

Performative Inter-Actions
in African Theatre 1

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Diaspora Representations
and the Interweaving of Cultures

Edited by

Kene Igweonu and Osita Okagbue

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures
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INTRODUCTION

PERFORMATIVE INTER-ACTIONS IN AFRICAN THEATRE

KENE IGWEONU AND OSITA OKAGBUE

Introduction

Theatre and performance have always existed in Africa as part of the cultural process and practice of what it means to be human. In effect, this means that theatre and performance have usually been perceived as one among a multitude of cultural practices that communities have, and engage in. Thus, theatrical performance as both a cultural practice and a process continues to contribute—like all the other cultural practices—to the well-being of community members and the societies in which they exist, and sometimes this contribution can take the form of cultural revision and/or social change. For us, this is the basis for the famed principle of functionality that is believed to underpin all forms of theatre and performance in Africa.

It is our view, and this is clearly borne out by analysis and study, that all traditions of theatre in Africa—from the various indigenous performances such as the masquerade theatre, ritual performances, musical theatre, and Theatre for Development, to the more contemporary forms such as the video films of Nollywood—are functional at their most basic level. In other words, each performance form engages in a dialectical relationship of mutual affect with their respective local socio-cultural contexts. Consequently, we take the view in this book that the notion of performativity serves as an enabling and encompassing framework under which all forms of theatrical practice in, and about, Africa can best be analysed and understood.

The last four decades have witnessed an unprecedented rise in African theatre and performance scholarships. Following on from the early 1980s, much of the debate surrounding whether indigenous African performances—rituals and festivals—constitutes drama and theatre was

quickly displaced by the rise of performance studies, which provided a useful framework with which to theorise non-western forms and practices. Since then, there has been a rise in the number of Africanist scholars who are beginning to theorise and analyse African theatre and performance by drawing on a range of indigenous frames of references—most of which acknowledge and extend, but do not necessarily accede to dominant western discursive frameworks.

As a consequence, in putting this publication forward at this time, we seek to acknowledge the concept of performativity—in the way it has been theorised in western performance scholarship—but ultimately go on to explore its relevance for African theatre and performance. However, in doing this, we hope to move on from the debates around the term “performativity”, to explore notions of inter-actions in African theatre and performance. We equally extend our examination to how African theatre practitioners work today, with an active (not passive) recognition of international theatre practices, while striving to create works that remain locally relevant and that are rooted in indigenous practices—thus successfully negotiating the global vs. local shifts in theatre practice.

African theatre and performance is functional. In other words, it is not just entertainment but is often geared towards fulfilling particular social or aesthetic functions—hence, it is performative at its core. By focusing on the many and varied inter-actions evident in African theatre and performance practice, the chapters in this book set out to examine how recent advances in global citizenship, technology, economics, and trans-/inter-cultural transactions and borrowings have impacted on theatre and performance in Africa. In doing this, we take our lead from the recent debate about the significant challenges facing African theatre and performance practice, and broaden the discussion to include the many ingenious solutions adopted to tackle them by exploring the notion of inter-actions from different perspectives, including: contacts, dealings, and connections across cultures, disciplines, and the media.

Importantly, our focus also extends beyond the debates on hybridity to examine contemporary performance forms in, and about, Africa that are comfortable in that very active process of negotiating an African identity that is globally aware, and yet locally relevant. However, a first step in this task is to set out how we understand and articulate performativity, and how it might relate to our unfolding discussions of these inter-actions that are so pervasive in African theatre and performance practice today.

Performativity in Performance or the Performativity of Performance

To begin with, a few questions that will be addressed in this introduction include: How does performativity differ from performance? Is performativity a central quality of African performance? How does the notion of performativity help us to understand ideas of presentation and representation in performance? Does performativity help in the understanding and presentation of the Self and Other? Is performativity a key element in the perception of theatre as culture in action, or of performance as a cultural process? Finally, is performativity a performance that does not end?

Ever since J.L. Austin, in his linguistic lectures, introduced the concept of the performative utterance, the idea of performativity or performative acts entered the language of performance theory. This concept has since continued to exercise scholars because the distinction between performance and performativity has not always been clear. We do not look to resolve this debate in this introduction, but we intend to show—through the various readings of scholars, from Austin through to Lyotard (who sees performativity as efficiency), Derrida, Lacan, Butler, Schechner to Harris, and Brocker—that it is the idea of performativity within performance that affords it its transformative potential.

