

The Characteristics of Traditional Drama

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The more fruitful a theory, the more it provides an understanding of facts extraneous to the primary area of observation to which it relates, and the more it encourages the further exploration of the unknown.¹

I

I wish to suggest that traditional dramatic performances around the world share certain basic characteristics. In the common recognition that there are performances world-wide that can be considered drama, there is an implicit recognition of shared elements; these performances, that is, meet the terms of the definition given to drama in European languages. But what particular features recur is seldom explored, even though I believe there are a number of formal features of the performance itself, together with features of both the social context within which the performance is given and the transmission or preparation of the material presented, that tend to be found together.

This is a huge topic and I am attempting here only a provisional and tentative outline; I hope that readers will contact me with their comments on the subject, and that they will alert me to accounts of traditional performances by travellers, missionaries, and anthropologists that would help to support or modify my thesis—or that would invalidate it.

Scholars immersed in a particular culture have been apt to claim that its performance forms have certain distinctive (often, it is claimed, unique) features that are in fact found quite commonly. Historians of European theatre have perhaps been the worst offenders, blithely

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ignoring the rest of the world. But those who have studied dramatic performances elsewhere have also suffered from blinkered vision. Their gaze—and this is especially true of scholars of African cultures—has been directed toward European forms and their explicit or implicit purpose has been to contrast European forms with those of the culture to which they have devoted themselves. So hypnotic is this gaze toward Europe that in the 1970 colloquium on black African theatre at Abidjan, Jacques Le Marinel gave a paper entitled “Théâtre négro-africain et théâtre universel” without mentioning, by way of comparison to African drama, a single country or playwright outside Europe.²

It is, however, more than a wish for accuracy in the claims made for the distinctiveness of African or any other theatre forms that leads me to pursue my topic. First, if there are indeed common characteristics of traditional dramatic performances then there is the possibility that, at a time when African playwrights are much concerned both with rediscovering traditional African modes and with reaching wider audiences, they may find more examples of possible aesthetic solutions in, say, Asian forms of theatre than in European, because there are in Asia not only thriving traditional forms but also theatre forms of urban and professional development that are far closer to traditional forms than are their European counterparts.

The second reason is that we are all bound by the language we speak and both “drama” and “theatre” carry strong connotations with their use. So strong are these connotations that Daniel H. Ingalls flatly denies that such works as *Shakuntala* and *The Little Clay Cart* are dramas at all; instead, he prefers to borrow a term from the Sanskrit and call them “spectacle-poems.”³ The uneasiness about the connotations the term “drama” brings with it from European practice is of long standing; hence, its avoidance in the coinage of the terms “Peking opera” and, modelled on that use, “Yoruba opera.” But “opera” has even more restrictive connotations than “drama.” Nor am I aware of any other problem-free alternative terms. Roger D. Abrahams, contributing an article on folk drama to a survey, *Folklore and Folklife*, dutifully defines the term, then rebels and comments that “the distinction between folk drama and other festival enter-

tainment is one that seems fabricated by scholars.”⁴ He considers the term “dance-drama” as an alternative but reflects that this leaves out acrobatics and song. Obviously, it is awkward to speak of dance-song-acrobatics-drama. Ola Balogun considers it “on the whole inappropriate to speak of ‘performing arts’ as such in the indigenous African context,” but in trying to avoid common terms he finds himself designating a performance “semi-ritual theatre, semi-popular entertainment.”⁵

Since a formal definition of drama fits performances around the world, the problem is not the inapplicability of the term itself but the connotations that surround it. The terms “drama” and “theatre” need not be discarded or evaded, but the ethnocentricity of our sense of dramatic norms should be recognized. Beyond those that allow us to call them drama, practically none of the characteristics common to traditional dramatic performances are to be found in our own contemporary theatre. Indeed, it is perhaps because an enumeration of the basic world-wide features of drama must lead to seeing our Euro-American tradition as eccentric to the norms of drama that there has been an imperceptiveness or lack of interest in the possible existence of such a pattern of features as I shall describe.

I do not think I am twisting the usual meaning of drama if I define it as *a presentation before spectators by performers who take on roles and who interact with each other to further a story, or a text intended for such presentation*. This is intended as a working definition, simple enough to be recalled easily to the mind. Indeed, it is so simple that I should point out that it makes one or two distinctions that are perhaps not immediately obvious. First, to say that performers “take on roles” leaves open the possibility that they are not within the roles throughout the performance, as such alternative phrases as “performers in character” or “characters represented by actors” do not. To say that the performers “interact with each other” might seem unnecessary, but is in fact important, for in traditional societies there are many performances in which different characters appear successively or simultaneously but who nevertheless do not interact. And I say “to further a story” because the progression of the story may not provide the structure for the performance.

The definition does not make one or two distinctions that might have been expected. There is, for example, no mention of spoken dialogue. But then our theatre has, on the one hand, always considered such wordless works as *L'Enfant prodigue* to be dramas while, on the other, it has had great difficulty in drawing a line between spoken and sung forms; if dialogue is placed in apposition to song, which of such early nineteenth-century forms as *drame lyrique*, melodrama, burletta, and opera bouffe are we to declare within the definition of drama and which outside? Nor does the definition distinguish between ritual and drama. The distinction between them is fundamentally one of efficacy and inefficacy: ritual seeks to be efficacious, while a dramatic performance does not expect future results to be brought about by the performance itself.⁶ As anthropologist Raymond Firth says; "no spectator is so completely engulfed by the action that he pursues it after the 'end' of the play."⁷

Firth offers a definition of drama that is full and careful; it is too complex to be remembered, but will serve to amplify mine.

Drama . . . is a portrayal of some aspect or sector of the human condition in a conventional, stylized form, involving selection and abstraction from observation or from an imaginative range of ideas. The aim is to produce over a limited time-span, by compression, a series of situations of tension and release. The production is not to be taken as a literal enactment, but as representative, illustrative of more general issues, perhaps not even descriptive of a real social world but only allusive and symbolic in quality. For this purpose drama requires actors, who perform in a representative capacity; that is, they are not in their private lives personally involved in the events which they publicly perform. They are also practising a craft—or profession—in which the patterned handling of their actions is of prime importance. Drama also needs an audience to witness it, spectators who may identify themselves with the action, but vicariously, suffering its pains and enjoying its pleasures only in imagination.

