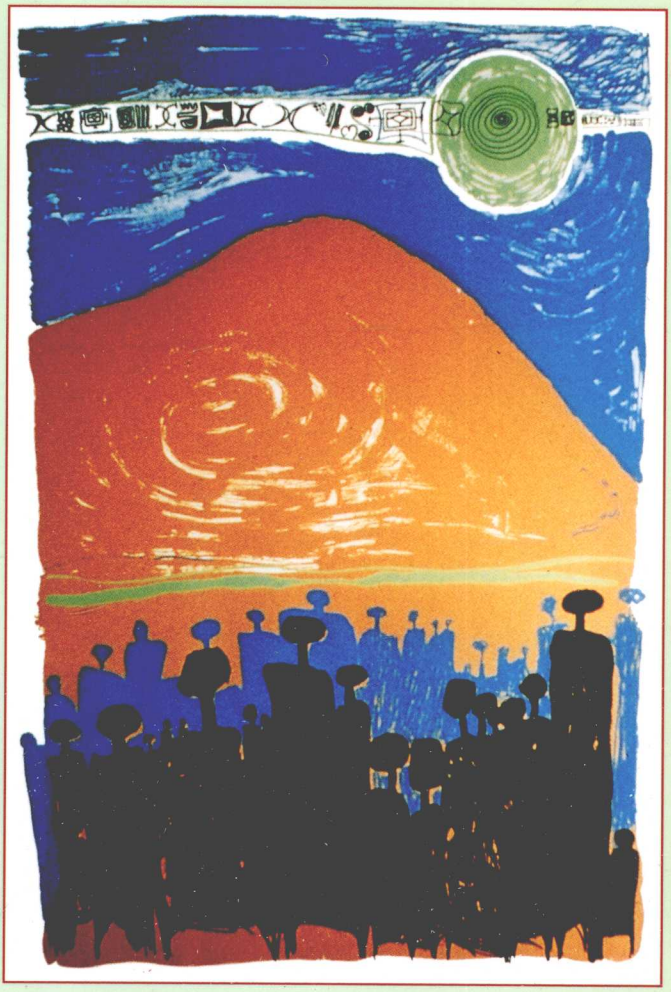
Modern African Drama



Selected and Edited by
Biodun Jeyifo

A Norton Critical Edition

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

MODERN AFRICAN DRAMA

Authoritative Texts of

FATE OF A COCKROACH
INTELLIGENCE POWDER
SIZWE BANSI IS DEAD
DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN
COLLISION OF ALTARS
THE DILEMMA OF A GHOST
I WILL MARRY WHEN I WANT
ESU AND THE VAGABOND MINSTRELS

Backgrounds and Criticism

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Preface

On February 22, 1826, in the ancient city of Oyo, the capital of the West African empire of the same name, the British explorer Hugh Clapperton and his party were treated to a theatrical performance by a Yoruba Alarinjo troupe. Clapperton's account of the event is contained in his travelogue, *Journal of a Second Exhibition Into the Interior of Africa.* From this account, it is evident that the Alafin, or monarch, of Oyo organized the event as a sort of command performance for the white visitors and their party, a performance in which the foreign guests found themselves simultaneously importuned as spectators and good-naturedly lambasted in the form of a character in the performance itself. Here is Clapperton on this double signification on his white, foreign presence at this 1826 performance in the then not yet formally colonized southern Nigeria:

> The third act consisted of the white devil. The actors having retired to some distance in the background, one of them was left in the centre, whose sack falling gradually down, exposed a white head, at which the crowd gave a shout that rent the air; they appeared indeed to enjoy this sight and the perfection of the actor's art. The whole body was at last cleared of the incumbrance of the sack, when it exhibited the appearance of a human figure cast in white wax, of the middle size, miserably thin, and starved with cold. It frequently went through the motion of taking snuff and rubbing its hands; when it walked, it was the most awkward gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking barefooted for the first time over frozen ground. The spectators often appealed to us, as to the excellence of the performance, and entreated I would look and be attentive to what was going on. I pretended to be fully as much pleased with this caricature of a white man as they could be, and certainly the actor burlesqued the part to admiration.

