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THE PROBLEM WITH POST-COLONIAL THEORY: Re-Theorizing African Performance, Orature and Literature in the Age of Globalization and Diaspora Studies

by Esiaba Irobi

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY, from **The Empire Strikes Back** through Spivak's **Critique of Postcolonial Reason** to Paul Gilroy's **Postcolonial Melancholia** is a reaction to Western imperialist history and intellectual ideology. It is a spirited engagement with the structures of thinking and actions that facilitate the continued subordination, marginalization and exploitation of the intellectual resources and cultural reserves of the previously colonized peoples of the Western and non-Western worlds. It is also a subtle examination of the many and often conflicting strands that make up the postcolonial situation and identity. It seeks to dismantle the epistemologies of intellectual hegemony cultivated by the West via its academies as well as confront the ex-colonized with the options available for their critical redemption via alternative modes of discourse which may be different and antithetical in structure and content from those traditions of discourse fashioned by the West. In temperament, post-colonial theory differs from postmodern theory primarily in the sense that it often combines individual emotional commitment and outrage with a defiant optimism which is much more strident and activist than an acquiescent postmodernism.¹ We see this intensity in the scholarly work of Wole Soyinka, Biodun Jeyifo, Aime Cesaire, Franz Fanon, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Rustom Barucha, Augusto Boal, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Henry Louis Gates, Coco Fusco, Guillerma Gomez-Pena, among many others.

However, post-colonial theory's major linguistic currency is English language followed by French and other European languages. Its teleology, by this I mean how it conceptualizes time and history, mirrors and sometimes interrogates European and European diasporic notions of time and history. Its epistemological impetus i.e. how it defines knowledge, culture, artistic productivity, theatre, performance, also imitates or, contradictorily, questions what the West has already foregrounded. In other words, the agenda for post-colonial theory and the possible space for

manoeuvre by any postcolonial scholar is over-determined or, to use a fairer word, *circumscribed* by a Western ontology and a response to this ontology. Why is this so? Abiola Irele explains:

The Western academy remains the unique source of validation for the African scholar.... Our credentials depend in the first place on the initial foundation of our prior training, which is based upon materials that are exclusively Western.... Nobody expects an American (or European scholar) to know anything



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about Africa...except perhaps as specialist knowledge. But an African scholar with only elementary grounding and familiarity with the Western content of his discipline has little hope of advancing in his profession. This observation holds true even in Africa today.²

Abiola Irele goes on to emphasize how the situation described above leads to a seemingly 'inauthentic' or 'illegitimate' academic discourse about African cultural/intellectual productivity for both African scholars on the continent and those who are economic exiles in the West: The language and concepts that we use are foreign, so that we start with a marked disadvantage in our apprenticeship within the profession. And because this language, this body of concepts, has not been generated within our environment, we have no choice but to produce what is ultimately a derived discourse.³

What Abiola Irele's statement implies is that even when you are writing about your own theories of performance as an African scholar, it is the Western academy that evaluates and validates the usefulness, efficiency and accuracy of your theories using its own Western parameters, languages, methodologies and critical yardsticks all of which are culturally situated and determined. We then come to realize, as African scholars, that theory and its practice, as disciplines of scholarship, do not exist in a vacuum neither are they innocent or neutral or blindly global or universal. They are products of specific cultures and histories and sensibilities and so even our attempts to redefine these concepts in order to articulate the uniqueness of our own cultural experience carry the burden and stigma of a derivative historical imperative. This is a disturbing predicament or dilemma for a people who have so much to give the world in the field of performance studies both from the continent and the Diaspora. Can we really express our indigenous cultural intelligence and theories of performance through the latticework of somebody else's thought-policing academy, ontology, and framework of intellectual and critical ideologies.

