Being African, Acting French

> I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.
>
> I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys.
>
> Aimé Césaire
> from Discourse on Colonialism (2000 [1955]: 43)

It was late October 2000, a hot, dusty morning on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, the capital of West Africa's Burkina Faso. Street sounds blended with the clicking of overhead fans inside a conference room where actors from Mali, Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Togo, Congo, and Ghana were in a line, trying to imitate the movements of a young modern dancer from Paris. The twenty actors expressed a variety of expressions ranging from grimace to befuddlement. They looked like puppets as their bodies contorted with the sharp abstract modern dance and Martha Graham technique movement exercises required by my erstwhile French assistant.

As the instructor of the workshop, I had, and just that morning been given the French dancer to "warm-up" the actors; her trip was funded by a French Cultural organization for that purpose. As I watched and wondered at the rationale of such a warm-up, the sound of applause from the next room filtered into the room. Peering through a connecting door, I saw two French mime artist leading another group of West African theatre artists. In a nearby courtyard a French mask performer was explaining *LeCoq neutral masks* to a group of Africans. Workshops in clown, marionette, and acting technique took place in other parts of the building—which was also a dormitory for visiting artists. All the workshops, except for that of a Togoan playwright and my own, were taught by French or French-Swiss artists. The workshops were part of the weeklong festival that included performances, symposiums, lectures, meetings, demonstrations, and workshops. *The Festival International de Theatre*

et de Marionettes de Ouagadougou, popularly known as FITMO 2000, was the largest theatre gathering of its kind in francophone Africa.

Not surprisingly, all organizations sponsoring the event were steeped, in a greater to lesser degree, in French culture or language. FITMO 2000 was presented under the auspices of Alliance France and UNESCO, a Paris-based UN organization with other major funding from UNESCO, UNICEF L'Agence de la Francophonie (ACT), La Coopération Française, Communaute Française de Belgique, Jeunesse du Monde, and the International Theatre Institute (ITI). The cast-strapped government of Burkina Faso supported the festival nominally (UNESCO 2000: 2). From the opening night ceremony and performances, and continuing throughout the week, nearly every lecture, workshop, meeting, and performance, of the festival was in French. [1] This fact was not so striking in the post-colonial context of francophone Africa, where the only language uniting the region was, and is, French.

The questions provoked by the dancer's warm-up nagged me throughout my weeklong workshop, interviews, and interactions at FITMO 2000. Was the festival and its various workshops, panels, and performances, propped up by French money and influence, an insidious continuation of colonialism? Was FITMO a willing pawn in a larger picture blurring political gamesmanship, neocolonialism, corruption, economic necessity, and French cultural egotism? Or was FITMO simply the expression of an emerging form of African theatre?

The French Cultural-Political-Economic Matrix

Not too far from downtown Ouagadougou's famous Grand Marché—a closely packed, multi-story labyrinth of shops—was the French Cultural Center, one of the three FITMO performance sites. The center was a well-maintained brick building with a fully air-conditioned 200 seat Theatre (for live performances and film), offices, public library, classrooms, art gallery, and a Café serving French fare and wines worthy of a Paris café. The imposing Center compound, which was the de facto cultural center of Ouagadougou, also contained a walled off 400 seat outdoor proscenium arch theatre, fully equipped with lights, sound, and a limited fly space.

The French Cultural Center in Ouagadougou hosted several French-language cultural events throughout the year. Though several events were presentations from francophone Africa, the overwhelming number of events featured imports from France: films, art exhibits, lectures, various performances, concerts, and theatre. The French Cultural Center (CCF) was part of a network of centers in francophone found throughout francophone Africa, facilitating and propagating French culture in the region (Edebiri 1984: 178).

The Centers also sponsored regional play competitions, exhibitions in addition to language, art, and theatre classes; the Centers were the conspicuous and influential hearts of French cultural influence. All CCF sponsored events, either from France or elsewhere in francophone Africa, were presented in French, the official language of all *la francophonie* nations despite the fact French was (and remains) overwhelmingly the second language for the majority of West Africa. The French, who consider their language and culture as essentially one in the same, have a stated preference for supporting French language and culture initiatives in their former colonies. Although events at CCF are sometimes presented in African languages, they are in the extreme minority.

Since the colonial era, French policy makers have promoted the *rayonnement* (spread) of French culture, language and intellectual traditions, deeming it integral to their political and economic interests (Schrader 2000: 396). In keeping with *rayonnement* policy, the French Cultural Centers and other French cultural institutions have continued to directly or indirectly fund a wide variety of theatre programs supporting actor training, technical support, productions, contests, festivals, and exchanges.

> It would be naive to think that their interest in theatre development is purely and solely artistic.... Nor are French-speaking African countries purely artistic or altruistic. For France, the promotion of French-speaking African theater is a means of maintaining the ascendancy of the French language. France's interest in theatre development in French-speaking African countries stems also from a desire to fulfill an obligation to help improve the cultural life of thousands of her citizens who are resident in Africa. (Edebiri 1984: 179).

However, despite the funding for French oriented theatre activity in francophone Africa, general audiences have not developed, and French style theatre (spoken in French) has remained, essentially, an acquired taste for a French-speaking African educated elite and expatriates. The conception of theatre, propagated by the French and transplanted in African soil during the colonial, has its origins in the French neo-classical "Age of Reason." Needless to say, its function, presentation, and objective, is alien to Africans not educated to the French tradition of theatre.

> In spite of the appeal of drama to a broad audience, these plays have unfortunately remained a means of entertainment and education for very few African audience, because they are written in a foreign language. As a result, they have, for the most part, been staged in French cultural centres, and capital cities of former French colonies, where, besides having an audience educated in the French language and history, some people can afford the luxury of paying to watch the plays (Yewah 2002: 219-220).

