

Ogunde on Ogunde: Two Autobiographical Statements

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Hubert Ogunde, considered the "father" of Yoruba operatic theatre,¹ is one of Africa's better known entertainers and showmen. In Nigeria he is already regarded as a "living legend"² who almost single-handedly pioneered the professional development of a popular art form called the "Concert Party,"³ a thoroughly African mode of musical comedy. One informed commentator has stated quite matter-of-factly that "Professional theatre in Yoruba begins with Hubert Ogunde."⁴ As a performer, producer and promoter of indigenous stage entertainment, he has remained active and popular for more than thirty years, frequently taking his troupe on tours throughout Nigeria and neighboring countries.

Yet despite everything that has been written about this famous artist and his contribution to African drama, there are hardly any primary sources to which one can turn for basic biographical information on the man and his career.⁵ Most scholars tend to repeat the remarks of observers based in Nigeria who either knew Ogunde personally or interviewed him about his life and activities.⁶ As far as I have been able to determine, only one of these interviews has been published and it appears in a French translation!⁷ It may therefore be of some value to reproduce two autobiographical statements by Ogunde which I discovered in Nigerian popular magazines while doing research at the University of Ibadan in 1972-73. The first was published

in two installments in the TV Times and Radio News of August 25 and September 1, 1960.⁸ The second appeared thirteen years later in New Era, a postwar magazine published in the East Central State (formerly Biafra).⁹

There are several discrepancies in these two accounts (marked by asterisks in parentheses in the second) which are probably due to printing or reporting errors. A comparison with other sources of biographical information suggests that the longer statement in the TV Times and Radio News is the most trustworthy.¹⁰ Nevertheless, both accounts are valuable for the revealing light they shed on Ogunde's career and personality.

NOTES

¹J.A. Adedeji, "Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theater in Nigeria," Research in African Literatures, 2, 2 (1971), 135.

²Introduction to Ogunde's autobiography published in New Era, 2, 10 (March 1973), 19, and reproduced here.

³For information on the history of the "Concert Party," see Oyekan Owomoyela, "Folklore and Yoruba Theater," Research in African Literatures, 2, 2 (1971), 125-26. For an example of "Concert Party" performances in another African country, see Alain Ricard, "The Concert Party as a Genre: The Happy Stars of Lomé," Research in African Literatures, 5, 2 (1971), 165-79.

⁴Ulli Beier, "Yoruba Theatre," in Introduction to African Literature, ed. Ulli Beier (Evanston, 1967), p. 245.

⁵The standard biographical sources are the entries on Ogunde published in Donald Herdeck, African Authors: A Companion to Black African Writing, Volume I: 1900-1973 (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 316-18 (which appears to be based on the essays by Adedeji, Owomoyela and Beier cited above), and Janheinz Jahn et al., Who's Who in African Literature: Biographies, Works, Commentaries (Tubingen, 1972), pp. 290-92 (which appears to be based on information supplied by Ogunde).

⁶A good distillation of the information on Ogunde currently in the public domain can be found in Anthony Graham-White, The Drama of Black Africa (New York, 1974), pp. 149-50. References to other articles on Yoruba drama (especially by Beier and Adedeji) can be found in the footnotes to Chapter 6.

⁷ Etienne Bertrand, "Le Phénomène 'Ogunde'," L'Afrique Littéraire et Artistique, 23 (1972), 72-78.

⁸ Pp. 12-13 and 4-5. This was a weekly publication of the Lagos Daily Times. Judging from data in the Ibadan University Library's helpful bibliography, Nigerian Periodicals and Newspapers 1950-1970 (Ibadan, 1971), it may have been in existence less than a year.

⁹ New Era, 2, 10 (March 1973), 19-21.

¹⁰ In addition to the sources cited above, there are some useful articles on Ogunde in other Nigerian popular magazines: Anon., "Hubert Ogunde--A Musical Celebrity," The People, 2, 2 (Feb. 1970), 8-14, 16-18; Anon., "Hubert Ogunde Counts His Blessings!" Drum, July 1965, 31-34; and Anon., "King of the Stage," Spear, Feb. 1972, 4-6. References to many other articles on Nigerian drama can be found in my A Bibliography of Literary Contributions to Nigerian Periodicals, 1946-1972 (Ibadan, 1975).