When we talk ecstatically about the achievements of postcolonial theory are we acquiescing to a notion that African theories of performance exist only because there was colonialism? Are we participating in an unscholarly conspiracy that African theories of performance can only be expressed in European languages? Are we suggesting that the West has given us the speech and linguistic infrastructure to theorize our performances. Are we saying that we do not have these analytical tools in our indigenous languages and never had them until the Europeans arrived in the 15th century. Are we agreeing with a European scholar I met at a conference in the US who told me quite assertively, his nose in the air, his head poised like a dumb man's penis, that theory is Greek. In other words, that only Aristotle had a brain or a head for the critical analysis of performances written and unwritten, literary and oral. Are we suggesting that African communities whose theatrical creations equal the Greeks in their mythopoeic complexity and polysemic sophistication are incapable of theorizing their own performances? Is this what we are saying? That theory exists only in the academy and can only be done by Western trained scholars like ourselves? That there are no intellectuals in our villages and homelands. Only in the metropolis. Finally, when we adopt a postcolonial teleology of our theory and

intellectual history, are we, then, accepting the notion that African history can only be divided into pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial epochs. Are we saying that had Africa not been colonized, there would be no theory or capacity for theory in the minds and cultural life of Africans?

I believe that the answers to these questions are obvious. And since they are, do we not need to ask ourselves the question: Are there other teleologies of theory that can circumvent the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial paradigms? Suppose we return to a remapping of Africa through performances and cultural practices which can help us rediscover the "premodern" African nations which existed before the "made-in-Europe" nations after the Berlin conference in 1885. Suppose we decide to include the theoretical concepts of these pre-modern nations, as expressed in their indigenous languages, in our scholarly essays - even if the extrapolations are done in English language - what will happen? What is wrong with articulating and canonizing a **Gelede** theory of African and African Diasporic Feminist performance, an **Ijele** theory, **Kete** theory, **Alagba** theory, **Oriki** theory, **Sangoma** theory, **Ituika** theory based respectively on the performance traditions, theories and languages of such pre-modern African nations such as the Ashanti, Igbo, Yoruba, Gikuyu, Zulu, Ewe, Akan, etc. Will anybody whip us publicly with grains of salt on our naked buttocks or strangle us if we attempt to include these new critical and interpretative concepts into the contemporary currency of what exists now as theory? What will happen if we throw overboard the notion of postcolonial theory and think of African and African-derived performance theory in a diasporic trajectory instead of the post-colonial episteme? By this I mean that there is ample evidence that a good number of African theories of performance migrated from the African continent to the brave new world, namely North and South America and the Caribbean before colonialism which started only in 1885. These theories did not get there as typographical literacy. They went there from 1441 to 1856 as kinaesthetic/phenomenological and iconographic literacies. They got there because the body is a site of discourse. And just as some cultures privilege the dissemination of information and knowledge through writing, oral cultures of the world privilege the encoding and decoding of precious information in the body and the expression of these knowledges through performance. That is why our people were able to survive spiritually and artistically in the new World. Another way of putting it is that the Africans who were translocated to the new world lost their names, their languages, their geographies and original communities but they still replicated syncretized versions of indigenous African performance forms such as Abakua, Candomble, Lucumi, Bembe and Carnival based on African theories of festivity and ritual performance. So, why can we not push forward a concept such as the **Ijele theory** which builds a bridge between an indigenous tradition of iconographic codification and celebration of beauty and community and history and festivity on the continent and their replication in Brazil, the Caribbean basin and Europe, via Carnival. Why do we have to keep citing Mikhail Bakhtin and the concept of the carnivalesque when the Ijele theory is there waiting to be used, waiting to be deployed as a more original interpretative framework of this African Diasporic performance tradition? If we do not do this now, who will do it for us?

I ask these questions because many other scholars have interrogated the validity of the concept or designation of postcolonial theory in the age of globalization and Diaspora studies. They argue that postcolonial theory is too amorphous, too faceless, too derivative of a Eurocentric notion of theory that it obscures the cultural and national specificities that shape theory itself or distinguish African theories from Asian, Australian, Canadian, Caribbean or Native American theories. As practiced presently, Post-colonial theory has become a blanket term for covering everything the Western world finds threatening to its own definition of theory. A vessel of containment. Leela Gandhi, who is Asian, frames this patronizing agenda beautifully when she argues that:

