

## SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT METHOD

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In Italy the field of Anglophone African studies, and in particular African drama, is burgeoning, unearthing a new breed of academic, the literary anthropologist who grubs up the bones of myth and ritual, and spawning mongrel theatre festivals, such as the recent Africa Italia cultural manifestation in Dakar, which inadvertently only served to highlight the difficulties of bridging cultural and national divides. The Albe di Ravenna theatre group, which boasts two Senegalese actors in its company, enjoyed a great success with their play "Siamo asini o pedanti?" which they staged there, but divides yawned into chasms when on their return to Fiumicino their two African actors were refused re-admittance to Italy and threatened with repatriation. Little wonder that the group's latest play jumps onto the ecological bandwagon and looks no further afield than Yugoslavia in describing an attempt to cover the Adriatic sea with cement.

Tongue in the cheek as all this may be, it yet raises the issue of the relevance of African drama in an Italian context beyond the confines of narcissistic and inky scholarship. Three aspects of this issue warrant particular consideration.

The first is the question of which African plays even reach the English speaking world, let alone Italy. As critics such as Joe de Graft and Michael Etherton have argued, the criteria for publication by a commercial publishing house are Western literary forms and conventions so that published plays may not even have been performed at all, while conversely, popular and successful plays in the African idiom may never achieve the prestige of publication. This makes traditional academic approaches of reliance upon a received text difficult, if not impossible.

The second problem regards the few opportunities African playwrights have had to stage their plays in Europe and the United States and the disturbing fact that even those few occasions have brought no commercial success. It would seem that African plays like wine from the Salento just do not "travel", to adopt an Italian expression. Even the best known African dramatist, Soyinka, has had a poor critical reception and his attempt to bridge the cultural gap in his adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides* in 1973 proved a flop. This failure

requires a more adequate explanation than the usual resort to platitudes about the commercialization of Western culture.

The third aspect, which concerns Italy particularly, is the language barrier. If plays are to reach a wider audience whether in the theatre or in published form they must be translated. All translation entails loss, as Ulli Beier, the translator of Duro Lapido's work from Yoruba into English readily acknowledges, but translating much African theatre into Italian presents difficulties of a special nature. Many plays make use of a variety not only of speech registers but also of languages, requiring the development of a translation strategy. The recent successful staging of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* would repay study in this respect but the township plays of the Zambian dramatist, Kabwe Kasuma, for example, would surely defy all attempts at translation, even supposing that their literary value deserved such attempts. This in turn raises the intractable problem of making critical judgements from a written text of plays which rely so much on extra linguistic means for effect.

My research is thus an attempt to reconnoitre the awkward terrain of African drama in Italy, inoculated against myth-fever and deaf to the throbbing drums and pounding feet so beloved of tourists and theatre directors.