Firth's intention, like that of my brief working definition, is not to separate drama from closely-related performance forms but to stress the central features of the dramatic experience itself.

II

I use the term "traditional drama" in preference to "folk drama." The latter carries from the European origins of its use too strong a suggestion of a lingering remnant of a rural past, a form of performance cut off from the ongoing development of today's art. Hence, to some the term "folk"

seems pejorative; for example, to call Yoruba opera "folk opera," Joel Adedeji believes, "unequivocally repudiates its artistic worth."⁸ Just because it carries with it fewer connotations, traditional drama is also a broader term; in particular, it does not necessarily connote amateur performers.

Traditional drama is primarily the drama of the community: prepared by members of the community according to well-established modes and performed for or on behalf of the whole community. But while this is the primary sense of the term, there is only a clear distinction between this kind of drama and others where the traditional drama has, as in most of Europe, become a relic of the past. Just as there is a continuum between ritual and drama—or, for that matter, between mime plays and grand opera—so there is a continuum in many parts of the world between traditional drama at the primary, village level and other forms that develop out of it, or borrow from it, or share features with it because of common borrowings from the repertoire of stylistic devices offered by oral literature, or perhaps because the means of transmission and production are the same. Many Asian theatre forms, for example, are traditional in that they share features with drama at the village level, as well as in the casual sense that innovation is not highly valued while past models are prized. A. J. Gunawardana has called such forms "intermediary theatres." He suggests that the essential distinction between them and what he calls traditional theatres (with a meaning close to mine) is that "they are traditional in form but project secular values."

Most intermediary theatres have developed in similar ways. Beginning as traditional forms, they moved from the sacred to the profane, from an overt concern with order and hierarchy (embodied in the cosmic struggles of mythic heroes and divinities) to more mundane stories, from periodic enactment (usually outdoors) to regular performances in enclosed playhouses.⁹

Just how complex can be the interactions between different types of dramatic forms is vividly charted for Southeast Asia by James Brandon.¹⁰ The theatre forms that have developed from or borrowed from traditional drama at the village level have been studied more extensively and are, of course, better known. For both reasons, I shall use examples from them to match others drawn from dramatic performances at the village level.

I am concerned with the aesthetics, rather than the sociology, of performance; the drama itself may remain the same in different circumstances (though a change in the circumstances of performance is likely to introduce a pressure for change in

the performance itself). For example, dramas that were performed by and for the rural community may be maintained in an urban situation, as the traditional comedies of the Bambara have been in Bamako; the community that sponsors the performance, and for which it is given, is now a particular quarter or city street, and the performers are likely to come from outside it and to be semi-professionals—that is, they are hired to give the performance, but do not make their living by performing.¹¹ Aesthetically, the drama can remain the same whether performed gratis for the community as a whole or, for a fee, in the courtyard of a family that has a particular reason (such as a marriage or a birthday) for celebration—or, indeed, can remain the same even when incorporated into a set of courtly festivities to entertain Queen Elizabeth I.¹²

III

In setting out the basic characteristics of traditional drama I shall not cite as many examples as occur to me. If I did, the result would be unreadable; besides, readers will probably be able to think of additional examples themselves. More important, the basic elements are mutually reinforcing; as I cite a performance to exemplify one feature, readers will notice that I could also have cited it to exemplify others.

Here, then, are what I conceive to be the basic characteristics of traditional drama.

1. Dramas are presented as parts of a sequence of varied performance forms.
2. Within one drama a variety of performance forms and dramatic modes can be found.
3. Texts are non-existent, or not used by the performers.
4. The plays use the stylistic devices characteristic of oral literature.
5. The subject matter is familiar to the spectators.
6. Settings are minimal, costumes are gorgeous.
7. Actor-spectator relationships are close.
8. The performance is free to the spectators.
9. A therapeutic function is attributed to the performance.

These are characteristics rather than necessary features: they form a recurring cluster in traditional dramatic performances around the world, but one or more may be absent from a particular situation. A varying number of these features can, as I have said, be found in other kinds of dramatic performances. Many forms of Asian theatre have developed from traditional drama, while such recent African forms as the Ghanaian Concert Parties and the Yoruba opera have borrowed from the conventions of traditional performance. By contrast, not one of these characteristics is to be found in the performances most common in our own culture.

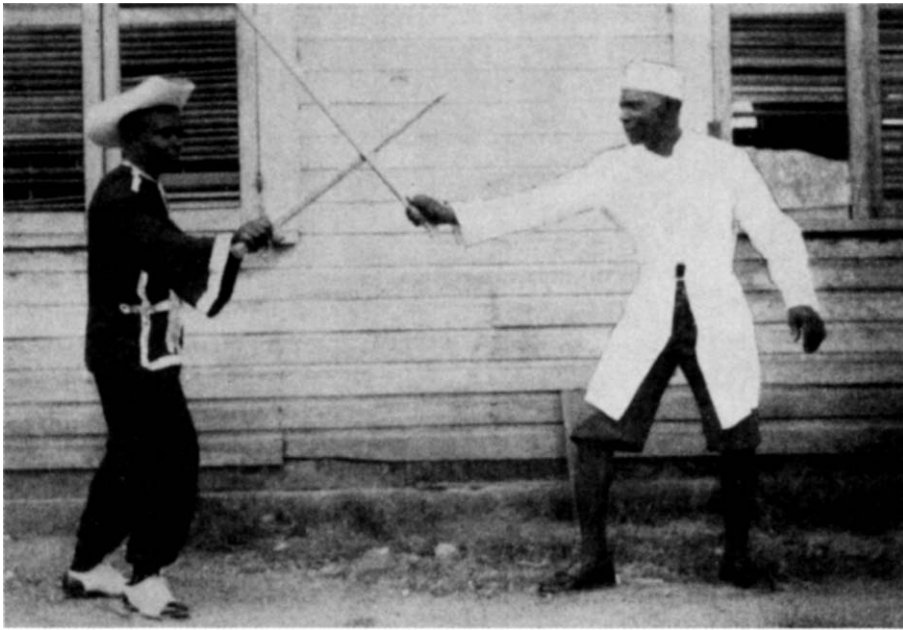
Dramas are presented as parts of a sequence of varied performance forms. To take two typical examples:

among the Ibibio of Southeastern Nigeria, a performance may consist of music, dance, songs, puppet-plays, stilt-dances, and dramatic sketches;¹³ in India's Maharashtra state, the traditional performance form of Tamasha "is characterized by a loosely arranged mixture of elements which may include traditional songs and dances, farcical skits, and . . . full-length dramatic folk-plays."¹⁴