We know from the considerable body of scholarly research and publications on the Alarinjo theatrical art of masked dance-mummers that Clapperton's application of terms of theatrical theory and criticism such as "the third act," "actors," "actor's art," "spectators," and "burlesque" constitutes an accurate reflection of the evolved, professional, and secular standards of this African theatrical tradition. It also appears that Clapperton, on this occasion at least, was a good sport, giving the artistry, if not the content of the performance, high praise. But while there is no reason to question the emotional truth of his

negative identification with the theatrical sign semiotized in the "figure cast in white wax," Clapperton's reading of the roots of what is imitated in the performance is very fanciful. When he writes, "when it walked, it was the most awkward gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking barefooted for the first time over frozen ground," he misses the whole point of the "burlesque," for this figure could in no way have had the bracing, wintry cold of Clapperton's temperate homeland as the source of its caricature. What we have here, it seems, is Clapperton drawing on his own cultural frame of reference and thereby misinterpreting what probably was a caricature of whites, not at home in the wilds of, say, the Yorkshire moors in the dead of winter, but in the tropical "interior of Africa" stripped of the comforts of the legendary white explorer's litter and its band of native head porters, guides, and body servants. The Alarinjo theatre tradition did evolve from sacred funerary rites, but its repertoire of masks and sketches was, and is still, rigorously based on historical events and topical civic issues; moreover, its repertoire of masks consists of stock social types. Indeed, several decades after this 1826 performance, the formal incorporation of the Oyo empire into what became the Nigerian colony of the British imperial system generated the appearance of the coupled figure of the white colonial district commissioner and his wife in the Alarinjo troupe's theatrical fare as one of the most colorful and frequently animated masks, comparable in popularity to two groups of masks. These are, respectively, the masks of "local foreigners" such as "Tapa" (the Nupe man) and "Gambari" (the Hausa man)—the Nupes and the Hausas being northern neighbors of the Yoruba with a long history of trade, warfare, and limited but significant cultural intermixture with the Yoruba—and the satirical masks of moral or social types such as "Iyawo Palo" ("Parlor Wife," i.e., the young housewife of loose sexual morals) and "Omuti Farasofo" (the perpetually inebriated drunkard). Thus, if Clapperton had given more critical significance to the fact that the burlesque of the "white devil" was only one act out of many in the total performance staged for his entertainment, he might have recognized the theatrical sign in that particular "third act" as part of a chain of signifiers whose logic of signification, like all signifying chains, was context-specific. Within the representational compass of this logic, the mask of the "white devil" in which Clapperton saw himself caricatured belongs to the same category—the category of "foreigners"—as the "Tapa" and "Gambari" masks. Within this composite category, one set of masks designates "distant" foreigners and the other set is made up of masks of close, contiguous foreigners. And both sets of masks, it might be noted, form a logic of representational difference with the "straight" and satirical masks of "insider" social types, such as "Malam" (Moslem priest), "Iyawo Palo," and "Omuti Farasofo."

This 1826 performance—and our deconstruction of Clapperton's reading of it—is emblematic of the perspectives that informed the selection of the materials assembled for this volume of plays and critical documents on modern African drama. For as with nearly every

other aspect of its experience of modernity, the "modern" in African drama and theatre is the product of the complex articulation of the local with the foreign, the indigenous with the alien within the historic context of the modern migrations of peoples and cultures *within* the continent, and the waves of imperialist expansion and colonial domination that swept over the continent in a five-hundred-year span. Because the European colonization of Africa has been the single most decisive factor in Africa's experience of modernity, until very recently it has been impossible to keep this mosaic of genealogies of the modern in Africa in the purview of even the most influential practitioners and scholars of the continent's traditions of drama and theatre. Very often and quite simplistically, the modern in African drama has been apprehended in the reified polarity of native traditions versus Western influences in which the latter always supervened the former in the manner of Clapperton's inability to imagine that the theatrical sign of the "white devil" could have had sources in local history.