In its current mood postcolonial theory principally addresses the needs of the Western academy. It attempts to reform the intellectual and epistemological exclusions of this academy, and enables non-Western critics located in the West to present their cultural inheritance as knowledge. This is, of course, a worthwhile project, and to an extent, its efforts have been rewarded. The Anglo American humanities academy has gradually stretched its disciplinary boundaries to include hitherto submerged and occluded voices from the non-Western world, But, of course, what post-colonialism fails to recognize is that what counts as 'marginal' in relation to the West has often been central and foundational in the non-West. Thus, while it may be revolutionary to teach Gandhi as political theory in the Anglo-American academy, he is, and has always been, canonical in India. Despite its good intentions, then, postcolonialism continues to render non-Western knowledge and culture as 'other' in relation to the normative 'self' of Western epistemology and rationality. Rarely does it [i.e. postcolonial discourse -] engage with the theoretical self sufficiency of African, Indian, Korean, Chinese knowledge systems or foreground those cultural and historical conversations which circumvent the Western world. ⁴

Leela Gandhi's expression "self-sufficiency" interests me a lot. Its implication for 'postcolonial' theatre scholars, researchers and practitioners is that we need to abandon the 'post colonial' terminology altogether, alongside the term 'precolonial' and begin to discuss African performative experience and the history of its theorization in a new, and subversive, light, namely, as a historical continuum that straddles African history and its diaspora in its own right by deploying theoretical constructs couched in our own indigenous languages. . We need to rethink African theatrical and dramatic history as valid in its own right, with a troubled diachronic existence, yes, with complex diasporic implications, yes, but we definitely cannot go on forever overemphasizing the colonial moment as the starting point or arbiter of our intellectual and performative history. We need to recontextualize historical happenstances such as slavery, colonialism, hybridity, syncreticism, interculturality, and the current 'brain drain' of African intellectuals to the West as serious and important interventions in our continent's history of itself and its performative intelligence at home and in the diaspora. These culturally disruptive and metamorphic processes need not be at the centre of our discourse about ourselves and our artforms, but relevant, aside, and

ourselves and our arguments but relevant issues and epistemological parentheses inevitable in this discourse about ourselves to avoid the Western accusation of "essentialism". But, whether we are African scholars living on the continent or economic exiles in the West, it is our ultimate responsibility to introduce to the West new, and, in fact, more exciting approaches to the discourse and practice of theory in the twenty first century. Whether you are a Ph.D. student in Britain or a tenured African scholar in a North American university, your work lives or dies on the basis of how well it is theorized. So there is no hiding place since what ever is not theorized does not exist. This includes racism. So how do we start to engage with theory and begin the journey of defining our own theoretical framework for the study, analysis, research and fieldwork of our performances. We need to ask ourselves:

What exactly is theory? Do Africans have theories of their own performances? If they do, in what languages do these theories exist? If Africans do not have theories of their performances, who has made this judgment and for what purpose? And in what language and with what license has this judgment been made? Even more provocatively, we need to ask the crucial question: at what point does a theory become a theory? Is it when it is being thought out in the brain, a child of the mind? Or is when it is being performed as the semiological refraction of an aesthetic notion, cultural idea or ontological concept that informs the way i.e. the form in which a people perform themselves, who they are, their history, and worldview. Or does theory only exist when it is written down, the residue of a specifically typographical mode of discourse. What I mean here is this. Does theory exist outside the scholarly academy? Can it be expressed in forms other than writing? Can theory only be expressed in English and French and German and Portuguese (that is, can it be *essentialized* into a European discourse) or can Yoruba, Igbo, Ashanti, Zulu, Ewe languages etc etc also be viable media for the dissemination of this extraordinary thing called theory? If Africans and other non-western peoples do not have theories of their performance in their own languages, how then do they create their theatrical performances and critique them, year after year? What critical construct helps them to improve the aesthetic configurations, functionality, and efficacies of these performances if they have no theories? How can they make sense of what they are doing, as a community, if there is no theoretical construct undergirding the creation of their performances? In other words, how can a Kalabari, Ashanti, Zulu, Mossi, Ewe or an Igbo community like the Afikpo create the Okumkpa theatre tradition if there is no guiding theory of what they want to create?