Often the performance itself is only part of an even broader event, a festival. At the Festival of Dionysus in classical Athens, dithyrambs as well as dramas were presented in a context of religious processions and ceremonies to honor citizens and to mark the annual tributes from Athens' allies. As part of a festival, the presentation may be no more than an "incident or sideshow" among more spectacular displays, as F. E. Williams writes of the Hevehe festival of the Elema of New Guinea.¹⁵ So unstructured is the occasion for the performance of Kutiyattam, in South India, that while the play is announced on the first day of performance and the opening invocations performed, several days are then dominated by the buffoon (*Vidusaka*) who acts as a kind of Lord of Misrule while satirical plays and discussions are held, together with a day of feasting, before it is finally decided which hero-king will be honored with a play on the last day of the sequence.¹⁶ In the town of Rabinal, Guatemala, a dance-drama of pre-Conquest origins is performed annually during festival processions, but few linger to watch it; in 1969 "no more than ten spectators were present" for everyone else had gone off to enjoy more intelligible and more gaudy plays sponsored by the quarters (*barrios*) of the town.¹⁷

Performances are also common in which a string of short plays is given. Among Indian forms of traditional theatre, for example, a Bhavai performance lasts from 9 p.m. to around 11 a.m. the next morning, but most of the plays presented last only thirty to thirty-five minutes, though the more important last for hours; a Chhau performance lasts all night, but its dance-dramas are not more than ten minutes in length.¹⁸

I might add the speculation that whenever drama becomes popular, it approaches the form of mixed or variety entertainment: the outdoor theatres of the Spanish Renaissance did not present a single play, while their English counterparts had their jigs. In the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British theatre the main piece was accompanied by afterpiece, orchestral overture and interludes, with specialty acts and dances between the acts of the plays. Contemporary street theatre, seeking a popular audience, also approaches the traditional pattern; the San Francisco Mime Troupe, for example, offers songs, juggling, and an entering parade in which the actors play band instruments before the play itself, which in turn incorporates songs and dances.



Ray Johnson as Lord Clifford and Risin' Tide Stevenson as Crook-back Richard in *Henry VI* and *Richard III* in La Ceiba

Some forms of drama, notably the Yüan drama in China and the Nō drama in Japan, developed by integrating diverse forms of entertainment.¹⁹ In origin, then, these forms are linked to performances that presented a sequence of varied performance forms. In a traditional Nō performance, moreover, five Nō plays (themselves of varied kinds, for Nō is a term that designates a mode of performance rather than a genre) were presented with farcical Kyogen between them.

Within one drama a variety of performance forms and dramatic modes can be found. There are few if any traditional dramas anywhere that do not include song and elements of dance within them. Once again, too, these features tend to be included in new forms that seek a popular audience, such as melodrama and musical comedy. In La Ceiba, a town in Honduras, English-speaking Afro-Americans have for decades presented a drama drawn from Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 3* and *Richard III*; the two features they have added to Shakespeare are a six-piece band and, to its music, a parade between each scene.²⁰

It may well be that, like the Yüan drama and the Nō, some traditional dramas have incorporated within themselves elements once discrete—not only song and dance but also farces and satires. If so, this basic feature may be seen in part as an alternative feature to that of drama appearing as one element in a mixed entertainment. Either, as James Brandon says of Southeast Asian forms, “a single play will be made up of a mixture of comic, farcical, melodramatic, and genuinely serious elements,”²¹ or the performance will feature a variety of drama-

tic modes, as in a Tamasha performance, which will include a lightly erotic and comic sketch between Krishna and the milkmaids, a hilarious farce that nevertheless highlights passionate narrative love songs, and the main play about a king of history or myth.

Texts are non-existent, or not used by the performers.

It is not only because performers of traditional drama are often illiterate that no texts exist. Where the performance is a regular event in the community, a premium may be placed upon novelty. The Bobongo performances of the Ekonda of Zaïre have to end with a novel spectacle each time, and when René Tonnoir studied the performance in 1951 he found that much of the four months of rehearsal was devoted to one of the ten episodes that made up the performance, because that episode presented the history of the village and it was difficult to treat the same history freshly each year.²² Where comedy dominates, it is likely to be topical and hence hardly worth recording. Improvisation may be so prized that even when the same play has been performed for hundreds of years, as is the case with the comedy *Charamiyex* at Rabinal, Guatemala, it will vary from performance to performance.²³ Even if the organizer of a performance knows that a text exists he may not consult it at all (as is the case at Rabinal) or, as in some Asian examples, he may keep it from the players to enhance his authority. Where the dramatic performances contain a great deal of mimed action or dance, a text might not be very helpful in any case.

Where texts exist, they may be misleading. For example, Balwant Gargi gives the following ex-

change between a warrior and his wife in a Yakshagana drama from the Mysore coast:

Warrior:

I have prepared for the battle.

Wife:

Aho.

Warrior:

I am going.

Wife:

Where?

Warrior:

I shall defeat the enemy.

Wife:

Hao!

Warrior:

And bring you war trophies.

Wife:

So?

Warrior:

Don't be sad.

Wife:

No.

Warrior:

My armor shines.

Wife:

Aho.

Warrior:

And my arrows and bow are quivering.

Wife:

Yes.

Warrior:

I shall return victorious.

Wife:

No doubt!

