

## **Pan-African Nationalism and Theatre Discourse in the New Political Economy of Ghana**

David Afriyie Donkor  
*Theatre/Performance Studies*

The Ghana National Theatre (GNT), established by the Ghana government in 1990, identifies its work as an outgrowth of the vision and mandate of an antecedent National Theatre Movement (NTM). The NTM, in which the GNT claims heritage, was conceived around the time of Ghana's independence in 1957 to help forge the new nation's cultural identity. This was a de-colonizing project with a mandate to envision and develop a modern African theater representative of Kwame Nkrumah's idea of an 'African Personality'. The NTM, however, produced an elitist 'art theatre' discourse with little appeal to a large constituency of Ghanaians. By 1966, the Movement had all but died.

The more recently established GNT features popular theatre, a product of the transnational cultural flows occurring within Ghana's urban popular culture. Facing the imperatives of Ghana's neo-liberal economy the GNT has sought financial viability by obtaining corporate sponsorship from Unilever, a local subsidiary of a multinational company, for these popular theatre productions. What discourses have the GNT's sway towards popular and market concerns, while maintaining a heritage in the Pan-African nationalist vision and mandate of the NTM, produced in Ghana's intellectual arena? What is the contribution of the Ghanaian academy to the discourses in this arena, today?

I argue in the paper that the GNT's sway and heritage signals, on one hand, a resuscitation of the NTM's important de-colonizing project and an expansion of theatre participation at the national level to a larger constituency of Ghanaians. On the other hand it marks an appropriation of the poetics of popular performance and the politics of de-colonization in the service of multinational profit interests. Consequently the discourses produced, sited in popular culture, reflect the interplay between a popular aesthetic and the political-economic determinations to which that aesthetic is subjected.

I also argue that theatre scholars of the contemporary Ghanaian academy, steeped in the Pan-African ideals of the 1960s remain obsessed with 'art theatre' to the neglect of the political-economic conditions of artistic production. As such we have not been germane to the most vibrant intellectual discourses about the theatre, which occur today in popular culture and outside the walls of the conventional academy. I suggest in this paper that the current generation of Ghanaian theatre scholars in the academy will, thus, need to join the broader theatre discourse by engaging the currency and changing value of Pan-African aesthetics side by side with the politics of popular culture in the shadow of capital.