In his lectures and, latterly, in his seminal book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin differentiates between two kinds of utterances. The first he calls “constative utterances”—these are utterances that merely describe or report on a state of affairs—and the second he calls “performatives”—these refer to utterances which in their enunciation do things, bring the things they describe into being, or even are the things they describe. As Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick assert in the introduction to their edited collection, *Performativity and Performance*, that in doing so Austin unwittingly initiated the process that has led to an “oblique intersection between performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance” (1995: 1). However, they also point out, and as we indicate above, how very “un-articulated” the cross-purpose appropriation of Austin’s term has been for performance theory.

The key problem for performance theory is that this appropriation of Austin’s term does sometimes lead to an indiscriminate interchanging of the two terms by scholars, leading at times to imprecision and uncertainty in the meaning of the term, and at other times to total confusion. As Geraldine Harris correctly argues in *Staging Feminisms: Performance and*

Performativity (1999), much of this confusion can be attributed to Judith Butler's use of drag to demonstrate the performativity of gender in her seminal study, *Gender Trouble* (1990). But Butler, it should be pointed out, has also been at pains in her later work, *Bodies that Matter* (1993), to make "it clear that performativity refers to a 'process, a reiteration of a norm or set of norms' while performance 'is a bounded act'" (Harris, 1999: 72).

Butler's differentiation, notwithstanding, this confusion still persists as both terms do have so much in common—so much that binds them to each other. In this book, we see the difference between performance and performativity as being in many ways reflective of the difference between reality and make-believe, between the real and the mimetic, between the presentation of reality and representation of the real. One other key difference between performance and performativity, as both Butler and Harris point out, is that although both share in the quality of citationality and reiteration, it is in the nature of what is being cited that they differ. For instance, one may ask the question, what is cited or repeated in performance—and for what purpose—and what is cited or repeated in performativity—and for what purpose? The fact that in performance the citation is foregrounded and acknowledged, while whilst this is not always the case in performativity, is one useful way of marking the difference between the two terms.

Thus, while a performative act and a performance act are alike in many ways, performance always involves and implies an awareness or consciousness of performing on the part of the performer. Whereas, in a performative act the "performer" is not always conscious of the fact that they are performing—hence the reason that Butler's study was groundbreaking, as well as controversial, in its claims regarding the performance of gender in everyday life. This is perhaps what Harris, echoing Butler, means, when she observes, "performance foregrounds its quotation marks (citation) whereas performativity in real life strives to conceal its citationality" (1999: 76). In other words, in performance the conventions of theatre, such as the framing, as well as the contexts and the rules are clear and often foregrounded, whereas in performative contexts these are mostly absent or are not necessarily rendered operative.

Performance, for Austin, is "acting or mimetically re-creating the real", while "the performative effects real change. It constitutes reality" (Blocker, 1999: 26). Blocker thus argues that performativity makes an artwork more than just an object or a theatrical performance, because "it helps reinforce the claim that the work actually makes something happen" (1999: 26). Performativity, therefore, when understood in uncluttered

Austinian terms as “doing” rather than “describing” can be very useful in appreciating and analysing the functionality and other characteristic manifestations of theatre in Africa. In most instances, theatre in Africa does not attempt or claim to represent reality, rather it presents a form of reality. It acknowledges that the line between the reality on stage and the reality in everyday life—between the worlds inhabited by the characters on stage and the performers that embody them—is not always as clearly demarcated or separated in Africa as it is in some other cultures of the world.

Another way we can explore the notion of performativity in African theatre, is to draw on the discursive framework derived from Jacques Derrida’s idea of a generalised iterability of speech acts, which—according to Richard Schechner—supposes that “...meaning cannot be permanently fixed: every utterance is a repetition—just as stage speech is the repetition of a script” (2002: 125). By this approach we move away from Austin’s argument for the exclusion of theatrical speech from the discussion of performativity, based on his claim that speech uttered by an actor on stage is “infelicitous” and does not truly reflect the speaker’s intention. In fact, Austin’s position is akin to that held by John R. Searle who “separates ‘normal real world talk’ from ‘parasitic forms of discourse such as fiction, play acting, etc’” (Schechner, 2002: 126), when he contends that “people constructed their realities largely by means of speech acts; and they communicated these realities to each other by means of speech acts” (Schechner, 2002: 126). However, by drawing on Derrida and evidence of the continued blurring of the boundaries between what is generally considered to be fiction and reality, Schechner remarks that:

Searle and Austin took this position because they didn’t recognise that art can be a model for, rather than, or in addition to, being a mirror of or escape from life. (2002: 126)

