. African theatre forms are not separate institutions but integral elements of a dramatic experience.

I would like to suggest that, firstly, drama students go out and study indigenous drama in the field, and that indigenous drama be recorded with video machines to enable students to study it. Secondly, that indigenous drama be transcribed into written script so that it can be studied in the same manner modern drama is studied. And thirdly, that indigenous theatre be brought into the lecture hall and made into a festival by students and lecturers, in the same manner that the festival is presented in the countryside. Then we might begin to glimpse the potential of South African theatre forms.

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