But in a text of the play this is set out as a single speech, without the wife's interjections.²⁴ Texts of Yüan dramas, it has been persuasively argued, leave out the comic episodes that were a part of the performances because the plays were recorded and edited not with an eye on mounting a performance but on making available the poetry of their songs.²⁵ The texts of Tibetan harvest dramas and of most Southeast Asian dramas are not in dramatic form at all, but set out as stories.

The plays use the stylistic devices characteristic of oral literature. Whatever the extent of the improvisation, some set formulae—often such common stock of oral culture as proverbs and praise-songs—are likely to appear in the performance. Often the rhetoric is highly sophisticated, replete with metaphor, punning, elaborate parallelism and other forms of repetition. In the Queché Maya play, *Rabinal Achl*, for example, each speech begins with a salutation and ends with a blessing; each speaker gives a close paraphrase of the speech he has just heard, before replying with words that will in their turn be taken up and repeated; within each

speech there is elaborate doubling of phrases. The effect is cumulative, since the phrases reverberate on and on, but a brief quotation will indicate the quality.

... you kidnapped the white children, my noble sons, at the point of your arrow, by the force of your shield, without your heart caring to hear my challenge, my war cry. Then I ran from mountainside to mountainside, to the sides of the valleys and put my markers on the place called Panahachel. Then I hurled my challenge, my war cry against you. Only then and there did you release these beautiful children, the white sons, there at the Great Woods of Cabrakan Paraveno, called thus, at just a short distance from the Quiché mountains, from the Quiché valleys. From there they returned, they ran from mountainside to mountainside, to the sides of the valleys; with empty bellies, with hollow stomachs they returned.²⁶

In Yakshagana each character repeats the last word of the previous speaker at the beginning of his own speech.

Incident, too, is often reduplicated, as in folktales. A husband will suspect several men of adultery with his wife, or will get into trouble for theft not once but three times, and so on.²⁷ This, of course, will also involve repetition of language.

Texts of traditional dramas are hard to find, but on the evidence of theatre forms that retain many traditional features, repetitions become particularly thick at climaxes. The Peking opera, *Ssu Lang Visits his Mother*, for example, ends with a series of pleas to the Empress to pardon Ssu Lang; these climax in three separate approaches and curtseys by her daughter, who is encouraged each time by two guards. When she is successful, Ssu Lang thanks her six times.

Ssu Lang

(sings):

Just now I traveled out in defiance of the law. Many thanks to you, Princess, for liberating me. Before thanking the Empress Dowager I first thank you. Just now I was a criminal. Many thanks to you Princess for speaking on my behalf. I stand here and thank you.

Princess

(speaks):

I do not deserve such thanks.

Ssu Lang

(speaks):

I must thank you once again.

Princess:

I do not deserve such thanks.

Ssu Lang:

I must thank you once again.



Ssu Lang and the Princess

Princess:

I do not deserve it.

Ssu Lang:

According to principles of respect and reverence I must thank you.

Princess:

I do not deserve it.²⁸

Very often repetition is needed because a situation is expressed in highly poetic or sung fashion, and needs to be conveyed to the spectators more plainly. At the beginning of a Peking opera, for example, the character will state his or her dilemma once in a terse sentence, then sing a few lines transmuting the same idea into metaphor, then return to spoken prose to explain the situation more fully. Similarly, a character in Yüan drama may sing some lines on entrance that reflect upon a general human situation and then outline his or her particular problem. Halfway through many Nō plays an *ai-kyogen* appears to re-tell the story (though what he says does not appear in the published texts of the plays).

In some traditional forms the manager of the troupe and director of the performance may explain the situation at the character's entrance. In Bhavai, of Gujarat, he questions the hero to establish the situation and then narrates the tale while the actors sing, dance, and improvise.²⁹ In Therukoothu, of South India, the character sings,

the chorus repeats his lines, and then the character paraphrases what he has said under questioning from the troupe's director or the clown.³⁰ Similarly among the Malinke of Mali: the entering actor speaks to the "head of the village," who is sitting with the musicians, and he questions the actor—often by no more than echoing the actor's last words in an enquiring tone—to elicit a fuller exposition.³¹ A clown-figure takes on the role of master of ceremonies in some forms; he may paraphrase while also amusing, or may so misinterpret the situation as to need point-by-point correction by the manager-director (who thus furnishes another repetition).

Repetition may also be needed because the language of the principal characters may not be comprehensible to their audience. The climactic exchange between Barong and Rangda in Bali is in an old form of Balinese, the text of the Tibetan harvest dramas is in classical Tibetan, the kings in the Sanskrit dramas are accompanied by a jester who speaks the commoners' Prakrit. In a comic sketch performed in Bamako, a Moslem ascetic is represented as singing a parody of a prayer in macaronic Arabic that both exemplifies and explains the use of repetition.

If you send for her

If it should happen that she accepts

If it should happen that she comes,

If you tell her carefully,

If it should happen that she accepts.

You take her and throw her onto the middle of your bed.

If she removes her loin-cloth, leaving only the pedenluni dye

If that is done,

You take off your trousers.

He who follows that path, his skin will be saved from his own hell.

Moslem men and women are devoted to this religion.

And now I will say it all over again for those who didn't understand.³²

The subject matter is familiar to the spectators. Traditional drama is likely to draw upon familiar legendary or historical material. The performance itself may refer to rather than tell a story. One of a series of dramatic sketches about Ikaki, a greedy tortoise masquerade of the Kalabari of Nigeria, simply shows Ikaki going from bush to bush, backing furtively out of each with a knapsack that becomes fuller and fuller. It is the spectators who must relate this action to the story of how Ikaki once went door to door predicting misfortunes for each of his neighbors and then, while their attention was held by an accomplice posing as a witch-doctor,

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rifled their food stores.³³ In New Guinea F. E. Williams saw a performance and had “no doubt that the special costume characters represent various of the persons referred to in the ballad” that was sung as they danced, but he could not grasp the correlations.³⁴ Nō plays of the *mugen* category refer back to a story that occurred in the past; the sense of the paths of past events is provided as much by the audience’s familiarity with the historical events that the drama recalls as by the playwright’s often elliptical phrases.