As some of the plays and documents assembled in this volume demonstrate, the wide-ranging legacies of the encounter of Africa with Europe in the modern period as the object of imperialist ambition and colonial domination remains a central dimension of modern African drama and theatre. But equally important, though almost always undertheorized and underspecified as a determinant of the genealogy of contemporary African drama, are two other large-scale modern experiences of African societies. These are, respectively, the migrations and population shifts of African communities across short and long distances before, during, and after formal colonial conquest and rule; and centuries of trade, religious proselytization, and slavery between the two blocs of the African continent north and south of the great Sahara desert. To illustratively refer again to the masks of the Alarinjo theatre, long before the appearance of the masks of the colonial district commissioner and his wife in that theatre's repertoire of stock characters, the Moslem priest had appeared as "Malam," not within the category of "foreigners" but as the mask of a completely assimilated "insider." Needless to say, this is the product of the Islamic penetration from North Africa and the Arab world across the Sahara in West Africa and the Indian Ocean in East Africa. Given the sheer historical and cultural weight of this factor, it should normally need no editorial justification as to why this volume of modern African drama includes entries from North Africa. That such justification is being hereby tendered is a reflection of the pervasive practice of separating Africa north and south of the Sahara in anthologies of the plays, poetry, fiction, and popular culture of the continent. It is incontestable that this practice is defensible and even productive at the level at which constructions such as "Black Africa" (as in the volume of poems edited by Wole Soyinka, *Poems of Black Africa*) and "North African" or "Maghrebian writing" refer to formations and communities of expression *within* African letters, arts, society, and culture. However, as the bloody and self-maiming civil war of the last three decades in the Sudan demonstrates, the suppression of shared histories, cultures, and ethnicities

between Africa north and south of the Sahara often entails violent, tragic consequences.

If the Western impact, via colonization, on modern African drama is often overstated (or conversely, tendentiously understated in some versions of nationalist counterdiscourses on the nature and sources of contemporary African drama) while the long duration of intercultural contact between north and south across the "natural" divide of the Sahara is often blithely ignored, there is also a pervasive act of amnesia about the scope of cultural intermixing among the continent's peoples and cultures as a decisive aspect of the modern experience of the continent. This particular act of discursive amnesia is all the more surprising given the fact that the artificiality, the porousness of the colonially imposed borders of African nation-states is as tireless invoked by statesmen, writers, journalists, and foreign pundits as the anodyne invocation of Africa as the origin of the human race. The *comparative* slant of nearly all the critical documents assembled in this volume is an attempt, one hopes not too belated, to give credence and weight to this dimension of Africa's experience of modernity. Fortunately, in much of recent scholarship in diverse disciplines, due and necessary cognizance is being given this crucial historical and geopolitical fact of Africa's modern experience. Consequently, the widespread practice of treating African cultures, precolonial as well as postcolonial and in the framework of a now discredited colonialist anthropology, as bounded and fixed within thousands of separate "tribes" is gradually giving way to the recognition that Africans are as much border-crossers in culture and the arts as they are of the territorial boundaries of the nation-state.

The upshot of the foregoing observations on the thinking that shaped the selection of plays and critical documents for this volume is that what is truly modern in African drama and theatre as it has evolved in the last hundred and fifty years or so is a function both of African self-encounter and of the continent's encounter with the outside world. Both sets of encounters inevitably replicate many of the themes of both the "promise" of modernity and its horrendous discontents that have been documented elsewhere in the world. That being said, it is noteworthy that such replication of "modernizing" global currents has taken irreducibly *African* expressions. One of the most remarkable of these unique African expressions of global modernity is the incidence of the much vaster scale of Anglophone and Francophone drama and theatre in this continent than elsewhere in the formerly colonized regions of the world. This point needs careful elaboration.