The influence of radio, television, and especially the cinema (also derived from the same origin), has further engrained French dramaturgy and narrative expressions, colonizing the African mind and challenging the development of performance expressions based upon African perspectives and tradition. That a vast majority of theatre productions are presented in French, rather than local languages, further hinders the development of African based theatrical forms and narrative expressions. An engrained and entrenched theatre milieu has stifled the growth of potential audiences who find the form and language alien. "Even in the mid-1990s, more than 70 per cent of people who were called francophone Africans were still not proficient in the language" (Diakhaté 1997: 23). African languages are seldom taught in schools. Literature and plays, written in African languages, which might serve as alternative examples and inspiration for an African-based theatre culture, are sorely lacking.

The traditional French language theatre propagated in francophone West Africa today, tends to be rooted (i.e., stuck) in the dramaturgy of 19th century. At first glance, this seems curious considering the dramaturgical, stylistic, and multi-cultural innovations occurring in contemporary France itself. However, when examined closely, this phenomenon reveals less a choice, and more the persistence, of the systematic acculturation of African history and perception of self by the French. Concomitant with this acculturation was an institutionalized cultural inferiority, which the African's themselves have perpetuated out of economic and political necessity.

During French colonial rule, African performance was deemed "savage and primitive," while French culture—and its manifestations such as theatre—were elevated as models to emulated and taught in schools. At the moment of French colonial imposition, the shape of African performance was planted and its future course determined.

> By the eve of WWI, French and Belgian influence was clearly felt in Africa throughout the region and its cultural destiny became clearly linked to French colonial policies. In the domain of theatre, colonization created a double cultural life: a literary theatre written in French and performed in accordance with European models and a theatre drawn form those traditional forms (Diakhaté 1997: 21).

Culture Wars And Spheres Of Influence

Today, the decline of France as a world power partially explains its need to assert cultural influence over its former colonies, in order to retain some of its "great power" status. It is this central preoccupation that has motivated and has wrought France's political, cultural, and economic relationship with its

former African colonies (Schraeder 2000: 396). France's relationship with its former colonies, in a sense, never ended, it just became more nuanced. Though France lost direct control over its former colonies after the African independence movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, France's current, post-colonial relationship can be seen more as an adjustment of strategy, perception, and responsibility, rather than loss of influence. Much of *la francophonie's* governmental and administrative structures, legal, and economic systems were inherited or fashioned after French models.

Francophone African nations are among the poorest in the world and, although "independent," none could survive, nor feed themselves today, without France. All *la francophonie* nations are young democracies struggling with institutionalized corruption (which was modeled after its former colonial overlords), and ethnic power plays, as they try to deal with profound social, political, economic, environmental, population, and health problems; AIDS is only one of many monumental challenges they face. Furthering their "culture of dependence," all are heavily in debt (to France and the IMF), have pre-industrial economies, (80 to 90% of the labor force works in agriculture), with an estimated average per-capita income of $1000 per annum, and are faced with the developing issues of desertification and reoccurring drought (CIA: 2002).

Many West African nations are rich in natural resources (including petroleum), which explains France's strong economic and investment interest. France remains la francophonie's largest foreign aid benefactor and trading partner. Francophone West Africa is also France's second largest market after Europe. In 1998 Africa absorbed $15.9 billion of French exports, accounting for 40 percent of France's trade surplus. The francophone African currency, the Communaute Financière Africaine (CFA), which is used by France's former West African colonies, was tied directly to the French franc, managed by the French central bank and guaranteed by the French treasury. When France, in its own self-interest, devalued the CFA in 1994, cutting its value by 50%, it shook francophone West Africa (Schraeder 2000: 398). The devaluation was a sharp reminder of how France still controlled the fate of its former colonies, its economic concerns remaining primary.

> French policymakers consistently have claimed that historical links and geographical proximity justify placing francophone Africa within France's sphere of influence. The implicit assumptions of what has been described as the French version of the Monroe Doctrine is that francophone Africa constitutes France's *domaine reserve* (natural preserve), and is therefore 'off limits' to other great powers (Schraeder 1997: 206).

Internationally, France has often been criticized for its selective intervention and support of non-democratic governments in the region. In the early 1990s, France took the international lead in a series of military interventions in Rwanda, with the long-term goal of integrating the former French-speaking Belgian colony into its French speaking sphere of influence. The Mitterrrand administration provided the authoritarian Rwandan regime with over "$160 million in economic aid and an untold amount of military aid from 1990 to 1994—in essence contributing to the genocide that unfolded in 1994 (Schraeder 1997: 208).
A more recent example of France's attitude towards *la francophonie* was vividly apparent in its response to the 1999 coup in Cote d'Ivoire. The New York Times reported on France's relationship to the ethnic unrest and eventual coup in Cote d'Ivoirie.

> France, without whose help the former colony's economy cannot run, has remained largely silent, providing support and justification even as their abuses have grown more flagrant [...] France, the only former colonial power to have maintained strong ties to its ex-possessions, worried that the end of personalized power under long-ruling dictators would open the region up to influence from others, notably the United States, and upset its interests in everything from oil fields to military bases [...] With the implicit backing of the French President Jacques Chirac, who had already said that Africa was "not ready for democracy" (French 2000: 4-4).

Today France maintains defense accords with their former colonial African counterparts, generously providing arms and military advisors for training, and authorized interventions by French military. Such military support has generally benefited an entrenched and undemocratic French speaking elite and a corrupt status quo (Schraeder 1997: 207). However, the emergence of democracy and the end of single-party dictatorships in la francophonie in the late 1980s and 1990s, has begun to erode French influence, forcing the next generation of West African leaders to welcome the expending influence of Japan, Germany, and the United States. This trend has pushed France to redouble its influence in the region, appealing in no small way to their "shared cultural heritage." In this way theatre and other cultural initiatives like FITMO, have become mediums serving political agendas.

Colonial Echoes

The countries of former French West Africa, Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) were created in 1885 and formed a kind of federal territory with its capital in Saint Louis and later in Dakar. French colonial policy was aimed at

cultural assimilation, attempting to make Africans into proper French citizens, reshaping the culture for the African world along French lines.

Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin (Cesaire 2000 [1955]: 88).

Colonial Governor General Brevie was credited for establishing the concept of Franco-African culture. He portrayed Franco-African culture as "Drawing its inspiration from the purest French traditions while plunging its roots in native life. Our African education should look towards France to received its light and towards it to draw its energy for action [...] we must develop an African culture which will reveal to the native his country and his soul in order to make him accede gradually to the ideal of Franco-African culture" (in Warner 1984: 181).

To achieve their colonial policy of acculturation, the French created a colony-wide system of French missionary schools for education and evangelization. French language, history, culture and Christian values, were taught to develop obedient servants for the colonial system. The William Ponty Normal School near Dakar was at the pinnacle of a hierarchal system of schools; students were admitted by competitive examination and were recruited from among the brightest in the West African colonies. "The major purpose of the Ponty Normal School was to provide a basic European education for future African civil servants. Most of the black francophone colonial elite were trained there"(Diakhaté 1997: 21).

In 1913, Georges Hardy, himself a playwright, became Director of Education of French Africa. Under Hardy, theatre gained popularity and an important place in the schools (Diakhaté 1997: 21). Theatre at the Ponty School however, was not a continuator or developer of traditional African theatre and performance but rather a satellite of European theatre which condemned everything belonging to the "savage past" with the African educated elite becoming nothing more than "home-grown and neo-colonial oppressors" (Yewah, 2002: 218). The locally educated elite were no more than pawns that, in the words of Emmanuel Yewah, perpetuated "authoritarian structure embedded not only in slavery but also in materialism and the cycle of dependency on foreign aid handouts and imported ideas which have contributed immeasurably to Africa's stagnation and underdevelopment" (Yewah 2002: 218).

The influence of the Ponty School was far reaching, profoundly shaping post-colonial francophone Africa through its political and intellectual elite who framed their new nations. The theatre work at the Ponty School played a

seminal role through the later activities of its graduates, several of whom on their return to their respective counties, were in a position to influence the development of national theatres, write, direct, and act in plays, and in turn assert a French cultural influence once removed (Diakhaté 1997: 22).

With nationhood in the late 1950s and 60s, came the need for Africa to identify and celebrate the past. Writing in French, francophone African playwrights responded by harkening back to great historical figures, myths, as to unify and inspire the citizens of a new nation. Rather than devise a dramaturgical model based on traditional African performance models, playwrights instead adopted French neo-Classicism.

> Their emphasis is on plot, form and character depiction, the exploration of ideas as well as on the construction (reflecting in this regard a French Classical drama influence) of rousing speeches in the style of Corneille, persuasive and built on rhetorical devices. The aim of these plays is rational intellectual communication (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 34).

The French neo-Classicism of Racine and Corneille was an easy fit for francophone Africans who were indoctrinated to perceive the western worldview as an ideal, and themselves as inferior. French neo-Classical dramaturgy was a ready and familiar form into which francophone African playwrights could re-invent a grander, heroic, and romanticized history. There were also more practical attributes that linked French neo-Classical theatre with traditional West African cultures, namely the parallels between the poetic, declamatory African *griot* and the poetic declamation of neo-classical France.

The great majority of French-Language African history plays have one thing in common: a celebratory and commemorative nature. They are like canticles intoned to the memory of illustrious ancestors like Chaka (1787-1828), empire-builder and king of the Zulus who is among the many rulers of the African past whose names have provided the titles of many historical plays. In noble and poetic accents, their patriotism, real or imagined, is sung and their courage extolled. Through a dramatic recreation of their heroic struggle to defend, or sometimes to expand, their territories, and of the elaborate court splendor and ceremonial that attended their lives, is conveyed a living sense of pre-colonial African societies at their most glorious (Coneth-Morgan 1994: 62).

Often, early francophone African plays were about ruling families detailing the exploits and victories of African heroes such as Chaka Zulu, rather than dealing (as Anglophone Africa did) with current issues during the critical time of nation building. It was not until the second generation of post-colonial

playwrights that a modern francophone African voice emerged. These playwrights and theatre artists were educated and came of age in post-colonial times, their consciousness shaped by the struggles of nationhood and need to find an African identity separate from its colonial masters.

> Sociopolitical conditions imposed a new orientation, both thematically and esthetically, upon various indigenous and expatriate playwrights. The theatrical season of the years 1966-70 witnessed the predominance of a sociopolitical theater whose esthetic was in general based upon the norms of classical French dramaturgy. But beginning in 1972, artists made a conscious resolution to create a new dramatic language for the stage (Sidibé 1999: 127).

(Re) Inventing West African Theatre

The generation after independence, searched for an African authenticity and identity separate from France. The pursuit of an African identity, aesthetic, and theatre free of French cultural influences was, in part, what provoked the formation of national theatre companies throughout francophone Africa in the 1960s and 70s. Though inspired by nationalistic fervor, these national theatres were ironically firmly rooted in the French cultural context and used the models and class distinctions of their French colonizers to serve their nascent nation's polity and cultural aspirations, perpetuating a more insidious form of colonization.

> French involvement in the training of theatre people in French-speaking West Africa antedated, and has survived, the establishment of institutions of drama in the region. In fact, it was in the early sixties that France embarked upon a series of programs aimed at training African actors. The French government, through its agencies, sponsored French professional companies to put up exhibition performances mainly in the capitals of French-speaking African countries; and a fair number of them went around French-speaking West Africa...However, since the tickets were prohibitive for the African masses and since they stage only European plays, their performance turned out to be the exclusive prerogative for he African intelligentsia and the French national resident in Africa (Edebiri 1984: 172-3).