Throughout India and Southeast Asia performances dramatize parts of the *Ramayana*. Here, too, the significance of the presentation is as much or more in its relation to the unseen whole as to what is shown. Indeed, in Burma, Maung Htin Aung reported that the audiences’ calls for repetitions of the songs and dances within the plays were so frequent that at every performance “when dawn broke and the audience dispersed to work, at the most only the first half of the play had been shown.”³⁵ As Brandon comments, “*Ramayana* dramas of the [Southeast Asian] mainland are often produced in fragmented fashion. Sections of the story that might be considered important are left out while extraneous scenes are dragged in.”³⁶

This is possible because the audience is familiar with the story, and because “the genre, not the play, is the unit of production.”³⁷ In many cases, the spectators do not know what episode they will see enacted. In Kerala it may be only just before the performance that the Kathakali performers decide what they will present. In Thailand, Likay performers may improvise the plot as well as the dialogue.³⁸ And in Balinese Ardja, the decision as to which historical episode will be presented may be made *after* the first few performers have already entertained the audience for some time; the minor characters recognize which play they have been introducing when the central character of the king joins them in the performance area.³⁹

During the festival season Balinese villages are visited by troupes from other communities. Payment is discussed with representatives of the village and only as many characters and as much of a story are presented as have been agreed upon for the amount of the payment.⁴⁰ In Kutiyattam, of South India, a play as a whole is never performed, but only acts selected from it.⁴¹

In a performance where the story is known, and perhaps the play itself, the spectator’s interest works in two directions. On the one hand, there is an emphasis upon how the performer is executing the familiar actions; that is, upon his expertise. Thus, a Peking opera performance may present extracts from longer works in order to display the performers’ prowess, while in Nō the climactic dances may be taken out of context, and in Kabuki one act extracted from a longer work. Thracian villagers may consider the improvisation of threats and curses, bestowed by the driver of a plough-team upon the stumbling boys who pull the plough, as a highlight of an annual dramatic ceremony.⁴²

On the other hand, as Roger D. Abrahams stresses,

Actions, as anyone will attest who has seen a live folk-drama, are secondary considerations to the audience. Much more important is the presentation of character and the development of interactions between the types. . . .

We are so used to the well-wrought performance piece, one which demonstrates its wholeness, integrity and verisimilitude within the framework of the work itself that we forget that most art achieves its sense of relevance and wholeness by its appropriateness to an occasion, and by the participation on the part of an audience prepared to enjoy, participate, react.⁴³

In a similar strain, Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies write that in Bali “the presence of all the right types seems to be the important thing quite irrespective of what they do; in fact the working out of a plot seems to interest no one. . . .”⁴⁴

The emphasis upon types is supported by stylized make-up, masks, and costumes; also by the repetition from play to play of musical themes.⁴⁵ Neither the circumstances inherent to outdoor performance, nor the lengths of many traditional performances, encourage the spectator’s close and continuing attention; these factors, too, support the reliance upon types.

Settings are minimal, costumes are gorgeous. Here, again, the emphasis is on the performer. In our theatre, carefully integrated design and the flexibility of stage lighting ensure that the actor stands out,



Nō actor

but in traditional performances it is the costume alone (together with mask or make-up) that enhance his presence. Peter Arnott comments upon the discomfiture felt by the Western spectator in a modern, fluorescently-lit Nō theatre:

His eye tends to wander to upstage centre, . . . where the musicians sit, and when not playing they may be busy with their own affairs. One may often see a drummer, during a dialogue passage, restringing the framework of his drum—with vivid orange thread . . . But these things are, to an extent, accidents of the indoor performance. When *noh* is played outdoors as it was meant to be, the stage assumes a different quality, and the relative importance of the characters is more immediately obvious. The stage and *hashigakari* [entranceway from the dressing-room] are shadowed by their canopies. Against this obscurity the mask and brilliant costume of the *shite* [principal actor] stand out in sharp relief. One perceives that the costumes have a graduated brightness in accordance with the status of the wearer; the less important the character, the more his costume merges into the shadows of the stage.⁴⁶

Gorgeous costumes may in some performance forms honor a god, spirit, or culture-hero, by whom the actor is possessed, or considered to be possessed. Distinctive costumes may communicate to the audience who the characters are, a function that is particularly useful in a sung performance.

Settings, on the other hand, may be non-existent. The actors may roam from one spot to another; they did so in fifteenth-century Norwich, where the appropriately named John Gladman “rode in diverse stretes of ye Cite w^t other people w^t hym dysgysed making merth and disporte and pleyes”;⁴⁷ they do so in some African performances;⁴⁸ and in the Ramlila of North India.⁴⁹ Sometimes a play may be performed over and over again in different parts of a village, as were the New Year plays of both the British mummers and of Turkish performers on the Black Sea coast.⁵⁰

Even if the performance is in one place, such as the village square, the audience may be on all sides. If there are elements of setting, they are likely to be functional. For example, in the Tibetan harvest dramas,

a house is a staked square enclosed by red cloth. A forest consists of green tree branches stuck into the ground, and when some of the branches are tied into the shape of a wigwam it is the hermitage of an anchorite. Branches stuck in the ground around a chair is a courtyard or a place of assembly in the open. The hill or elevation higher than the surrounding area is a chair on which the observer stands . . . At the edge of the performance area marshals beat the ground continuously with whips, to keep back the children.⁵¹

Although such aggressive marshals are not uncommon elsewhere, keeping back spectators who press forward into an ill-defined performance area is more often one of the clown's functions. Indeed, from it derives the short stick topped by an inflated bladder common to the jester of Europe, the *tulum-cus* who accompanied Ottoman sultans, and clowns elsewhere.⁵²