The term *Anglophone* and *Francophone* are key words of cultural criticism and, more broadly, transnational, transhemispheric intellectual and cultural currents of the late modern world. Anglophone for its part now generally denotes that vast stretch of the English-speaking world that is outside Britain and North America, especially the United States. Similarly, Francophone now generally denotes a French-speaking community of writing and cultural expression outside of

metropolitan France. Now, it is one of the most significant features of these Anglophone and Francophone worlds that while in poetry and fiction there are more or less equally powerful currents coming out of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, Francophone and Anglophone drama significantly bulk much bigger in Africa than in other parts of the non-Western English- and French-speaking worlds. True enough, world-class African Anglophone and Francophone dramatists are, so far, only a handful, but there is now in existence a considerable number of fine, sensitive dramatists in this newly emergent tradition; moreover, the sheer volume and social impact of the English- and French-language drama of Africa is, quite simply, one of the contemporary world's most significant cultural developments. What makes this such an outstanding aspect of post–World War II cultural history is the fact that the scale of Francophone and Anglophone African drama grew out of some of the much-discussed limitations of the theatrical heritage of Africa. These include the relative absence in Africa of the great professional, highly specialized, and rigidly codified theatre institutions and practices, in both written and unwritten forms, of Asian and European antiquity and the early modern period. In this case, the saying "the poor shall inherit the earth" takes on a special resonance, because unencumbered by the dead weight of these monuments of theatre tradition, African Anglophone and Francophone drama has zestfully raided a great number of the continent's "little" theatre and performance traditions in ways that Francophone and Anglophone drama elsewhere has not dared to do. These "little" traditions are, however, capacious in their range, stretching from popular festivals to the most esoteric cultic rituals, and from oral storytelling traditions to the arts of sacred and carnivalesque idioms of masqueradery, dance, and music.

The ramifications of this pattern have barely been acknowledged, let alone extensively explored. For one thing, anticolonial and postcolonial nationalism, with its resilience and pitfalls, is one of the most paradigmatic and at the same time extensively interrogated constructions of political community in the late modern world. It has been thematized and explored in Anglophone and Francophone African drama as in no other major cultural region of the world, with the possible exception of Latin America. As a corollary to this, outside of Europe and Latin America, the revolutionary potential of contemporary dramatic and theatrical theory and criticism has found no theorists or critics of the caliber of pundits that have emerged from critical discourses on African Francophone and Anglophone drama. This particular feature of contemporary African drama and theatre is amply illustrated in some of the critical documents assembled in this volume.

French and English are of course not the only languages of expression in modern African drama. To speak only of literary drama, African theatre of the last century has seen the emergence and growth of drama in other major literary languages of the continent, such as Arabic, Amharic, Yoruba, Swahili, Hausa, Twi, Gikuyu, Zulu, and Sotho. Regrettably, since this volume is an English-language publication, this

richness and diversity of African drama is not immediately apparent in the content of the materials collected here. However, this richness is inscribed in subtle ways in the forms and idioms of expression explored by many of the plays, as well as in some of the theoretical speculation in the critical documents. No doubt some of these will seem strangely familiar to readers knowledgeable about the technical and stylistic armory of the Western theatrical avant-garde. Conversely, some readers wedded to a unilinear and Eurocentric view of the course of evolution of modern world drama will see in one or two of these plays modes of dramatic expression that seem to belong to earlier phases of literary drama. But in the main, many features of this confident genre-bending and form-stretching impulse of African drama will startle because they indicate fresh and radical extensions of dramatic form.