So, to return to our thesis, if the tendency in the West is to theorize a performance after it has been created - this is usually done by some exceptionally brilliant scholar steeped in the writings and typographical methodologies of his predecessors and such a scholar can actually theorize dance even if he or she has two left legs. - must this chiropractic paradigm, which emanates from the West's own history, be replicated the world over? Can theory, as in the Igbo tradition and other African traditions that I know, be a forerunner to creativity. Can it even be the impetus to writing. Can theory be the map or compass to the purpose and process of the conceptualization, execution and expression of a typical African theatrical performance especially if the performance is created as result of communal consensus instead the genius of one individual? Is the African methodology of theatrical criticism a kind of

the African methodology of theatrical criticism a kind of metacriticism, one which operates from within the theoretical infrastructure of a community as encoded in its own languages and metalanguages. When the Akusa drum disqualifies an *Alagba* masquerade performer among the Kalabari of Nigeria because he has failed to point out the correct ancestral or historical house/oru, is there a critical theory involved in that aesthetic/performative judgement? When the narrator/cantor/communal poet refers to the *Ijele* of the Igbos as "the universe in motion" is there a conceptual theory at work? When a Babalawo begins to listen to his acolyte in training reciting the verses of divination, is there a theory of orature at work? When the Efik captives from Calabar replicated *Ekpe* as *Abakua* in Cuba, was there a theory of performance that undergirded that translocation or syncretization or creolization of an indigenous African masquerade performance tradition? If there is no theory involved, how come that the aesthetic principles and philosophies of art as well as semiotic elements replicated in the performance in the African diaspora embody the same stylistic, choreographic, spiritual and participatory efficacies that existed and still exist on the continent? Let me flesh this out by providing a historical archeology of this call to arms, this charge to create and recognize our own theories, this challenge to not just redefine western theory but to prove that we indeed have our own theories of performance some of which are older than the Greeks. As Wole Soyinka once put it wittily: "Ogun and Dionysus are brothers. But Ogun is Dionysus elder brother!"

The Quest for an African Diasporic Theory: A Historical Archeology

In 1976, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel Laureate and playwright, was invited, after winning the John Whiting Award for playwriting, to Cambridge University as a fellow. In the course of his stay, he discovered that his lectures had been consigned, not to the Department of English, but to the Dept of Social Anthropology because some dim but distinguished English egghead at Cambridge did not believe in any such mythical beast called African Literature or African Drama. In the introduction to his book, **Myth, Literature and the African World**, which came in the aftermath of his Cambridge experience, Soyinka wrote:

We black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonization – this time by a universal –humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from **their** history, **their** social neuroses and **their** value systems. ⁵

While at Cambridge, Soyinka met a young African-American doctoral candidate who was trying to find an alternative, post-structuralist, albeit vernacular theory for the analysis and appreciation of African-American Literature. This young man's name was Henry Louis Gates. Several years later, Gates, out of frustration, would write in his ground-breaking essay, "Canon-formation and the Afro-American Tradition," an essay I sometimes like to describe as "a public split in the trousers of the great", that

we must not succumb to the tragic lure of white power, the mistake of accepting the empowering language of white critical theory as 'universal' or as our own language, the mistake of confusing the enabling masks of theory with our own black faces... Now we must, at last, don the empowering mask of

now, we must, at last, don the empowering mask of blackness and talk *that* talk, the language of black difference.⁶

Gates goes on to give us a provocative definition of 'theory'. Tracing the word to its Greek original '*theoria*' he defines theory as "a public, institutional act of certification which assumes the authority to 'effect the passage from the seen to the told': and provides the basis for public discourse. Theory, then, is - like rhetoric - a form of cognition modeled upon public utterance rather than upon private perception."⁷ Gates argues that if we must form black canons, we must be ready and willing to produce black text-specific theory. He goes on to caution that, "when we mindlessly borrow another tradition's theory, we undermine this passage from the seen to the told - from what we see to how we tell it - this basis for our own black public discourse, this recognition between cognition and utterance."⁸ He argues that in theorizing our cultural experiences and artforms, we must search for intellectual paradigms that are indigenous to our cultures and states, significantly, that "the future of theory in the remainder of this century "is black,"⁹ in deed.