National theatres and their attendant schools were dependent on ongoing state support, which meant they conserved the status quo and Franco-African values. Often times national theatres produced plays from the world repertory or African plays modeled on western dramaturgical models, applying western acting, directing, and production values on proscenium arch stages. Training programs were fashioned after western theatrical programs with nods to African dance, oration, and drumming (many National Theatres included Dance Company components). To assist the development of national theatres in

francophone Africa, the French often sent (and still send) guest artist, teachers, and management advisors who organized the theatres after French aesthetics and models, making artists into civil servants, and establishing French-styled bureaucracies (Kotchy, Sidibé, Touré 1997: 100).

To support their efforts France sponsored, and still sponsors, a variety of contests (with Frenchmen and African elites as judges) festivals, tours, and training opportunities for African artist in France. Many new plays were created in the context of the Concours Théatral Africain, an annual drama contest organized by Radio France International (Yewah 2002: 220). The French also funded several cultural NGOs with the sole purpose of supporting French culture in its former colonies. Funding for these initiatives continue today.

Early French support, however, also seeded a fertile period in francophone West Africa theatre, giving the means and developing the voices of many important playwrights and going far to establish an African style and perspective. Bernard Dadié's "Béatrice du Congo" (1970), a biting satire of post-independence society, was a fine example of how francophone West African dramaturgy evolved from historical to contemporary preoccupations in style and content. The events in the play span almost three centuries and,

> Conjures up the ambiguous role of technical assistance which operates as a parallel government, the false symbols of independence such as the flag, the predilection for high-sounding tiles, the maintenance of a beautiful capital which is an 'island of prosperity', the institutions which are a copy of European models, the presence of a metropolitan army ostensibly to protect the regime in power (Warner 1984: 191).

The success of plays like Dadié's and the emergence of an African perspective, however, was double-edged. Though such plays went far to establish a unique African theatre, they were generally satirical and critical of the political and cultural status quo. Freedom of expression was and is not the hallmark of African governments. After the first blush of nationhood, national theaters, which were initially seen as a source of pride and identity, were subsequently starved in order to control, censor, or silence mounting criticism against the government. French support followed suit. A series of political and financial crisis, along with corruption and reassessment of funding priorities, has essentially finished off state supported theatre. What remains of national theatres in West Africa (and in other parts of Africa), is support for tourist and "cultural ambassador" oriented dance-theatre, song, and drumming presentations more concerned with perpetuating an ersatz nostalgia of African culture than contributing to its development.

Today, most national theatres in francophone Africa are decrepit husks of what they once aspired. Morale is low, development and innovation are non-existent, artist and administrators are paid infrequently, theatre buildings are in disrepair, and the audience for theatre is overwhelmed with far more pressing social, economic, health, and political concerns. Abandoned by their national governments, the theater of francophone Africa had no option but to turn once again to France for survival. "In the absence, then, of serious and sustained national government assistance, Francophone theatre has continued to rely on outside help and the French, claiming a traditional love of the arts with a keen recognition of the importance of those of African to the spread of their language, have not failed to give it" (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 59).

Out Of The Theatres And Into The Streets

It wasn't until the late 1970s that Community Development Theatre reached francophone West Africa. The movement evolved almost simultaneously in Kenya, Zambia, and Tanzania in the early 1970 and quickly spread, becoming the preferred method of communicating directly and effectively to communities about issues important to them. Community Theatre applied an admixture of expressions and included traditional dance, story telling, and self taught acting, lecture, and oratory styles.

Young African nations in the 1970 were faced with high illiteracy, and profound social-economic adjustments caused massive urbanization and the introduction of a market economy. Combined with poor transportation infrastructures and limited communication systems (few radios and no television), the most effective way to communicate was by using theatre. Community Development Theatre (later known as Theater for Development) had a profound effect on communication and development, but just as significantly, it marked a profound shift in how theatre was viewed and presented in Africa.

Struggling governments and international funding organizations soon recognized the form as a viable medium to convey issues as varied as family planning, vaccination, child abuse, farming methods, soil erosion and political and administrative corruption. The form has also been used for government (and political party) propaganda, and for promotions of products like Coka Cola.

The National Theatres and their attendant schools were founded on European models, formal, literary, and meant for the elite, educated class. In contrast, Community Development Theatre was grassroots in origin, created in response to immediate and practical needs and, like traditional performance, offered immediate, visceral, and communal satisfaction. The language of Community Theatre was local rather than colonial French; its performance

vocabulary was derived from local traditional culture and presented in an informal setting, applying familiar on site format of a traditional performance with easily grasped and entertaining singing, drumming, dancing, and audience interaction.

> Its objectives are to impart specific information, to criticize and discourage behavior patterns deemed incompatible with desired social values and objectives and to elicit popular participation in the realization of the latter (Conteh-Morgan 1994: 81).

The form, however, which found its inspiration in grassroots necessity, was quickly co-opted by governmental and non-governmental organizations. International donor agencies like UNICEF and Oxfam, rightly saw Community Development Theatre as an ideal way of assisting in their development agendas. The interest and financing by governmental ministries and International donor agencies, provoked the evolution of Community Development Theatre into a viable profession. University educated “theatre activist” and “cultural workers” evolved, their training and salaries funded by government ministries, international donors, and the foreign government aid programs. University programs developed to train theatre activist and cultural workers; international government aid agencies conducted workshops, training programs, and exchanges.

The development of independent companies was a welcomed evolution and bodes well for a diversity of voices and experimentation of theatrical form. However, because African audiences are not used to paying for theatre, independent la francophonie groups must often times depend on international (i.e., French) donor organizations, for their sole support. Patronage by commission, however, does not come without an artistic price—namely, supervision of content and the propagation of social, political, environmental, economic, and health agendas. Issues of sustainability, dependency, and appropriateness of outside funding of local groups raises several serious issues.

> Do NGOs encourage theaters companies and the communities they serve to become self-reliant and independent of external support? [...] One cannot help feeling however, that they are merely putting bandages on wounds, which should never have been made in the first place. At present, since almost all arts for development is sponsored by NGOs with specific amelioration goals, it tends to be directed towards ‘bandaging’ strategies—namely play, songs, dances, posters, radio jingles or soap opera advising people how to improve their lives within fairly narrow sectoral domains (Kerr 1999: 85-86).

