

# Faculty Reports

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## Contemporary African Dramatists and the Question of Orality

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This summer I began field research in Nigeria and Ghana on a new project in which I am examining the role of oral traditions in African dramaturgy, film, and cinema.

The thrust of this project is to argue that there has been an increasing tendency on the part of many African writers to identify with the literary tradition of their people. Writers, especially playwrights, demonstrate this commitment by incorporating materials from oral traditions into their works to sustain the functions performed by such materials in oral society in modern literary production. However, the project is not just about preservation and survival of African oral traditions, but more about the ways oral traditions have been adjusted by African playwrights and film script writers to address contemporary interests and concerns. On several occasions, these folkloric materials also become instruments that African writers manipulate easily to raise social consciousness in the minds of their readers and audiences. Therefore, African playwrights and film scriptwriters convert various genres of their oral traditions to a complex set of symbols that are only partly indigenous, thereby freeing them from impediments of a fixed cultural perspective.

It is essential after the initial conception of a project like this to interact with colleagues in Africa working on the same problems and period. Therefore, during my trip to Africa this past summer, I interviewed several African writers, literary scholars, scriptwriters, and film producers based in Nigeria and Ghana. I also attended two international conferences where I made presentations and shared my thoughts on the project with colleagues.

The preliminary results of my investigation reveal that integration of oral literary materials into the works of contemporary African dramatists manifests at two levels: that of documentation and manipulation. By documentation, I mean a writer's adoption of specific samples of literary materials from oral genres, which he or she lifts verbatim, transcribes,



and inserts in appropriate places in his or her writing with little or no addition or subtraction. As for manipulation, however, African playwrights carefully make only selective use of elements of oral traditions, which they exploit to advance their political opinion. What appeals to this category of playwrights in their recourse to oral traditions is not just the preservation of the material itself but the ideas contained in it, which are seen as having an enduring relevance. At this level, playwrights turn oral traditions into metaphorical or symbolic use to articulate political vision.

As I progress on this project, I hope to discuss further how contemporary African playwrights

borrow specific traditional literary materials for the construction of characters and situations in their works. I also think this research will benefit my undergraduate African literature and culture course, which is structured to expand the humanities offerings of the Center for African Studies and the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures.

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