Gates theoretical hypothesis which he illustrates with mesmerizing brilliance in **The Signifying Monkey**, is a critical paradigm which has been adopted by numerous scholars in the fields of Art History, Literature, Music, Film, Cinema, and Cultural Studies. Its uniqueness as a postmodern, metacritical, discourse stems from the fact that it deploys a vernacular albeit African mythopoeic framework for the author's exegesis and engagement with African-American literary texts. The basis for Gates theoretical coup d'état, indigenous African mythic and epistemic knowledge speaking truth to modern and post-modern power, loose canons hitting and deconstructing sacrosanct white and Western targets, a public split in the trousers of the great, is a need and critical facility that all cultures have: an unquenchable desire to explicate, interpret, communicate, mythify, sanctify and signify on and about their lives and its performativities from the perspective of their own chosen ontology, mythology, semiology, teleology and epistemology

in a bid to create new narratologies of their historical experiences no matter how hybridized, colonized, globalized, problematized, hegemonized, complex or conflicted their identities and histories have become in the wake of modernity and postmodernity. This necessity is not only human but inevitable.

What Gates means by the phrase "the future of theory - in the twenty-first century - is black" is that there are aspects of black experience, modes and codes of cultural expression, ontological, epistemological and semiological constructs of Africa and the African Diaspora that lie outside and beyond the provenance of western theory since theory is by its very nature, a cultural product. This makes the whole idea of postcolonial theory even more problematic.

As a response to the provocations in this theoretically counterhegemonic paper, I am excited to say that I am working on a book titled **Before They Danced in Chains: Performance Theories of Africa and the African Diaspora** which attempts to reevaluate and expand the discourse of Performance Theory as it is understood and practiced in the West and the rest of the world today. My intention is first and foremost to contextualize performance

memory, is first and foremost to contextualize performance and the creation and migration of performance theory within a framework of globalization which stretches to the earliest movement of human beings from the Rift Valley to the rest of the globe. This teleology subverts the "pre-colonial" , "colonial" and "postcolonial" paradigm favoured by the West. I argue that there is a theoretical continuum of African ways of knowing and doing and performance that stretches from Africa's first experience/contacts with Moorish, Arabic, Mediterranean and Indian globalizations from 600 AD to the present. This natural migration of theories of performance alongside the movement of people via emigration, exile and travel has continued well into 21st century. The sexy variation of globalization we are now faced with is not any different from the former ones. Its only uniqueness is that it comes on the heels of slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism whose impetus is propelled by a mercantile European and North American capitalistic imperative and greed. The book therefore makes migration, not colonialism, central to our understanding of how African theories of performance have traveled and remerged in the Africa diaspora. The book also reinscribes African concepts, notions, philosophies and theories of performance into contemporary scholarship through "African" languages as the constitutive infrastructure of our contemporary scholarship. For example, the book asks: What is the "Gelede" Theory of the Yorubas, "Sankofa" Theory of the Akan, "Ijele" Theory of the Igbos, "Alagba" Theory of the Kalabari, "Kete" Theory of the Ashanti, "Sangoma" Theory of the Zulus. "Kora" theory of the Bambara. "Ituika" Theory of the Kikuyus. To understand these theories, we need to learn the languages they stem from and stop making judgements of entire cultures and histories without knowing or understanding their languages. Languages express the ideas of the persons who speak them and are the keys to those dimensions of their being and perception of the world that are inexpressible in any other languages. (Languages are our first and foremost covenant with God. They are the primary markers of our identities. God hears prayers in all languages. The easiest way to derail and confuse a people is to ask them to theorize themselves in another person's language. Just as the easiest way to derogate their intelligence is to ask them to articulate who they are through somebody else's theories couched in that person's languages. The Japanese do not do this! The Chinese do not! The Koreans! The Indians! The Aboriginal Australians! Only Africans. And people of African descent in the African diaspora! So, why us ? Why us? Why always us!

By domesticating theory from an African linguistic perspective we will be able to force Western/white/Africanist scholars to study one or two of African languages in order to understand the complex artistic ideas and philosophies that undergird the performances, oratures, and literatures of African cultures even if some of the literatures are extrapolated in English language. African literature, for example, is the only literature in the world that anybody can teach without knowing how to speak a single African language. You cannot do this in Spanish or French or Russian or Swedish or Portuguese Literature. By theorizing or at least encoding our core theories of orature and performance and literary expression in African languages, we will therefore addle the scholars of the Western academy , an institution of Western hegemony we have all come to inherit, into the awareness that all cultures of the world have theories of their own performances in their own languages. We will all then come to the intellectual epiphany that, historically, these theories predate Western theories of performance and would

have been equal currencies for scholarly discourse had it not been for the predatory and hegemonic influences of slavery, colonization, capitalism, typographic literacy, and globalization which led to the subordination and subjugation and even the extermination of whole peoples, languages, cultures and indigenous/vernacular theories. In other words, the Native Americans, Mexicans, Africans, South Americans, Caribbeans, Aboriginal Australians would have been able to express themselves and articulate their theories of performance today on equal terms with the West had it not been for the fangs of history and the errors of the rendering of other people's cultural intelligence by the West.