FITMO

The l'Espace Culturel Gambidi, a walled compound located on a deeply rutted road a few miles from downtown Ouagadougou, was the host site of The Festival International de Theatre et de Marionettes de Ouagadougou, FITMO 2000 festival. The land was granted to Jean-Pierre Guingane, director of the center, and professor of theatre at the University of Ouagadougou. The compound included an outdoor theatre, dormitories, offices, a business center for email and faxes, a canteen, and classrooms and workshops. The theatre in residence, and the main occupant of the center, was *Theatre La Fraternatie* which performed year-round and was also under the direction of omnipresent Guingane.

The politically savvy Guingane who founded Theatre La Fraternatie in 1995, solicited the Burkina Faso government for the land and, with the help of volunteers and French funding, built the theatre step-by step. Theatre La Fraternatie survives by accepting commissions from internationally funded Theatre for Development (TDF) projects, in addition to, supporting a theatre-training program. In a politically corrupt nation with little economic, cultural or educational support, the achievements of Guingane and Theatre La Fraternatie's are remarkable. However, like most places in the world, funding for theatre is a struggle, and if it were not for commissions garnered for TDF programs, the company would not survive.[2] The company's narrow focus brings in international agency funding, but their hand-to-mouth existence severely limits efforts to develop new plays or encourage experimentation. Instead, presented and supported, are what amounts to addendums to TDF formulas, essentially tweakings of the dominant French dramaturgical forms.

Theatre La Fraternatie is only one company and, because it is difficult to find money, it is not working as it should. In the mind of the people and the government theatre, "Is a hobby for children and not a serious pursuit." We cannot offer scholarships, and it is difficult for students to travel to school and for tours. It is difficult to explore the potential of what we can do if we are always concerned about money (Guingane 2000).

The Gambini District, the area in which the cultural center was located, was originally conceived as a tourist area. Across the road from the center was a large, empty walled area (a government initiative long since sidetracked by mismanagement and corruption) meant to be the site of the Ouagadougou Zoo. Not far from the district were the Exhibition Grounds, where an internationally noted arts and crafts fair, SIAO, the continent's largest, took place. With government prodding FITMO was rescheduled to coincide with SIAO in the attempt to shape an international tourism event. The change reflects

the Burkina Faso government's savvy in recognizing an increasingly important source of foreign currency. "The Burkina Faso government is beginning to see the advantage of having strong a culture. They are realizing that it can bring in tourist and that it is necessary to develop music, cinema, traditional arts, and theatre. So the government is giving more support and there is more sensitivity for the arts" (Ousmane 2000). In many ways Burkina Faso has led the way in the renaissance of African arts and culture and French initiatives should be credited, in no small way, with the positive growth, organization, and development of SIAO, FITMO and the FESPACO Film Festival. The latter had a humble beginning in 1969 and has since become a chic, West African version of Hollywood's independent cinema scene.

According to Boundaone Ousmane, Assistant Director of FITMO (who was trained in arts management in France), in 1989 six Burkinabe theatre companies decided to do a theatre festival. "They wanted to do it for themselves and the public. It was not for money. At first it was only a festival for and between themselves" (Ousmane 2000). What was a nominally budget and volunteer based regional festival, has since evolved into the largest theatre festivals in the region and, one of the largest, on the continent. "The French Embassies in West Africa saw that it was good and supported it and francophone organizations have helped to make it international" (Ousmane 2000). Today major support for the festival, which has been called FITMO since 1994, has come from the French or Paris based UN organizations compared to other Festivals in the region, FITMO remains an organizational wonder. In contrast, the 2001 *Festival des Réalités* in Bamako, Mali, was cancelled because it was unable to secure sponsorship or secure a space (Traoré 2001).

When I interviewed Guingane in his busy office at the end of the festival, he struck me as more a weary politician than a theatre artist.

> Many Theatres are operating in countries without democracy. This makes it difficult for theatre. But that is the role theatre—to be madman. This festival is a network where the best from each country come and share and find strength in what they do. It is unfortunate that we have boundaries known as countries when we are all the same people. People beyond politics, economics, culture. We are all African. That is what this festival is also about, about breaking down the boundaries. Boundaries created by colonialism, by politics. 'Theatre La Fraternatie' (Guingane, 2000).

When I asked him how he saw the French cultural influence in francophone African he responded, "We are part of the French tradition. The question is how to reconcile the colonial language with our interest in establishing an African identity" (Guingane 2000).

"What Concerns Them And What Their Life Is Like"

Theatre artists in francophone West Africa do as their brethren elsewhere in the world, they do what they can to survive, which for many means learning as much as they can, making connections, hustling commissions, and making theatre that sells. As in colonial times, those in power, the educated elite, whether French or a local, are those who control the purse strings and in turn, shape its theatre.

Patrice Kabore was one of the participants in the workshop I presented at FITMO. A tall, thin man from northern Burkina Faso, his face and bearing were infused with a pride befitting his Mossi, royal family lineage. Like other la francophonie theatre artists he migrated to the capital city to seek out a livelihood and, compared to others, has had relative success. He came to Ouagadougou in 1992 and worked with several theater and dance groups to learn what he could from a variety of different artists. He had read several western acting books and was particularly inspired by Robert Benedetti's *The Actor At Work*, which he pulled out of his knapsack to show me.

Kabore uses comedy, poetry, dances and participatory singing and dancing in his performance. Developing his performance style, "From television and movies, traditional dance and song, and especially French theatre, mime, and comedy techniques I have learned in workshops like the ones given at FITMO or by the French Cultural Center" (Kabore 2000).

Photo: Thomas Riccio
Patrice Kabore, as a Mossi elder, in an outdoor story telling performance.