In his attempt to rehabilitate Austin’s original thesis, however, James Loxley cites Austin’s argument “that speech actually has the power to *make* a world” (Jackson cited in Loxley, 2007: 2), and uses it to claim that:

The creative connotation of this “making” has also drawn in theorists of literary language, and a possible relation to theatrical performance has stimulated the interest of thinkers on drama. (Loxley, 2007: 2)

In putting forward this re-reading of Austin, Loxley articulates what he terms the standard narrative of origins and subsequent development of performativity, by which he attempts to bridge the gap between Austin’s

views and those expounded by the likes of Derrida and Butler. Going further along these lines, Loxley argues that Derrida's radical deconstruction of the notion of performativity led to its wider application of "pressing issues in cultural politics" (2007: 3). He goes on to add that:

Such illumination of the way we "act" our identities also had radical implications for how we might think about the relation between theatrical performance and the apparently real or serious world off stage, implications that performance theorists have themselves sought to spell out in recent years. (Loxley, 2007: 3)

In this sense, performativity points to a variety of topics; among them the construction of social reality including gender and race, the restored behaviour qualities of performances, and the complex relationships of performance practice to performance theory (Schechner, 2002: 123).

By way of going back to definitions, we cite copiously from Henry Bial who describes performativity, on the one hand, as a term that is often:

...invoked by those who wish to describe a performance without the connotations of artifice or superficiality that accompanies the word "theatrical". (2007: 175)

Bial also goes on to add that, "[O]n another level, the term 'performative' refers to a specific philosophical concept concerning the nature and potential of language" (Bial, 2007: 175), in which speech denotes action, and saying *it* means to do *it*, or as Schechner puts it:

[I]n uttering certain sentences people perform acts. Promises, bets, curses, contracts, and judgements do not describe or represent actions: they are actions. (2002: 123)

Seen from this perspective, and by interrogating the relationship between *speech* and *action*, we contend that utterances in African theatre do not always constitute attempts to express or convey existing reality in everyday life, but work to construct new, and often parallel, realities. This idea is deeply rooted in indigenous performance practices, such as the *mmonwu* (masquerade) performance of the Igbo people of eastern Nigeria. In most of these performances the poetic utterances of the *mmonwu*—which is seen as an embodiment of both ancestral and extant traditions of the people—lay bare present realities as they exist within the society, whilst simultaneously weaving their poetic narrative around an alternative reality drawn from a parallel universe or a vision of the future for the community at large.

Discussing the performative use of speech or narrative in African theatre, and the role of the playwright in that process of constructing a new or alternative reality, Esiaba Irobi argues that:

Speech, you see, is a performance. Utterance. Incantation. Invocation. Chant. Ululation. Prayer. Even breathing is a performance (that is why sometimes we snore heavily in a play to indicate—in the context of our make-belief—that we are asleep). (Azuonye, 2003)

While this idea of using various forms of *speech* to create new realities constitutes an interesting concept, African authors often find it difficult to capture some of the nuances of their indigenous languages in English or other languages of colonisation. Consequently, Irobi goes on to add that:

...an important qualification or credential for being a poet is to have that self-destructive perfectionist streak that makes you want to panel beat language into a shape accurate and broad-shouldered enough to carry the full weight of your experiences. (Azuonye, 2003)

On the one hand, therefore, this idea of “panel beating” western languages to fit indigenous references describes an approach used by successful playwrights on the African continent to respond performatively to the challenge of writing in an imperial language. Consequently, African theatre can be described as being dynamic—often making subversive use of English or other imperial languages in ways that are evocative of the idea of “panel beating” in order to convey indigenous imageries through the performative utterances of their characters.

On the other hand, however, African playwrights from the diaspora do not create characters that deliberately set out to undermine western languages by “panel beating” them in the same way as their continental counterparts. Instead, the performative utterances of their characters are often seen in the way they articulate their *migrant* identities in the western societies they have come to consider as *home*. Their characters speak in the same way as their non-African counterparts, but their utterances are often laden with deep political symbolisms and meanings that do not go unnoticed by the *Other* characters. In fact, their performative utterances are underpinned by a glaring realisation that their social condition is largely informed by their racial identity. Consequently, characters created by African diasporic playwrights often make performative utterances that position them firmly in the location in which they find themselves.

