Theatre and Political Mobilisation: Case Studies from Uganda

ROBERT SERUMAGA: ... theatre in Uganda should not start from the National Theatre in the city and then spread outwards, but should start from the villages, and then build up to the National Theatre in the city ...

OKOT P’BITEK: I agree. I like to see the National Theatre as a kind of workshop, where we do a lot of experimental work. The problem really is that in the countryside we don’t have artificial drama or artificial music ... and by "artificial" I mean things taken out of context. In the villages you have death-dances and marriage-dances and so on, and the poetry and the death-dances are about death, and they are very real, and when people repeat these poems they are shedding tears at the same time. I would like to see that in the National Theatre we take this very real thing, very real drama from the countryside, experiment on it and see how we can project this.

At a time, when, as the first Ugandan, Okot p’Bitek had just been appointed director of the National Theatre in Kampala and when the Nation-building rhetoric was prevalent in the literary and cultural scenery, he drew attention to what have today become key issues in the post-colonial cultural debate:

- the existence of different cultures with different structures and intentionality within one and the same national framework
- the question of whether nation-building and the formation of cultural identities should be a process of top-down or bottom-up communication and interaction between the masses and the cultural and political elites

In many African countries, the socio-cultural atmosphere of the period immediately before and after independence was characterised by an all-embracing alliance between political leaders, intellectuals and artists and the vast majority of the common people. The common goal of all three groups to replace colonial subjugation by national political self-determination resulted in a unique homogeneity of political aspirations. As Basil Davidson puts it:

Katanga Theatre: Woyigira – From Where You Learn:
Opening the show with a dance