Issues dealt with in his performances were either self-generated (based on observed need) or commissioned by international organizations, the Ministry of Culture, schools, or Burkina Faso television. Several of his performances have dealt with street children and the problems they face, "What concerns them and what their life is like, how they live and what they think" (2000).

A recent commission required travel to a Mossi village to understand about the "old days and learn the old style of telling stories" (Kabore, 2000). The resulting performance, "Kunduni" (Cry Only Me), was a ceremony/performance dealing with white and black conflict and how blacks consider themselves inferior to whites. Kabore has increasingly integrated

traditional styles of storytelling and movement into his style in performance. "I have included call-response with my audience", says Kabore, "Something I learned directly from Mossi old people" (Kabore, 2000).

"There Is No Going Back"

Jacobin Yarro was the director and founder of the *Atelier Cocrad* in Douala, Cameroon, a group organized as a collective of "drama creators." Yarro started doing theatre 30 years ago as an actor doing sketches at secondary school and went on to receive a university degree in French Language and literature as he continued to do theatre, even though there exists no formal theatre training in Cameron. Yarro was forced to learn by doing. "It is difficult to find mentors, even today" (Yarro 2000).

Yarro depends on the French Cultural Center in Douala for space and funding, so much so he considers the Center the "major sponsor" of his group. The French Cultural Center and other French organizations frequently assist Yarro's *Atelier Cocrad* with technical assistance, advisors and visiting artist, which brings French theatre artist—choreographers, directors or technicians—to Cameron to create collaborative projects. "The Cameron government gives very little and has no proper policy designed for funding the arts. Theatre is not a priority for policy makers. The French are the only ones that support us in a continuing way" (Yarro 2000). Yarro and several members of his group have received some training in France—playwrighting, acting, directing, design, mime, marionettes, and mask—all of it in French theatrical expressions. Yarro spent a year in Montreal in 1988 studying directing, acting, playwrighting and theatre pedagogy. All of his performances and classes are conducted in French.

Like other African theatres, Yarro's *Atelier Cocrad*'s bread and butter comes from Theatre for Development, working on commissions from international aid and educational organizations such as UNICEF, Alliance France, Save the Children, Family Planning International, and the French Cultural Center. The French, however, administer the funding and "Have the ability to collect money, from private sources, NGOs and the French Government. Once they have the money we have a collaboration and there is a project" (2000). The group often creates performances addressing a specific issue such as drug abuse, violence against women, family planning, children's rights, AIDS, and sexual assault. Their performances are often presented on television, but more typically they tour rural areas, schools, festivals, and tour the "Francophone Network," the seven regional French Cultural Centers. Payment for each performance varies from $125 to $200. In addition to their

Theatre for Development performances, *Atelier Cocrad* will also produce plays from the French, world, and African repertory—these plays are always underwritten by the French Cultural Centers or other French organizations.

Atelier Cocrad company consisted of 20 to 22 actors, all of whom had been trained to a varying degree by Yarro, who characterizes his style of actor training as strongly influenced by "French and African traditions."

"I am influenced by all styles of acting and training" says Yarro. "It all comes together and I have to pick out—according to my need and dreams for the performance. I use what they can understand and what is suitable to a performance" (Yarro 2000).

Yarro's predicament—living in and drawing from two cultures—was a typical refrain throughout the interviews I conducted during the festival. "There is no going back," he once expressed, "We must work with what we have. To create African theatre and say it is traditional, is only nostalgia. There is no going back. Going back to what?" (Yarro 2000).

Yarro's collaborative methodology creating performance and text development continues to be strongly based on traditional ways of creating performance—namely, blending Theatre for Development techniques, French dramaturgy, and traditional African performance. The company generally allows two months for rehearsals, rehearsing five days a week for three to four hours a day. In addition to their Theatre Development work, *Atelier Cocrad* had produced several Ionesco plays, including *Exit the King*, and several plays by Moliere and Soyinka.

They presented a philosophical text based play, "Negrerrances" at FITMO. The comedy-drama followed the travails of a Nicolas, a self-imposed African exile in France. Nicolas, a "Pure and hard Cartesian," explores the boundaries of the rational and superstition. He was rejected and humiliated, and after suffering indifference and unbearable solitude in France, he realizes he doesn't "fit in" so he makes a spectacle of himself as a way of saying "I exist," which forces the question of returning home. After FITMO, Yarro was to begin work on adapting a French novel for the stage.

"The Angel Of Death Comes"

Moumouni Touré, an actor with *Ymako Teatri* in Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire, was at FITMO to present their play "Les Paléos." Graduates of the National Institute of Dramatic Arts in Abidjan, formed the *Yamako Teatri* in 1998 with their explicit focus being the AIDS epidemic. The play they presented at FITMO,

was about a mime artist that became rich and decided to help everyone through generous acts. But when he became sick, no one wanted anything to do with him. "Dying, the angel of death comes, but the man refuses to die because he is an artist and is needed. The angel kills him and takes him to god because of his good deeds, but because he dies before he should, he opens the eyes of the people" (Touré 2000).

Ymako Teatri was a private, for profit group that received no funding from its government. All of the group's funding came from French cultural initiatives or international health and education organizations. They did not have a permanent home. For rehearsals, they "scrambled to secure permission to use various city owned buildings or a University classroom in Abidjan" (Touré, 2000). The group had two plays in its repertory and began creating a new piece when they returned to the Cote D'Ivoire, which was, at the time of my interview, in the throes of a civil war.

"It Must Be In French"

Troupe Douga from Bamako, Republic of Mali, was formed just six months prior to FITMO. Massa Coupipapy, director, musician, and actor with the group, supported himself by playing jazz saxophone in local bands and fixing air conditioners. He also presented one man educational shows, heavily laced with comedy, dealing with topics that included AIDS and female circumcision. Catherine Kone, *Troupe Douga*'s artistic director, taught and acted at the Mali National Theatre, but because funding had been erratic, she was forced to develop her own company and seek Theatre for Development monies (Kone 2000).