A good example of this can be found in the works of Dipo Agboluaje who is famous for writing plays that satirise contestations of cultural identity in British society. His plays are inspired by both his Nigerian and

British heritage, and strive to convey the experiences of the Nigerian diaspora living in Britain as “distinct in its finer details” from that of other black peoples living in Britain. Explaining this in a 2008 interview with Belinda Otas, he argues:

Understanding the minutiae of life is what I try to do. I'm not one for emphasising the liberal assumption that we are all the same and that my job is then to go on and prove it. That breeds smug theatre, a theatre of recognition, preaching to the converted. There's no challenge in that. (Otas, 2008)

Through his plays, Agboluaje goes beyond posing a challenge to what it means to be a black person living in a “so called” multi-cultural British society, to raise questions about what it means to be British and Nigerian at the same time. In the same interview with Otas, Agboluaje explains:

My voice has been created by two societies: Nigeria and Britain. For me that is an inescapable fact whatever politics of writing I might claim. As people of the diaspora we inhabit diverse worlds: home communities back home, *home* communities within the host nation and relationships with other diaspora communities. We respond to the politics of the society we are in. (Otas, 2003)

It is the complex nature of such a relationship, articulated in Agboluaje’s plays, that is also echoed in different ways by various authors in this book.¹ For instance, in *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*, we feature chapters such as Joseph McLaren’s “Tess Onwueme and Diaspora Representations in *The Missing Face*”, which depicts characters that retain the same western modes of speech as their non-African counterparts, but whose utterances convey their deep identity. Mwenya B. Kabwe, on the other hand, in “Performing Africa Differently: Articulations of Migrant Identity in a Re-imagining of Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of A Negro*” situates a diaspora play in a South African context—in a way that foregrounds embodied utterance as opposed to the spoken word.

Performing the World into Being

Joanne Spooner, one of the contributors, writes that “culture is a mechanism of identification, a repository for people’s sense of identity that requires constant re-affirmation through performance”, and—according to Homi Bhabha—it is the performativity in and of language that ensures that the narrative of the nation is carried out, and that the

nation needs this narration in order to come into being (1990: 3). In *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (1999), the editors Jeffrey Mason and Ellen Gainor explore in the introduction to the book how the theatrical representations of the United States have helped to shape the national identity of the country. They specifically demonstrate the role that theatre has played in the construction of American identity.

Thus it is valid to say that African theatre performs the African world, and through it the African identity, into being. This is mainly because of its nature and also because it is perceived in, and by, most African societies, as a cultural process and practice—it is not an activity that is outside of the normal things that people do or take part in, because African cultures demand of its people a certain amount or level of performance every once in a while. When an individual is born, that individual performs or has others perform for, or on their behalf—whether it is their naming ceremony, puberty initiation, or rites of passage into a masquerade fraternity or women’s associations. As the person gets older, they begin to perform themselves, supported by others, into new states of being. For example, if they become wealthy they may acquire status as leader or chief etc. through engaging in further performances.

Finally, when a person dies, there are the rites of transition into the realm of the ancestors or the respected dead, who are often performed into being by the living as masquerades. In other words, performances are done on behalf of the dead person who becomes a passive participant in their own performance—just as they had been as a newborn baby at the first performance of their life. Whether a person is an active or passive performer in their life performances, they remain or perform as themselves—this goes back to the idea of performativity in which the conventional rules of framing a performance are rendered inoperative in African theatre. They can also be seen as performing alternative realities into being, because they mark palpable changes or transformations in the lives of those involved.

African performances flow out of and back into society. They are a time out of time and yet they remain, and are firmly anchored, within the moment of a performance. This is because the distance between the performed reality (the performance) and the lived reality (society) is constantly negotiated and breached, so that the boundary between them is forever porous and therefore ultimately they remain as one. The audience, on the one hand, are themselves, yet on the other hand they are performing a role. However, they are very much aware that they are doing so—which is to say, they are never not themselves.

This is true of performers in a variety of African performance traditions, such as Theatre for Development, trance and possession rituals, and the masquerade performances. It is, therefore, the performative element of so many indigenous African performance practices and traditions that gives African theatre its manifest theatricality—African theatre has previously been referred to as a theatre that consciously embraces and broadcasts its theatricality (Okagbue, 2007: 181). The performative element carries the famed functional quality of African performance, because African people perform not just to entertain themselves, but they do so to also impact on their world—to question, understand, challenge, and ultimately order and re-order their world. They use the theatre to celebrate and affirm what is good and also to censor, admonish, and hopefully correct behaviours perceived not to be good. Performance is the tool for negotiating the complexities and anxieties of existence, and it is the phenomenon of performativity that enables this to happen—African people, it can be said, perform to be.