Actor-spectator relationships are close. Where the performance area is undefined, and especially where the performance is in the daytime with the whole area well-lit, easy access to the spectators can be exploited. The coquette may flirt and dance with them, the sharper try to sell to them or borrow from them.⁵³ In the British mummers' play the crucial property to save the hero may be borrowed from the audience. The Nkundo of Zaire give the victim of their satire the chance to improvise a reply.⁵⁴ In a Turkish performance of a drama that Metin And suggests is related to the Persephone myth, “a member of the audience acts as the village headman” and at the start of the play the Persephone-figure is “carried off by a member of the audience.” He says nothing more of the headman and does not explain whether the member of the audience who carries off the girl is really one of the performers, but it is clear that here, and in the “general lamentation of the villagers when the man falls dead or the

girl is abducted, and [rejoicing] when the dead man is resurrected or the abducted girl returns," there is a strong pattern of audience involvement.⁵⁵

As in this Turkish performance, spectators in general may be expected to express themselves. In the Peking opera and Kabuki theatres they are expected to shout at certain moments; in the Raslila of Mathura, near New Delhi, the director of the performance orders the spectators to "Shout the Victory of Lord Krishna!" and, as the performance moves toward its climax, the spectators must clap in rhythm or, it is believed, they will be born crippled in the next life; they must also shout the holy slogan "*Radhaiaiai . . . Shyam!*" or they will be re-born dumb.⁵⁶ Often, audiences sing choruses to the actors' verses.

The performance is free to the spectators. Someone, of course, has to pay for the appurtenances of the performance, and perhaps the performers too. That cost may be met by the club or society presenting the play, as often happens in Africa; by a community levy, as with the village plays traditional in North China;⁵⁷ or, as in parts of Southeast Asia, by the sponsorship of a local religious organization. The spectator himself is not charged to attend the performance, though spectators may wish to run forward and reward an actor for a feat of virtuosity or for the sentiments he has just uttered. At a Nautanki performance, in Rajasthan, the actor would be thanked by the director of the troupe with a low bow and an improvised couplet in his honor.⁵⁸

Where the individual is charged to attend the performance, there are likely to be two consequences: a structure is built to control access to the performance area (a process particularly clear in the origins of the Nō theatre)⁵⁹ and the performance becomes more tightly knit, since the spectators are unlikely to be able to go away and return. Perhaps there develops a greater concern on the part of the individual to know in advance what he will see if he spends his money; possibly, too, a greater demand for novelty.

Where the performance is free to the spectators, part of the dramatic performance can be presented in the morning and part in the afternoon or on the next day. It can more easily be interwoven with other community events. The occasion of the performance is more important than what is performed; people have a good time—talk, eat, drink, and sleep if the performance goes on all night.

A therapeutic function is attributed to the performance. In the time of Zeami Nō performances were given for the sick;⁶⁰ in Sri Lanka performances that include "devil-dancing" and comic sketches are performed to cure the physically and mentally ill.⁶¹ The therapeutic function of dramatic performance is rarely as specific as this, however. In many places traditional dramas are said to be performed to keep

the gods happy, to strengthen the fertility of the earth, or to keep witches or illness away from the village. What is performed may have symbolic relevance, as often in New Year plays, or it may be quite unrelated to the occasion, as among the villages of Northern China in the 1920s where, once it was decided that a performance might help to end drought or flood, it made no difference what play was performed, nor whether the performance was given by the villagers themselves or by a travelling professional troupe.⁶²

It is the therapeutic function attributed to performances that probably accounts for the rarity (perhaps the total absence) of tragedy as a genre of traditional drama. The sense that to enact misfortune is to invite it has been recorded in various parts of the world. Analogously, directors of medieval cycle plays often found it difficult to fill the roles of Pilate and the devil, even though these were the best parts in terms of theatrical impact. The function of traditional drama is not to hold the mirror up to nature, but to abstract from nature a model of the world. Types rather than individuals are represented, and types do not lend themselves to tragedy; "types do not create themselves by a process of choice: they are already made; they are eternal."⁶³ In Sanskrit theory, "A drama as a work of art was regarded as a whole, as a cycle complete in itself. A drama ending with disastrous consequences would be a mutilated piece from the world of our experience—it would merely mean that the cycle has not been completed, or that it is only a partial view and not the whole."⁶⁴ M. Christopher Byski puts the same point yet more forcefully:

Since Yajña [sacrifice] must reach a positive conclusion, it cannot therefore be overrun by the adverse forces of the Asuras, for then the disintegrated body of the Lord of Creatures will not be reconstructed and the whole order of the Universe will be perilously disturbed. *Natya* [drama] is supposed to reflect the nature of the world to such an extent that it is itself called a sacrifice so that it cannot disregard the pattern and consequently be an untrue representation of the Three Worlds.⁶⁵

The common genres of traditional drama are comedy and historical (or legendary) reenactment. Historical enactments affirm the unity and traditional values of the group. Comedy is more complex. It may be priapic or satiric and, by mixing the two modes, may offer both release from daily social restrictions, especially those between man and woman, and reassertion of social norms. The aggressive wife and henpecked husband, for example, offer both a reversal of the normative ideal and,

“There is, of course, a fascination in finding that man’s mind works in similar ways in different continents and, for that matter, in different centuries.”

because they are laughed at, reassertion of the norm. The drunkard, the miser, the womaniser, the cripple, who are a strain on the community, together with those outside it, such as foreigners, tradesmen, and wandering ascetics, are common objects of satire. Of the priapic elements, the sociologist Georges Balandier has written,

They indicate the condition of societies in which all effectiveness of human action is of a biological rather than a technical nature, cultures in which, as Engels put it, “reproduction of human beings” greatly overshadows “production of the means of existence.” In such a context, the prototype of every effective act is the sexual gesture. To simulate this gesture shows recognition of a fundamental law—indeed, a condition for the continuation of the living natural world—and gives assurance of fruitful and harmonious action.⁶⁶

Of traditional dramatic performances in general it is true to say, “Because a didactic aim requires that virtue triumph over vice, virtually all plays have happy endings.”⁶⁷

In addition to the features that I have singled out there are others that are common, such as the participation in village performances of the leader of the troupe (or organizer of the performance) as master of ceremonies, and of the clown, who stands in a particularly close relationship to the spectators, whether he is interpreting the action of the play for them or keeping them from intruding upon the performance area. But the more features that are enumerated, the less basic and universal they become.