We have had many of the very best teachers from France, teachers in playwrighting, acting, and directing. But now we must rehearse and perform in a school because the National Theatre is so poor. Funding is the biggest problem; but even though we invite ministers to come to our rehearsals and performances, but they don't understand why they should fund theatre (Kone 2000).

Their play, *La fin d'un serment* was the company's premiere performance and was commissioned by FITMO because "Now, not even the national theatre has money to put on productions" (Kone 2000). The play's story line—the death of a father, the search for the murderer and the test of friendship and kinship, and ultimately revenge—was a cross between a French neo-classical tragedy and an African historical drama. The plot line followed classical western dramaturgy. Its performance style was an odd mix of stiff, almost reveren-

tial formality mixed in with some heroic chest thumping and formal stage combat. Its language was performed in a formal declamatory style and included several long speeches. The play also incorporated ritual-like processional moments, which led to the heroic triumph of the king and restoration of the family and public order.

The play's costuming, set, and props were suggestive of an idealized, if not nostalgic African past, and included the appearance of a witch doctor and a theatricalized séance. The quality of acting was a mixed bag of histrionic grand gestures and poses, physical acting, caricature, and melodrama. The performance was presented twice during the festival and had a total attendance of about thirty-five; as far as I could determine, however, no locals were present, even though the festival posters and advertising were plastered all over Ouagadougou.

"The inspiration for the play was to open the people's eyes to the issues of justice because there are many African countries killing each other—we need understanding and have reconciliation. Here there are problems between many people" (Kone 2000). After the FITMO commission, Audiences CCF (the French Cultural Center) contributed 700,000 CAF (Central African Francs) for the production.

If it were not for the French and other international organizations, there would be no theatre in Mali. Now there are five groups in Mali trying to get money for Theatre for Development to fund performances presenting the fight against sickness. We do not know what production we will do next, but it will have to be something the French and NGOs are interested in funding (Kone, 2000).

When I asked Kone if their performances must be in French to be supported she replied emphatically, "It must be in French" (2000).

When I asked her what the biggest problem was after funding, Kone took no time to respond, "Only a few educated people know what theatre is. At the National Theatre we made theatre for people who know what theatre is. Now we must do theatre for people who do not know what it is: The common people who think it is a big ceremony and they do not know how to react" (Kone 2000).

"The French Have Been Very Kind"

Audience Awareness Theatre, based in Accra, was one of two Ghanaian groups at the festival. When asked why an English-speaking group was invited to FITMO, Evan Oma Hunter, the group's entrepreneurial and charismatic founder and director replied, "We are here because we have received money form

many different French NGOs recently. The Alliance France has been very generous"(Hunter 2000).

The mainstay for *Audience Awareness* is Theatre for Development; however, they also performed theatre offerings from the world repertory, one of which was their premiere of *Antigone* at FITMO. Their performance was primarily in English, with sections in French. The production, sponsored by the Alliance France, included funds for the mounting of the production, transportation, publicity, and a subsequent tour to communities, schools, and work places in Burkina Faso and Ghana. During my interview with Hunter, I asked why Alliance France was sponsoring the production: "Ghana is surrounded by French language countries, so Alliance France has, over the last few years, given us money for company members to study French. This production is the first step in the direction of presenting French language performance. They have given us a strong incentive" (Hunter 2000).

The Ghana National Theatre's *Abibigromma Players* also presented a performance at FITMO. Their presentation of "The Bride of the Gods" was entirely in French. Like *Audience Awareness Theater*, their production was fully sponsored by the Alliance France, which had also sponsored French language lessons for the company. The company itself was formed by members of the Ghana National Theatre which had, like other national theatres in the region, fallen on hard times due to lack of funding. Those employed by the Ghana National Theatre were civil servants, however, funding, and the sporadic payment of salaries had become problematic for the artist, forcing them to formulate groups such as the *Abibigromma Players* to develop opportunities. Because of a long relationship the first president of Ghana had with Chairman Mao, the Chinese built the Ghana National Theatre in 1992. The building has two performing spaces, a 1500-seat proscenium arch (with fly space), and a 400-seat black box. The National Theatre had formerly produced three to four productions a year; recent titles included Derek Walcott's *Playboy of the West Indies* and August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.*

Abibigromma Theatre also developed pieces, which they called "African Theatre." Edinam Atatsi & Osabutey-Aguedze, leaders of the group, adapted Ghanaian myths for the stage, using elements of traditional regalia, dance and music. However, worsening economics, and the recent and increasing availability of videos and television, has relegated the once highly regarded Ghana National Theatre as elitist, making its cultural and political viability inconsequential.

> The audience cross-section used to be elites, and many came because of individual actors, not because of plays. Now they will only come if it is something spe-

> cial. The government gives us less and less every year, really, just enough for salaries but not for production, so we must get production money from elsewhere. And if we do not get production money from elsewhere, then we must try to do theatre elsewhere. We consider ourselves performers first. That is why we formed the Abibigromma Players, because Theatre in Ghana is not encouraging now (Atatsi 2000).

When they returned to Ghana the *Abibigromma Players* continued their "Literature Books" series, a program that adapts literary classics for presentation in the schools. Like other groups in the West Africa, *Abibigromma Players* has adapted their production content to satisfy the educational, environmental, and health issue objectives of international NGOs such as UNICEF, UNISCO, The World Health Organization, British Council, and the now defunct United State Information Service (USIS), which funded the production of American plays (generally with American participation) at the National Theatre.[3] The commission by the Alliance France, and the funding of French language lessons for the company, was viewed by Edinam Atatsi & Osabutey-Aguedze as a necessity of survival in an era of diminishing funding. "The French have been very kind and are offering us an opportunity to have a larger audience in the region. We look forward to working with foreign directors and the possibility of going to France" (Atatsi, 2000). To make ends meet many company members taught at The University of Ghana, which has similarly shifted its programming to prepare its students for careers in Theatre for Development, film, television, and the ever popular, radio drama.