The essays contained in this three-volume book attest to these transformative qualities and impact-driven imperatives of African theatre and performance. The broad range of traditions and practices, and cultural and national contexts covered in this collection demonstrates the breadth of styles of theatre which exist, and the fact that each theatre practice or form is more or less in dialogue—either of affirmation or confrontation with its society and culture, and informing and being informed by, and changing and being changed by the environment in which it exists. These qualities apply to African theatre on the continent and in its various manifestations in the African diasporas of the Caribbean, South America, the United States of America, and Canada. Thus, a great many of the essays in this collection look at a diverse range of theatre and performance practices from different parts of Africa and the African diasporas. The essays all suggest that these performances, in their different ways, engage in this process of performing the world into being through their performative articulations or exploration of the divergent African and African diaspora experiences of Africans or people of African descent.

It is the idea of the performances captured by the majority of the essays in these three books as performative engagements that underlines the unity of the collection. The essays and the theatrical engagements and traditions which they discuss capture either the overall performative imperative which informs the type of theatre, or they record the performative moments when the actual desired transformation occurs or is expected to occur.

Themes and Approaches

Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre explores three major themes, which are captured in the subtitles of each of the three books within the set. The first of the three books is subtitled: *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*. This is followed by Book Two which is subtitled: *Innovation, Creativity and Social Change*, and Book Three is subtitled: *Making Space, Re-thinking Drama and Theatre in Africa*. The volumes are written by a wide range of international scholars, thus topics are discussed with an in-depth critical vocabulary and focus appropriate for a publication written for an international readership—the contributors' backgrounds and global spread reflect our international focus in putting this book together.

The contributions, in their various ways, demonstrate the many advances and ingenious solutions adopted by African theatre practitioners in tackling some of the challenges arising from the adverse colonial experience, as well as the “one-sided” advance of globalisation. The contributions attest to the thriving nature of African theatre and performance, which in the face of these challenges has managed to retain its distinctiveness, while at the same time acknowledging, contesting, and appropriating influences from elsewhere into an aesthetic that is identifiably African. Consequently, we present the three books published under this title—*Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre*—as a comprehensive exploration of the current state of African theatre and performance, both on the continent and diaspora.

In Book One, *Diaspora Representations and the Interweaving of Cultures*, we present essays that show that even though the plays of the African diaspora acknowledge and pay homage to the cultures of *home* in the various locations around the world, they do not lose a sense of their Africanness in their various inter-actions. This sense of the interweaving of cultures—without losing a sense of their indigenous African influences and sensibilities—is evident in the contributions that explore performances from the African diaspora, as well as those performances located on the continent that engage with this idea of interweaving in much the same way as their diaspora counterparts. Thus, the idea of *Diaspora Representations* attests to the notion that the diaspora—as we see it—is not solely located outside of the African continent itself, but can be found in those performances that engage performatively with the West in that process of articulating identity.

Book Two, *Innovation, Creativity and Social Change*, on the other hand, contains contributions that address performativity as a

process—particularly in the context of theatre’s engagement with social realities with the hope of instituting or achieving social change and the transformation of society. The innovativeness of some of the applied and community theatre practices explored within the book points to the ingenuity and adaptiveness of African theatre in a way that enables it to engage indigenous forms in the service of contemporary realities. This privileges an approach to theatre and performance that constantly redefines and reshapes itself, so as to remain relevant and in tune with contemporary realities in the quest for social change. The contributions deal with forms such as Theatre for Development, community and applied theatre, and indigenous juridical performances, as well as the use of indigenous performance forms by contemporary dramatists and performers to instigate change in society.

Finally, in Book Three, *Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa*, we present essays that seek to reconceptualise notions of drama and theatre in Africa, and therefore redefine our understanding of the practice, role, and place they occupy in a constantly evolving society. Contributions in *Making Space, Rethinking Drama and Theatre in Africa* range from essays that explore notions of space in performance, to those that challenge the perceived orthodoxy of conventional forms and approaches to theatre.

The individual themes of each of the three books intersect at various points and consequently the overarching theme of all three is the fact that they are linked in their exploration of the performative and interactive nature of performance in Africa and the African diasporas. Thus in this concluding section of the introductory chapter, we go on to discuss the various approaches adopted by some of the contributors in the volumes in their attempts to engage with notions of performativity and inter-actions.