The generally affirmative tone of these observations and musings should not, finally, blind us to the present precarious condition of African drama, or indeed the toil and sacrifice that many African dramatists, theatre companies, and performers have had to bear in the course of plying their trade and craft, both in the colonial and postcolonial periods. Contemporary African drama, in its exploration of both social and existential themes, is a vigorous response to the crippling vagaries and frustrations of what some of the most prominent social theorists of the twentieth century, taking a deep, sober measure of the broken promises of independence in much of the developing world, have aptly termed "the development of underdevelopment"; it is also often a hostage to this stultifying process. The list is very long of theatre people in Africa who, in the cause of social justice and human rights, have paid small and heavy prices so that the ancient, primordial energies of the mimetic faculty that lie at the root of the dramatic enterprise may be rekindled and revitalized for our age, especially on the continent of Africa. This volume is dedicated to all such theatre people of the past, present, and future.

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TAWFIK AL-HAKIM

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PRIEST
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Procession of Ants

Mortals
SAMIA, a housewife
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COOK
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Act One—The Cockroach as King

The scene is a spacious courtyard—as viewed of course by the cockroaches. In actual fact the courtyard is nothing more than the bathroom floor in an ordinary flat. In the front part of this courtyard stands an immense wall, which is nothing but the outer wall of the bath. The time is night, though from the point of view of the cockroaches it is daytime—our bright daylight being so blinding to them that it causes them either to disappear or go to sleep. At the beginning of the play, night has not completely fallen, which is to say that the cockroaches' day is about to begin. The King is standing in sprightly fashion next to a hole in the wall, perhaps the doorway to his palace, and is calling to the Queen who is asleep inside the palace.

KING Come along—wake up! It's time for work.
QUEEN (*from inside*) The darkness of evening has not yet appeared.
KING Any moment now it will.

† From Tawfik al-Hakim, *"Fate of a Cockroach" and Other Plays*, sel. and trans. from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980). Copyright © 1996 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Used by permission of the publisher.

QUEEN Has the blinding light of day completely disappeared?

KING Any moment now it will.

QUEEN Until it disappears completely and night has completely come, let me be and don't bother me.

KING What laziness! What laziness!

QUEEN (*making her appearance*) I wasn't sleeping. You must remember that I have my toilet and make-up to do.

KING Make-up and toilet! If all wives were like you, then God help all husbands!

QUEEN (*aroused to anger*) I'm a queen! Don't forget I'm the Queen!

KING And I'm the King!

QUEEN I'm exactly the same as you—there's no difference between us at all.

KING There is a difference.

QUEEN And what, prithee, might this difference be?

KING My whiskers.

QUEEN Just as you have whiskers, so have I.

KING Yes, but my whiskers are longer than yours.

QUEEN That is a trifling difference.

KING So it seems to you.

QUEEN To you rather. It is your sickly imagination that always makes it appear to you that there is a difference between us.

KING The difference exists—it can be clearly seen by anyone with eyes to see. If you don't believe me, ask the Minister, the Priest, the Savant, and all those worthy gentlemen connected with the court . . .

QUEEN (*sarcastically*) The court!

KING Please—no sarcasm! I have an ever-growing feeling that you're always trying to belittle my true worth.

QUEEN Your worth?

KING Yes, and my authority. You are always trying to diminish my authority.

QUEEN (*even more sarcastically*) Your authority? Your authority over whom? Not over me at any rate—you are in no way better than me. You don't provide me with food or drink. Have you ever fed me? I feed myself, just as you feed yourself. Do you deny it?

KING In the whole cockroach kingdom there is no one who feeds another. Every cockroach strives for his own daily bread.

QUEEN Then I am free to do as I like?

KING And who ever said you weren't?

QUEEN Let me be then. It is I who will decide when I shall work and when be lazy, when to sleep and when to get up.

KING Of course you are free to do as you like but, in your capacity as Queen, you must set a good example.

QUEEN A good example to whom?

KING To the subjects, naturally.

QUEEN The subjects? And where might they be? In my whole life I've never seen anyone around you but those three: the Minister, the Priest, and the learned Savant.

KING They are enough, they are the élite, the cream . . .

QUEEN But if you are the King you should be surrounded by the people.