The play Alliance France commissioned the *Abibigromma Players* to present at FITMO "Had to be in French" (Atatsi 2000). The play itself was a pastiche Atatsi termed, "Total Theatre," which included fragments of storytelling, traditional music, drumming, and dancing; its structure, oddly enough, was that of a musical review cabaret. Atatsi said the company developed its own theater form and was inspired by the "Concert Play," a style first introduced to Anglophone West Africa in the 1920s when American music hall performers visited the region. "We realized what we did was based on Western theatre, but also from our own culture. We use trial and error and many sources and see what works best. We like to experiment, and performing in French is part of our experimenting" (Atatsi 2000).

"We Are Doing What We Feel We Must"

Compaore Kassoum and his group, *Association Songr-Manegre,* were not invited to FITMO in 2000. The *Association Songr-Manegre* is the administrative umbrella for two dance-theatre groups, *Be-n-Neere* and *Compagnie Zems-Taaba* . I

met Campaore in the Grand Marché (Grand Market) in downtown Ouagadougou where he operated a textile stand, which also employed other members of his group. Compaore, a Rastafarian, developed his group after recognizing the ignorance of Burkina Faso's traditional culture among his own children and the children living in his Ouagadougou neighborhood. Compaore himself left his rural village at a young age; forming the group was also a way for him to personally regain his Bambara and Jodeou traditional culture. Burkina Faso, like most of Africa, has experienced unprecedented urbanization over the last two decades as people from the rural areas sought jobs and a better life in the city.

> Our organization is a Children's theatre with a focus on development. We are using culture so we can grow and develop our self and regain the wisdom of our ancestors. We are not political. The focus is instead on self-empowerment. For us theatre, dance, and music are the same, they hold our culture. There are several cultures in Burkina Faso, but the children don't know this. All they know is the culture of the city. And if the children do not understand their culture, then our traditions will be lost. In the city everyone wants to be a white person and speak French. We are not white and we are not French. Talking French and not talking about the values of culture means we are losing our culture. Our group is here to help the children realize they have a different culture and that, culture, is important for their lives (Compaore 2000).

Over the past few years, Compaore developed an outdoor rehearsal and performance space behind a grocery and shoe repair shop in his outlying neighborhood of Ouagadougou. It was there I watched an exciting and heartfelt dance theatre presentation one Sunday evening. The performance, in terms of theatricality, physicality, quality of dance, mask, and musical expression, had a vitality that far exceeded anything I had seen at FITMO. Unlike FITMO presentations, *Be-N-Neere's* performance was informal; the compound crowded with children and adults alike, was a festive community event. As with all of their performances, *Be-N-Neere* charges no admission, audience members instead pay what they can afford. The company presented several dance-dramas dealing with a wide range of subjects such as, prostitution, relationships between a man and woman (how difficult it is when you are poor), government corruption, and poverty. All of the dance-dramas were choreographed; applying and adapting traditional dance vocabulary.

I found their absence from FITMO odd, given the quality of performance, was local and used African traditional expressions. When I asked Compaore why his group was not participating in FITMO, he was circumspect, citing his "lack of connections." Further conversations with others in Ouagadougou revealed the politics and fierce competition for funding. Theatre for Develop-

ment, because of its ability to address and disseminate timely issues dealing with development, education, and health was in great demand, and as a consequence, could be (in relative African terms) financially lucrative. In Ouagadougou two large groups, Guingane's *Theatre La Fraternatie* and *Compangnie Theatrale le Roseau*, led by Alram Ngonndingamlemgoto (who was also employed by the national government), captured the lion's share of the international and French funded Theatre for Development work.

Although *Be-N-Neere* considers itself a community grassroots organization, they have toured and performed at European dance festivals and are often funded, in a more limited way, by international aid and education organizations. Unlike the groups invited to FITMO, the sixteen-member *Be-N-Neere* was dedicated to the preservation and application of African traditional music, dancing, and story telling. Compaore steadfastly refused to perform in French and did not subscribe to what might best be described as European or text-based dramaturgy, the predominant expression of the FITMO presentations.

When I asked Compaore about how he developed dance and theatre based on traditional expression, he explained their process.

> We go to the villages and ask the elders and traditional doctors, 'What should we do?' And they say 'Discover and heal people.' Our Choreographer talks and works with them in detail and they are helpful and willing to tell us the meanings and stories. They are happy to tell us. They say the old ways are going fast and the want their traditions remembered. We would like to bring the healers to Ouaga, but it is expensive. We pay them what we can afford because they know we are poor and we are trying to do good for the people. Traditional Doctors use dances to heal and they know that dance and stories can heal. We stay with them and they explain and show us dances, ways of singing, drumming and performing masks. We do the same thing and we learn the same way at other villages. That is how we have learned many traditions. When we come back to Ouaga we show the group what we have learned and we mix traditional elements with modern to create something general for the urban community who would not understand the tradition clearly if we just did the tradition (Compaore 2000).

Once back in Ouagadougou, the group works with the choreographer on the traditional song, dance, music, and mask and then, through discussion and experimentation, they transform it into a new expression. After working on a project intensely for a week, they refine and then integrate it into their large repertory and performance program. The new dance, song or mask becomes an element, which they then use as a "stand alone" presentation or as part of a larger creation. When I inquired about his role in transforming tradition, Compaore was direct.

We are doing what we feel we must do. We are not doing traditional dance. What we are doing is for the people in the city who come from many groups. It is a new tradition, but it is a continuation. The dancing and music mix to call the spirits because the rhythm is sacred. We perform to move the spirit, to invite and please the sprits but we do not go any further. We want to do artistic things—we do the movement and vibration of the body with dance—but not the healing ceremony. We can only do minor healing with our performances, but even that is something (Compaore 2000).