In Book Three, for instance, in his essay “Dreams Deferred: National Theatres in National Development”, Osita Okagbue, in arguing for the national theatres in Africa as institutions responsible for preserving, nurturing, and disseminating each nation’s theatrical traditions and art forms, invokes the Owerri Igbo *mbari*. *Mbari* is understood as “a house of art” in which a group of young men and women of the community are selected to devote to a period of time in utter seclusion. While in seclusion, they are tasked with using the process of “making” art to begin a programme of knowledge, communal engagement and healing. The process of making the art is simultaneously the process of “healing and empowerment” for the community for whom, and in which, the *mbari* house is situated. The *Mbari* house and art are made and then abandoned, left to decay and fall apart. Thus, its efficacy is not in the art or the house

that people behold, but rather in the selection of candidates and the process of making or constructing the house, as well as the art objects that adorn it.

Okagbue's essay, however, does not suggest that the impermanence of *mbari* be transferred to how African countries manage their national theatres, but rather it emphasises the idea that the usefulness of a national theatre is ultimately dependent on what happens, when it happens, and how it happens within it as an institution. In a similar vein, Benita Brown's essay in Book One, which is titled "The *Òrìsà* Paradigm: An Overview of African-Derived Mythology, Folklore, and Kinaesthetic Dance Performatives", explores the jazz dance of the African diaspora in the United States of America—which she terms a "dance performative". In it she argues that the inspiration and modality of this dance performative affords its African-American participants the opportunity to be touched by the "Òrìsà". Brown's premise of jazz as a dance performative facilitates, for participants, a context and a moment for the recovery and embracement of their African ancestral past—through the *asé* (the Yoruba concept of power utterance to bring about change) that is generated, the individual participants are able to engage and come to terms with their current realities.

In much the same way, Krueger's chapter, "*Zeff*/Poor White Kitsch Chique: South African Comedies of Degradation" (Book Three)—in looking at the new phenomenon of *Zeff* derogatory comedy in South Africa—concludes that:

...within *Zeff*'s mockery of the poor white Afrikaner resides an attempt to come to terms with some of the unsettling qualities inherent in a new South African white identity... an identity which has had to reshape itself within the context of a hybrid culture.

Thus we see in this performance how a character becomes a mode of appropriating and coming to terms with the past in order to move forward in the present. This idea of moving forward in the present is precisely what the *gacaca* court performances of Rwanda—the subject of the opening chapter of Book Two entitled "Juridical Performatives: Public Versus Hidden Scripts and Transcripts"—illustrates. In this essay, Ananda Breed argues that the court hearings demonstrate the power of the performative utterance, and that the moment of confession, atonement, and reconciliation brings about healing for a community and country that is traumatised and still reeling from its experiences of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The confessions serve as an appeasement to those who had been wronged, and for those who perpetrated the wrongs, by confessing they own up and take responsibility for the crimes committed.

Annette Bühler-Dietrich's contribution in Book Two, "Burkina Faso: Theatre's Impact on Creating the Future" examines a range of Theatre for Development events and programmes that take place mainly around the capital, Ouagadougou, but also in other towns and villages. She equally argues that even the literary plays are geared toward making a transformational impact on the audience and thus playwrights have that in mind when they write, which means that the notion of "art for art's sake" has no place in such an environment.

The same attempt to use the theatre to create the future is the topic explored in Book One by Joanna Spooner in her chapter "Enacting the Nation: Transcultural Performativity in the Construction of National Identity in *Juliush Siza* and *Moses, Citizen and Me*". Spooner shows in her essay how Thomas Dekker's *Juliush Siza*—a Krio translation of *Julius Caesar*—is a political act that performatively serves as the process of imagining the Sierra Leonean nation, while *Moses, Citizen and Me* constitutes a re-enactment of the conception of the nation already imagined by Dekker in his play. Spooner's argument, therefore, is that the enactment of the nation can become performative, and that performance contributes to the construction of the nation and ultimately the national identity.

"Cultural Factors, Power Dynamics and Effective Theatre in HIV/AIDS Education in South Africa" found in Book Two is the title of the chapter by Chijioke Uwah and Patrick Ebewo. In it, they examine theatre as an intervention in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been decimating a sizeable number of the potentially productive population in South Africa. They argue that the theatre played a significant and successful role in the fight against apartheid because it was made from the grassroots. Consequently, they argue that the reason why the interventions against the spread of HIV/AIDS have not worked is not because theatre has lost its potential to be efficacious, but simply because of the practitioners' "inadequate knowledge of their target audiences' cultural norms and values" and the fact that they did not get the audience involved at the early stages of the theatre process.