This effort, for me, becomes all the more important in the wake of globalization, when the dynamics of cultural survival as refracted through performance should stem from one's indigenous aesthetic traditions as a marker of identity in a progressively fragmenting, disneyfying and globalizing world. In essence, what I am summarizing here, is that "aesthetic" is political and a consciousness of one's indigenous "aesthetic" as well as theoretical traditions, if intelligently deployed in performance, painting, dance, playwriting, acting, redefines the meaning and significance as well as formalistic properties of any work of artistic expression despite the syncretic or hybridizing or creolizing or intercultural tendency of the present.

What I mean here is that what will make my play different from a Chinese or Japanese play written by somebody living in New York is my deployment of Igbo aesthetic elements and performance theories in my work. And to be able to do this I need to do the necessary research into what existed in Igbo culture before the intrusion of Europeans into the African universe. Hybridity as it is now discussed seems to be happy and exciting affair. Few artists and scholars are ready to engage with the fact that hybridity is indeed a very violent process. Our present attitude to hybridity, under postcolonial theory, is to adore the mixed-race child as beautiful. What we do not want to do is to confront the history and anguish of the relationship that produced the baby. A little understanding of where the parents come from will help us better understand what the child is made up of or will become in the fullness of time. We must go back to sage philosophy, to the excavation of the theories of our performances and oratures that have shaped and powered the great breakthroughs in form and structure and dynamics of art, painting, literature as exemplified by the works of Picasso, Soyinka, Achebe, Okigbo, Ben Okri, Dennis Scott, Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Urban Bush Women, Fela Anikulapo Kuti and a myriad others. The knowledge/theory is there, waiting only to be excavated and properly documented and deployed in all aspects of our creativity including our theatrical acting styles and "subaltern" discourses on performance theory, orature and literature. Jonathan Culler puts the impetus of my argument about theory this way:

Foucault claims to analyse a particular historical moment, so the question that arises is whether his large generalizations hold for other times and places. Raising follow-up questions like these is, in turn, our way of stepping into theory and practicing it. ⁹

The essential problem with postcolonial theory, as it is practiced today, is the notion or misconception that most scholars, black and white, have in the West and the rest of

generally, black and white, have in the West and the rest of the world, namely, that theory is a purely typographical form which is only possible as written discourse. This notion, of course, stems from a limited or perverted understanding of what the word actually means, its origins, dynamics, evolution, even by Western standards. Aristotle's theories of drama were first and foremost, oral treatises, lectures given publicly to students who wrote it down. The thoughts, ideas and concepts did not become theories when they were written down, they were theories even while he was "thinking them out" or articulating them verbally as a dialogic or Socratic discourse. This analogy of the link between theory and orality becomes clearer when applied to oral poetry which is quite different from verse i.e. poetry as a written form, encrypted in Western orthography, as it is widely known, practiced and valorized by the Western academy. It is important to note that while verse is struggling to survive in the West - when it does it is mainly as among the university-educated, middle-class, populations - oral poetry continues to thrive in three quarters of the world as prayer, ritual, invocation, market chants, songs, sermons, divination, political rhetoric, praise singing, rap, spoken word etc. etc. I have tried to theorize the reason for this vibrancy, accessibility and functionality of oral poetry as well as its vernacular imperative in a recent essay titled: "Taking the Bull by the Balls: The Oriki Theory of African and African Diasporic Orature."