III

I have tried to keep the focus upon the aesthetic features of performances for it is to them that we respond as spectators. Even so, the aesthetic features are determined by the social structure, both in the broadest terms of world-view—from which derive the perceived purpose of the performance and the determination of who the performers should be—and in the narrow terms of who pays for the performance. It is not possible to divorce the aesthetic from the social features of performance, and the last three of the suggested basic characteris-

tics of traditional performance are more directly social than aesthetic. One of them, that the performance is free to the spectators, seems absolutely crucial.⁶⁸

It would have been possible to start from the social features. The International Folk Music Council does so in defining folk music:

Folk music is the product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are (1) continuity, which links the present with the past; (2) variation, which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (3) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.

The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from elementary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which has originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten tradition of a community.⁶⁹

This last distinction comes close to my distinction between traditional drama at the primary, village level and traditional drama in a broader sense; indeed, in these terms even Shakespeare in *La Ceiba* would be considered traditional drama. The International Folk Music Council is concerned, as I am, to point to an interchange or continuum between the performance forms that have developed within a more or less isolated community and forms that have flourished under urban or court stimulation.

It would have been easy enough to write this essay without citing Peking opera, *Nō*, and Kabuki. My suggested characteristics might have seemed better supported if all examples had come from forms developed and presented in the villages—especially since I have kept examples to a minimum. Yet to limit my presentation in this way would work against my larger aim: that we should cease placing traditional drama in a category where it subsists as a thing unto itself and does not affect the way we think of dramatic form. In a single generation *Nō* passed from a popular to a court entertainment and, in our century, the Malaysian *Ma’yong* passed in a single generation from court to village entertainment.⁷⁰ In Europe the evidence is

lacking for the existence of such a continuum as seems to have existed in Asia, whereby a dramatic form could move from village to court appeal or vice versa, but individual plays occasionally have done so. *Mucedorus*, for example, a product of the popular and professional theatre of sixteenth-century London, was still being performed in Shropshire villages in the mid-nineteenth century.⁷¹

An emphasis on the social features of performance would, I believe, have supported the breadth of my examples, for the strongest links between traditional drama of the village community and the forms of drama developed by professional touring troupes in Southeast Asia, and the urban forms of Peking opera and Kabuki, lie in features outside the performance itself. That is, they lie in the process of oral transmission, usually through an apprenticeship system that is often strongly tied to particular families. That system, with its emphasis upon the accumulated repertory of the troupe, in turn supports a repertory system of performances where the ultimate emphasis falls upon the mode of presentation rather than upon the individual work of art. And it is probably the inherent conservatism of the process of transmission and the organization of performances that accounts for the maintenance of formal features that are shared with primary traditional drama.

Where does a study of common elements in traditional forms of drama lead us? There is, of course, a fascination in finding that man's mind works in similar ways in different continents and, for that matter, in different centuries. For an explanation of why it does so, one is drawn toward exploring, on the one hand, the psychology of the aesthetic experience and, on the other, the social structures and social experiences from which traditional forms of drama have arisen. But that there are common elements world-wide does not lead to ever wider speculations and generalizations. A recognition of what is held in common should lead to a sharper sense of what is individual in particular cultures; there can be no true appreciation of what is particular to a dramatic form unless one has a clear sense of what it shares with others. That sense, for example, should provide a context for the understanding of our experimental theatre, since in turning away from the particular traditions of Western theatre, the practitioners of experimental theatre are seeking those dramatic norms—often with an imperfect knowledge that they are indeed rediscovering norms—that have become weak in our own theatre, such as contact with and physical involvement of the spectator, use of undefined acting areas, and performances of a loose structure that force the spectator to adopt a less intense and less focused attentiveness.

The study of common patterns should also lead to a changed, less ethnocentric sense of dramatic norms. This, in turn, should lead to revisions in Western dramatic theory.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lord Zuckerman, "Theory and Practice in and out of Science," *Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 17, 1972, p. 1393.

2. *Actes du Colloque sur le Théâtre Nègro-Africain* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1971). The titles and contents of the two other papers in the same session, on the *universality* of African theatre, betray an exclusive concern with Europe.

3. Introduction to *Sanskrit Poetry: From Vidyāhara's "Treasury"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press for Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 36.

4. Ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 355.

5. "Traditional Arts and Cultural Development in Africa," *Cultures*, 2, No. 3 (1975), 166–167.

6. I have discussed the difference between ritual and drama in *The Drama of Black Africa* (New York: Samuel French, 1974), pp. 14–27, and in "'Ritual' in Contemporary Theatre and Theory," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 28 (Oct. 1976), 318–325.

7. *Rev. Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* by Victor W. Turner, *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 13, 1974, p. 966.

8. "The Birth of Yoruba Opera," *Spectrum* (Atlanta), 3 (June 1973), 55.

9. "From Ritual to Rationality: Notes on the Changing Asian Theatre," *The Drama Review*, 15 (Spring 1971), 55, 56.

10. *Theatre in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 82–83. Brandon's categories are the folk theatre tradition of the village, the court theatre tradition, the popular theatre tradition of the towns, and the Western theatre tradition.

11. See Claude Meillasoux, "The 'Koteba' of Bamako," *Présence africaine*, English ed., No. 24 (1964), pp. 28–62. See also his *Urbanization of an African Community: Voluntary Associations in Bamako* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).

12. See the account of the entertainments at Kenilworth in M. C. Bradbrook, *The Rise of the Common Player: A Study of Actor and Society in Shakespeare's England* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962).

13. John C. Messenger, "Ibibio Drama," *Africa*, 41 (July 1971), 211.



Rama and Sita from the *Ramayana*

14. Tevia Abrams, "Folk Theatre in Maharashtrian Social Development Programs," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 27 (October 1975), 396. See also Balwant Gargi, *The Folk Theater of India* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), pp. 73–88.

15. F. E. Williams, *Drama of Orokoloko: The Social and Ceremonial Life of the Elema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 329.

16. K. R. Pisharoti, "South Indian Theatre," in *The Theatre of the Hindus*, by H. H. Wilson et al. (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1955), pp. 198–200.