KING Have you forgotten the characteristics of our species? We are not like those small creatures called 'ants', who gather together in their thousands on the slightest pretext.

QUEEN Don't remind me of ants! A king like you claiming you have worth and authority and you don't know how to solve the ant problem!

KING The ant problem! Ah . . . um . . .

QUEEN Ah . . . um . . . is that all you can say?

KING What reminded you of ants?

QUEEN Their being a continual threat to us. A queen like me, in my position and with my beauty, elegance, and pomp, can't take a step without trembling for fear that I might slip and fall on my back—and woe to me should I fall on my back, for I would quickly become a prey to the armies of ants.

KING Be careful, therefore, that you do not fall on your back!

QUEEN Is that the only solution you have?

KING Do you want, from one day to the next, a solution to a problem that is as old as time?

QUEEN Then shut up and don't boast about the length of your whiskers!

KING Please! Don't talk to the King in such a tone!

QUEEN King! I would just like to ask *who* made you a king.

KING I made myself a king.

QUEEN And what devious means and measures brought you to the throne and placed you on the seat of kingship?

KING (*indignantly*) Means and measures? Pardon me for saying so, but you're stupid!

QUEEN I confess I'm stupid about this . . .

KING What means and what measures, Madam? The question's a lot simpler than that. One morning I woke up and looked at my face in the mirror—or rather in a pool of water near the drain. You yourself know this drain well—it's the one at which we first met. Do you remember?

QUEEN Of course I remember, but what's the connection between the drain, your face, and the throne?

KING Have a little patience and you'll find out. I told you that I looked at my face in the mirror—something that you naturally do every day, perhaps every hour, in order to assure yourself of the beauty of your face.

QUEEN At present we're talking about *your* face. Speak and don't get away from the subject.

KING (*rather put out by now*) As I told you, I looked at my face in the mirror—this was of course by chance . . . that is to say by sheer accident . . . meaning that it was not intentional, I swear to you.

QUEEN That's neither here nor there. You looked at your face in the drain—what did you discover?

KING I discovered something that surprised me and aroused in me . . .

QUEEN A feeling of dejection.

KING Not at all—of admiration.

QUEEN Admiration of what?

KING Of the length of my whiskers. I was really delighted at the length of my whiskers. I immediately rose up and challenged all the cockroaches to compare their whiskers with mine, and that if it was apparent that mine were the longest then I should become king over them all.

QUEEN And they accepted the challenge?

KING No, they conceded it to me there and then, saying that they had no time for whisker-measuring.

QUEEN And so you automatically became His Majesty!

KING Just so.

QUEEN And did they tell you what your privileges were to be?

KING No.

QUEEN And did they tell you what their duties towards you were?

KING No. They merely said that as I was pleased with the title and rank, I could do as I pleased. So long as this cost them nothing and they were not required to feed me, then they had no objection to my calling myself what I liked. And so they left me, each going his own way in search of his daily bread.

QUEEN Then how was it that I became Queen?

KING By commonsense logic. As I was King and you were the female I loved and lived with, so you were of necessity Queen.

QUEEN And your Minister? How did he become a minister?

KING His talents nominated him for the office of Minister, just as mine did for the throne.

QUEEN We know about your talents—the length of your whiskers. But what are your Minister's talents?

KING His consummate concern with proposing disconcerting problems and producing unpleasant news.

QUEEN And the Priest, what are his talents?

KING The completely incomprehensible things he says.

QUEEN And the learned Savant?

KING The strange information he has about things that have no existence other than in his own head.

QUEEN And what induced you to put up with these people?

KING Necessity. I found no one but them wanting to be close to me. They are in need of someone to whom they can pour out their absurdities, whereas I am in need of close companions who will call me 'Your Majesty'.

QUEEN All of which was brought upon you by your long whiskers.

KING And am I responsible? I was born with them like this.

QUEEN Maybe there was someone with longer whiskers than you and yet he never thought of declaring himself a king.

KING Very likely, yet it was I who thought . . .