Theory, to be precise, is an attempt to make sense of how and why we create or make things, structures, ideas, institutions, art in a given society. Its primary functions are to encode, articulate, clarify, criticize, historicize, assess, redirect, reshape, regenerate a society's cultural and creative processes from prayer, dance, painting, literature through music to scientific invention. Theory exists in all cultures of the world in the culture's own languages. Each culture's theoretical constructs can best be appreciated by first studying the culture's own languages and metalanguages and then by placing their theories side by side with the literary or performative artform or genre or discipline being studied or examined by the theorist. And that is what I intend to do, from an African diasporic perspective, in the book: **Before They Danced in Chains: Performance Theories of Africa and the African Diaspora.**"

In a recent essay titled, "To Cite or not to Cite," Kofi Agawu, distinguished professor of musicology at Princeton University, USA, articulates the grouse of my argument beautifully when he says about the present mendicant situation of our scholarship and the politics of knowledge in our world today: "But what of cultures that are primarily oral, in which knowledge is preserved in memory and disseminated through repeated performance, and where scholarly texts necessarily assume a different mode of material existence? If, as is widely recognized, sub-Saharan African cultures are for the most part primary oral cultures, then some inflection of the metropolitan practice will be needed in order to ensure full participation by African workers....we might ask how one might position scholarly requirements so that an unschooled but thoroughly educated African sage is not by definition barred from our knowledge producing game. As things stand currently, you may be the most knowledgeable individual in your town or village, know a lot about, say, instruments or musical styles, or the symbolism of dance, or the history of transmission of certain rituals. You may be well- practiced and widely recognized as

one who is uncommonly knowledgeable. But if your knowledge is not committed to paper, you may well not get credit for it. In fact, it is nowadays likely that a Euro-American ethnomusicologist will come and interview you and convey your knowledge and ideas to a larger public in writing. During this ostensibly collaborative process, your words and your transcribers may become intertwined, leading ultimately to the latter's signing of the text. *The deck is thus stacked in favour of those who write not those who know. African sage scholars are therefore automatically at a disadvantage as soon as we accept the imperatives of a written tradition.*"¹⁰ (emphasis mine) Apparently, until lions tell their own story, the story of hunting will always glorify the hunter.

In conclusion, this essay explores how a vernacular redefinition of "theory" can change forever the linguistic and epistemic angles from which people of African descent participate in Western-derived theories. It addresses how an African-diasporic notion of theory can produce an alternative epistemology for the analysis and better understanding of African/African Diasporic orature/literatures/performances. It insists that we call postcolonial/postmodern theory, like snow, has covered, for several centuries, a certain body of theories created by Africans, through African orature, in African languages, long before the advent of slavery or colonialism. These theories are obscured because they stem from orature whereas our theoretical practice both in the West, the continent, and diaspora, is based primarily on typographical literacy to the exclusion of iconographic, kinaesthetic, sonic, proxemic, sartorial, tactile and many other literacies which constitute the polysemic ingredients and epistemological infrastructure through which three quarters of the people of African descent on the continent and the Diaspora create the performance texts, not literary texts, that allow them to perform selves, pass on their history, participate in a democratic way in aesthetic structures created by their ancestors. Research and fieldwork into these metalanguages, as I prefer to call them, will enable us to find a theoretical continuum that circumvents the teleologies of the postcolonial construct and redefine theory from a diasporic, migratory, and phenomenological perspective, away from the book-centred concept of the Western academy. The master's tools can never demolish his house!

To be continued...¹¹

NOTES

1. See Mark Fortier, *Theatre /Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 130-14
2. Abiola Irele, "The African scholar", in *Transition*, No 51, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp 56-69
3. Ibid., 56-69
4. Leela Ghandi, *Post-Colonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)
5. See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, London: Methuen, 1976.
6. See Henry Louis Gates' essay "Canon Formation, Literary History and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to

History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told", in *Falling in Theory* edited by David Richter New York: Bedford/St Martin's , 2000), pp 175-182

7. Gates, pp 175-182
8. Gates, pp175-182
9. Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp13.
10. This extraordinary and iconoclastic essay was first presented on April 19, 2007, at the "Performing Africa Conference , Ohio University, Athens, OH, USA. To catch up with his counterhegemonic thinking, Kofi Agawu recommends that we read Kwesi Yankah: *Globalization and the African Scholar*. Legon, Ghana: University of Ghana, 2004. On sage philosophy, he recommends Henry Odera Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).