17. Carroll Edward Mace, *Two Spanish-Quiché Dance-Dramas of Rabinal*, Tulane Studies in Romance Languages and Literature, No. 3 (New Orleans, Louisiana, 1970), p. 113.

18. Gargi, pp. 57, 175.

19. See, in particular, James I. Crump, "Yüan-pen, Yüan Drama's Rowdy Ancestor," *Literature East and West*, 14 (Dec. 1970), 473–490; and P. G. O'Neill, *Early Nō Drama: Its Background, Character, and Development, 1300–1450* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958).

20. Louise Wright George, "Shakespeare in La Ceiba," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 3 (Oct. 1952), 364–365.

21. Brandon, pp. 116–117.

22. René Tonnoir, "Bobongo, ou l'art choréographique chez les Ekonda, Yemba et Tumba du Lac Léopold II," *Problèmes d'Afrique centrale*, 20, No. 2 (1953), 105–106.

23. Mace tells of the impossibility of establishing a definitive text; Mace, pp. 171–173.

24. Gargi, p. 152.

25. See James I. Crump, "The Elements of Yüan Opera," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 17, No. 3 (1958), 417–434, and "The Conventions and Crafts of Yüan Drama," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 91 (Jan.-March 1971), 14–29.

26. *Rabinal Achí*, trans. Richard E. Leinaweaver, *Latin American Theatre Review*, No. 1/2 (Spring 1968), p. 27. Translators often omit repetitions. Arthur Waley omits all repetitions in his translations, *The Nō Plays of Japan* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921) and Liu Jung-en notes that "I have omitted passages in dialogue and in verse which are obscure to me, inessential to the play as a whole, or tiresomely repetitive," Introduction to *Six Yüan Plays* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 20.

27. For more examples of such repetition, see *The Drama of Black Africa*, pp. 49–56. Repetition of this kind, of course, is a common comic technique; nevertheless, it seems particularly strong in the comedies of *traditional* drama.

28. In *Traditional Chinese Plays*, trans. A. C. Scott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, Vol. I, 1967), pp. 89–90.

29. Gargi, p. 59.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

31. Meillasoux, pp. 36–37.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

33. Robin Horton, "Ikaki—The Tortoise Masquerade," *Nigeria Magazine*, No. 94 (Sept. 1967), pp. 226–240.

34. Williams, p. 278.

35. *Burmese Drama* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 137.

36. Brandon, p. 90.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

39. Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies, *Dance and Drama in Bali* (New York: Harper, 1939), pp. 37–38. Zoete and Spies do not specify what dramatic form of performance they are describing, but it seems clear that it is Ardja.

40. Margaret Mead, "The Strolling Players in the Mountains of Bali" (1939), in *Traditional Balinese Culture*, ed. Jane Belo (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 142.
41. Pisharoti, p. 198.
42. See *Kalogeros*, a film distributed by the University of California at Berkeley, Extension Service.
43. "British West Indian Folk Drama and the 'Life Cycle' Problem," *Folklore*, 81 (Winter 1970), 256–257.
44. De Zoete and Spies, p. 18. They go on to make an exception in the case of Ardja.
45. See Brandon, p. 133.
46. *The Theatres of Japan* (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 94–95.
47. *Records of the City of Norwich*, quoted in Charles Read Baskervill, "Dramatic Aspects of Medieval Folk Festivals in England," *Studies in Philology*, 17 (1920), 40.
48. See, e.g., *The Drama of Black Africa*, pp. 29–31.
49. Gargi, p. 91.
50. For the latter, see Metin And, *A History of Theatre and Popular Entertainment in Turkey* (Ankara: Forum Yayinlari, 1963–64), p. 56.
51. Marion H. Duncan, Introduction to *Harvest Festival Dramas of Tibet* (Hong Kong: Orient Publishing Company, 1955) pp. 17 and 15.
52. For the *tulumcus*, see And, p. 19.
53. A variety of such involvements is described in *The Drama of Black Africa*, p. 36.
54. G. Hulstaert, "Théâtre Nkundo," *Aequatoria*, 16 (1953), 143.
55. And, p. 154.
56. Gargi, pp. 122–123.
57. Sidney Gamble, Introduction to *Chinese Village Plays from the Ting Hsien Region (Yang Ke Hsüan)* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970), p. xx.
58. Balwant Gargi, *Theatre in India* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1962), p. 84.
59. See, e.g., Earle Ernst, *The Kabuki Theatre* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), pp. 36–37.
60. Zeami, *Kadensho*, quoted in Waley, p. 25.
61. Faubion Bowers, *Theatre in the East: A Survey of Asian Dance and Drama* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), pp. 99–100.
62. Gamble, p. xxvii. Cf. William Fagg's belief that, in a performance in a traditional society, "a person in stylized movement is ipso facto generating force," *Nigerian Images* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 123.
63. Ingalls, p. 17.
64. S. N. Dasgupta and S. K. De, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1947), p. lxxxii.
65. *Concept of Ancient Indian Theatre* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974), pp. 137–138.
66. *Ambiguous Africa: Cultures in Collision*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966), p. 142.
67. Brandon, p. 117.
68. For example, this factor, with others, leads A. L. Becker to describe traditional theatre in Burma in these terms: "Theatre . . . comes to the home of the audience, to a village or neighborhood . . . The theatre is not a formal place where the performers are at home and the spectators are visitors, feeling awkward and ill at ease; rather, the spectators are the hosts and treat the performers as guests, offering them meals and small gifts." "Journey through the Night: Notes on Burmese Traditional Theatre," *The Drama Review*, 15 (Spring 1971), 84.
69. Quoted in Frank Howes, *Folk Music of Britain—and Beyond* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 11.
70. William P. Malm, "Malaysian Ma'nyong Theatre," *The Drama Review*, 15 (Spring 1971), 108. As the audience changes so, of course, does the form. "It customarily happens that when a folk-art turns professional and divorces itself from its popular origins, it begins to shrink from physical contact with its public. The stage withdraws and the audience is kept at a respectful distance," Arnott, pp. 81–82.
71. E. K. Chambers, *The English Folk Play* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 191.