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The Classical Tradition in African Drama

Greek drama and mythological sources have been used in modern African drama for means quite different from the causes of imperialism and colonialism that it has sometimes served in the literature, art and music of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. This paper outlines the role and extent of classical influences in the development of African dramaturgy in the twentieth century. African drama frequently touches upon issues relevant to tribal Africa and features religious and folk rituals. Some plays deal with issues relevant to post-colonial Africa, such as freedom and civil rights, and serve as a form of political and social protest in societies whose writers have composed their works in a climate of repression. The influence of classical literature and mythology upon modern African dramaturgy is most evident among a number of West African dramatists who have incorporated classical motifs and elements into their plays, sometimes preserving the broad outlines of particular Greek dramas.

Two of the better known West African playwrights are Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi. Soyinka has re-written Euripides' *Bacchae* in his *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973). Soyinka draws on the Greek notion that in order to ensure the fertility of the crops a scapegoat must be sacrificed to the gods, specifically to Dionysus. In re-writing Euripides' play, Soyinka makes the ancient tragedian's treatment of oppression and religious conflict relevant to a new context. He transfers Euripides' temporal setting toward the end of the Peloponnesian Wars to the period of the post-colonial African wars. Rotimi transfers a Greek model of tragedy and the Oedipus myth to a Yoruban setting in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971). The plot in Rotimi's play is roughly the same as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and the choral chant of the townspeople has a socio-philosophical content comparable to the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy. While the two protagonists in *Oedipus Rex* quarrel over which carriage has the right of way, those in Ola Rotimi's account quarrel over the ownership of some farmland in what becomes a long, protracted fight to establish historical claims to land rights. The actions of the chief Odewale build up the sense that he is, if not immoral, certainly unfit to rule. Other West African plays with classical underpinnings include Duro Lapidó's *Oba Koso* (1973), John Pepper Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1962), Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* (1967), Femi Osofisan's unpublished *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, and Kamau Braithwaite's *Odale's Choice* (1967).

A South African playwright, Athol Fugard, weaves into the fabric of *The Island* (1973) figures and themes drawn from Sophocles' *Antigone*, including the theme of conflict between the state and the individual and the distinction between human law and divine justice. In this drama the human spirit emerges triumphant over political oppression and social injustice. In Fugard's *Dimetos* (1977) there are parallels not only with Phaedra and forbidden love but also Dionysus, who appears in the role of Danilo, a stranger who appears and becomes the catalyst for the tragedy that results from the passions that lie within the human characters in the play. So while African plays with classical allusions touch upon cultural, social, political and ritualistic situations that have a direct connection

to modern African society, the dramatic situations themselves typically have a wider relevance to the human condition.