So the choice of *Performative Inter-Actions in African Theatre* as a title for this book is not fortuitous. It was carefully chosen, firstly because of the editors' awareness that the theatre traditions, styles, and forms found on the African continent and the African diasporas are predicated on the notion of performativity. And secondly, on the belief that in instituting art forms and practices, African peoples set up mechanisms, instruments, and contexts for engaging, examining, understanding, and affecting their worlds—by making the invisible visible and bringing the past into the

present in order to predict and manage the future. Underpinning all of this is an understanding that whatever is said or done within a theatrical space, has the capacity to affect what happens in the world outside it because the boundary between the imagined world of the theatre and the world outside it are porous, in the same way that the boundary between the performer and spectator in indigenous African performances is deliberately made porous—always flexible with the performer occasionally becoming the spectator and vice versa.

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CHAPTER ONE

POSTCOLONIAL PLAYING WITHOUT A WEST?: AFRICAN DRAMA IN JAPAN¹

KEVIN J. WETMORE, JR.

Introduction

Oe Kenzaburo, Japan's Nobel Laureate for literature, opens his 1964 autobiographical novel *A Personal Matter* (*Kojinteki na taiken*) with the protagonist, a twenty-seven-year-old man named "Bird", staring at a map of Africa in an atlas in a bookstore.² As he stares, he sees the shape of the continent shifting into a decomposing skull, "suggest[ing] unnatural death, raw and violent" (1969: 1). Bird questions why the map is open to Africa, as "Africa was in the process of dizzying change that would quickly outdate any map," and yet he buys the atlas anyway, hoping to "set foot on African soil" someday (1969: 2, 3). For Bird, Africa is a land of freedom, in opposition to the duties and responsibilities he feels towards his family, especially his mentally challenged child. He dreams of running away to Nigeria, seeing it as a place of adventure and autonomy and a nation of new independence, as opposed to the nation of obligation he perceives Japan to be.

It is obvious that Bird's (and Oe's) Africa is a simulacra, developed out of movies and books from Europe and the United States. Bird only experiences Africa indirectly, through a Michelin guide map and his own imagination. He has no sense of the reality of Africa. He knows no Africans. All he knows about Africa is what he has learned from the cultural products of the United States and Europe. In a sense, the title of my chapter is, therefore, a bit of a lie. I hereby give away the ending: there is no postcolonial playing without a West in Japan, for, just as with Bird with his Michelin map, Japan experiences Africa primarily through Europe and the United States, especially when it comes to African theatre. Yet there is something to be learned from how African theatre, specifically

South African theatre and very precisely the plays of Athol Fugard, have been staged in Japan.

Modern Japanese theatre began at the turn of the twentieth century with amateurs and university students and teachers developing a naturalistic theatre based on Western models. *Shimpa* (meaning “new school”, as opposed to *kabuki*, which was perceived as “old school”) and subsequently *shingeki* (which means “new theatre”) saw exemplars in Ibsen, Chekhov, O’Neill, Shakespeare, Synge, Maeterlinck, Wilde, and, later on, Beckett. In short, modern Japanese theatre is rooted in the West, and Japanese *shingeki* artists have displayed a preference for American and European drama ever since.³

Modern Japan is also complex in its identity and its relationship to the nations of Africa because it is a non-Western nation that has engaged heavily in imperialism, colonising Taiwan in 1895, Korea in 1910, Manchuria in 1931, and China in 1937. Kweku Ampiah reports that Japan’s invasion of Manchuria made possible, and provided justification for, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 (1997: 35). Eventually, many African subjects of the United Kingdom fought against the Japanese in the Pacific War, with the 81st and 82nd West African Divisions and the 11th East African Division engaging directly in battle with the Imperial Army in Burma (Ampiah, 1997: 36). Conversely and simultaneously, however:

African intellectuals and leaders, in a rather convoluted way, admired Japan for standing up against white supremacy; overlooking the fact that Japan was equally imperialistic in its external relations. (Ampiah, 1997: 36)

Yet artists making theatre in Japan, both during this period and in the post-war period, were predominantly leftists who were opposed to imperialism and militarism in all forms and by all nations. Consequently, many of these artists were imprisoned for their politics during the war by the then military government of Japan. Thus, even though modern theatre in Japan may have traditionally favoured the West, it also traditionally had an anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist bent.

In the post-war period, Japan continued to have a complicated relationship with both the West and Africa. When Japan joined the United Nations in 1956, it also joined the Afro-Asian group and immediately “professed solidarity with the OAU states in their fight against colonialism, and the institution of racial discrimination in South Africa” (Ampiah, 1997: 5). Yet Japan was also frequently criticised for maintaining a business relationship with the South African government in Pretoria throughout the apartheid era. In 1982, for example, Japan was

South Africa's largest trading partner, engaging in what Jun Morikawa calls "dual diplomacy" (and what the Japanese called *nigen kōzō* ("double preoccupation"; 1997: 1, 6). Official Japanese policy was that there were two Africas: "white Africa" in South Africa and "Black Africa" in the rest of the continent. Hence, they continued to do business with the former, while publicly decrying apartheid in order to satisfy the latter. This policy collapsed in 1990, because:

...based as it was on the premise that white Africa was a self-contained political unit, dual diplomacy had to disintegrate as white Africa itself disappeared...

...following the end of the apartheid system in South Africa (Morikawa, 1997: 6–7). As a nation, contemporary Japan continues to engage in trade with many African nations, purchasing large amounts of raw materials (metals, oil, and food) and selling its own technological products and automobiles.

As for awareness of culture beyond economics and politics (if there is such a thing), it is perhaps not groundbreaking scholarship to suggest that the contemporary peoples of Japan and the nations of Africa are not always familiar with each other's histories or cultures.⁴ As recently as 2010, Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo reported a high level "of ignorance of Africa, her people and her cultures in Japan and of that of Japan, its history and its cultures in Africa in general", and that in both locales, "stereotypical images and constructs were taken for real knowledge" (2010: 239).

African nations and individuals have, on occasion during the modern era, looked to Japan as a model. A group of young Ethiopians in the first decades of the twentieth century were called "Japanizers", among other things, because they saw in Meiji, Japan a model for overcoming feudalism in favour of bourgeois capitalism by a non-Western nation that could be embraced by Ethiopia (Clarke, 2004: 25). In the postcolonial period, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania opined that if Africans "must opt for capitalism, they should go for it the way Japan did it" (cited in Owoeye, 1992: 128). Similarly, in post-civil war Nigeria, Governor Mobolaji Johnson of Lagos State suggested Nigeria follow Japan's post-Second World War model in order to rebuild the national economy (Owoeye, 1992: 128). Jide Owoeye concludes that Japan is a model for African nations on how to "adopt advanced technology from the West without losing its culture and identity" (1992: 128–9). Lastly, Nigerian philosopher Fidelis Okafor coined the term "Afro-Japanese" as a form of "ethnophilosophy", arguing that Japan and Africa have more in common

with each other than either does with the West, and that both would be better served by recognising those similarities (1997: 363).

This brief survey of the complex history of the relationship between Japan and Africa provides a context for the little amount of African theatre present in contemporary Japan. Although Tokyo is one of the most cosmopolitan theatre cities in the world, the drama of Africa and the African diaspora is conspicuous by its absence. No plays by Derek Walcott, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, Wole Soyinka, or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have ever been performed in Japan, to the best of my research. Nearly two decades after it was published, Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* was translated into Japanese by Matsuda Tadanori as *Shin'wa bungaku afurika sekai* (Soyinka, 1992). Also, some of Soyinka's novels and other theoretical and critical writings have been translated, but none of his plays.

It should not be a surprise that there is little African drama published, or African theatre performed, in Japan. Other than the works by South African playwrights, I could find no evidence of any other African plays published or performed. However, the absence of evidence is not *evidence of absence*, and there has been the occasional tour by an African theatre company or an individual scholar working on African theatre (such as Yamamoto Shim), but the evidence of African performance in Japan is largely anecdotal. This is largely due to *shingeki's* Western prejudice, evidenced through a century of a theatrical culture that when not inward looking gazes West. This also explains the preference for Fugard, who writes in English, is celebrated in the United Kingdom and United States, and whose dramaturgy is rooted in the traditional naturalism favoured by most *shingeki* companies. We might note that in world theatre anthologies in English, Africa is typically represented by one play by Wole Soyinka (usually *Death and the King's Horseman*) and one play by Athol Fugard (usually *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* or *Master Harold...and the Boys*). In this way, for example, South Africa is often seen as a synecdoche for Africa, while Fugard is a synecdoche for South Africa.

I give here a brief summary of Fugard in Japan. In 1987, the Chijinkai Company presented *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, about which I will go into much greater detail below, as the first African play performed in Japan. This was followed in 1989 by *Samu to Harorudo*, literally translated "Sam and Harold", a Japanese version of *Master Harold...and the Boys* at the Haiyuza, one of the most important contemporary theatres in Tokyo, known for its commitment to politically progressive theatre. As the title suggests, the focus of the play is the relationship between Harold and Sam, the black father figure on whom he turns. The play was translated by Adachi Shihō,