**African theatre**, effectively, the [theatre](https://www.britannica.com/art/theatre-art) of Africa south of the [Sahara](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahara-desert-Africa) that emerged in the [postcolonial](https://www.britannica.com/topic/postcolonialism) era—that is to say, from the mid-20th century onward.

It is not possible to talk of much African theatre as if it fell into discrete historical or national patterns. Colonial boundaries ignored cultural and linguistic unities, and ancient movements throughout the continent—sometimes motivated by trade (including the [transatlantic slave trade](https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade)), [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion), or exploration—brought different ethnic groups into contact with each other and often influenced performance in a manner that is still evident in the 21st century. It is also important not to divide the theatre into “traditional” and “modern,” as the contemporary literary theatre—predominantly written and performed in [English](https://www.britannica.com/topic/English-language), [French](https://www.britannica.com/topic/French-language), and [Portuguese](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Portuguese-language)—exists alongside festivals, rituals, cultural performances, and popular [indigenous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigenous) theatre. The richness of theatre in Africa lies very much in the interaction of all these aspects of performance. The broad subheadings under which theatre in Africa is considered should, therefore, be seen as an aid to access rather than as representing definite boundaries. This article aims to sketch the broadest patterns of work and highlight some landmarks in dealing with the extensive continentwide theatrical activity.

[**Anglophone West Africa**](https://www.britannica.com/place/western-Africa)

The countries of [Ghana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghana), [Nigeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria), and [Sierra Leone](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone) (and to a lesser extent [The Gambia](https://www.britannica.com/place/The-Gambia)), plus the English-speaking areas of [Cameroon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cameroon), have produced a theatre of great richness since their political independence. They are examined individually below.

**[Ghana](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghana)**

Ghana produced two of Africa’s most-accomplished women playwrights, [Efua Sutherland](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Efua-Sutherland) and [Ama Ata Aidoo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ama-Ata-Aidoo). Sutherland’s plays were written in [Akan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Akan-languages) and in English. *Foriwa* (first performed 1962) and *Edufa* (first performed 1962) dealt with political issues relevant to the challenges of independence. *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) is a witty but still politically relevant comedy in a form she described as *anansegoro*—that is to say, the creation in dramatic form of *anansesem*, the stories about [Ananse](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ananse) the spider man, [trickster](https://www.britannica.com/art/trickster-tale), and entertainer. Sutherland was active as a director and created the Ghana Drama Studio in [Accra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Accra) to explore traditional performance spaces and styles. She is also known for plays she wrote for children such as *Vulture! Vulture!* and *Tahinta* (both 1968).

Aidoo, also a poet and novelist, wrote only two plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970). Both, however, are works of great stature. [*The Dilemma of a Ghost*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Dilemma-of-a-Ghost) is concerned with the arrival in Africa of a black American woman married to a Ghanaian and the struggle she has in coming to terms with her cultural past and with her new home. An unspoken but powerful presence in the [play](https://www.britannica.com/topic/play-behaviour) is the [legacy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legacy) of [slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology), a theme that is more fully explored in *Anowa*. That play—based on a legendary source concerning a beautiful young woman who marries a handsome stranger—is a remarkable exploration of Ghanaian history, both colonial and postcolonial, with a powerful indictment of the temptations to which contemporary politicians [succumb](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/succumb). With those two plays Aidoo established herself as a major presence in African theatre.

J.C. (Joe) de Graft’s plays *Sons and Daughters* (1964) and the harsher *Through a Film Darkly* (1970) explored domestic problems. They are good examples of the theme of “the clash of cultures” that was commonplace in much African writing in the years surrounding independence, when a new young educated elite confronted what were thought to be old-fashioned traditional attitudes. De Graft also wrote and staged [adaptations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptations) of [Shakespeare](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shakespeare)’s [*Macbeth*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Macbeth-by-Shakespeare) and [*Hamlet*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamlet-by-Shakespeare). In the 1970s de Graft moved to teach in [East Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/eastern-Africa), where he wrote and produced his play *Muntu* (1975).

A number of other playwrights should be noted, including Martin Owusu (with *The Mightier Sword*, 1973, and *The Sudden Return*, 1973), Asiedu Yirenkyi (*Kivuli*, 1980; *Blood and Tears*, 1973), and Kwesi Kay (*Hubbub in the House*, 1972). Those plays variously concern themselves with the tensions and temptations of modern urban life. Another important Ghanaian playwright is Mohammed Ben-Abdallah. His *Land of a Million Magicians* (1993), inspired by [Bertolt Brecht](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertolt-Brecht)’s [*The Good Woman of Setzuan*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Good-Woman-of-Setzuan) (1943), is a work of considerable theatrical scale and dramatic power.

Ghana’s Concert Party theatre—a traveling performance troupe with a [repertoire](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repertoire) of broad comedies and social satires—flourished in the earlier part of the 20th century and continued in its popularity and ingenuity into the 21st century. Concert Party theatre complemented the literary theatre with its particular kind of social commentary and its inventive use of both traditional and modern forms of entertainment.

**Nigeria**

[Nigeria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria) stands out in the continent for the vigour and range of its [theatre](https://www.britannica.com/art/Nigerian-theatre). The rich cultural heritage of the nation, particularly of the south, made performance the natural means for political debate, social cohesion, celebration, and lament. The Nigerian playwright has grown up in a world where theatre literally takes place on the street, in the performances of such masquerade figures as the Egungun, or the festivals relating to trades, crafts, or seasonal rhythms, marriages and funerals. A vibrant tradition of popular theatre (such as the [Yoruba opera](https://www.britannica.com/art/Nigerian-theatre)) was also a resource that the literary playwright could be inspired by and draw upon. Popular theatre practitioners such as [Hubert Ogunde](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hubert-Ogunde), writing in [Yoruba](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba-language), created biblical and political dramas that toured the country in trucks, performing in hotel yards or [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) halls to enthusiastic audiences, with lavish ingredients of [song](https://www.britannica.com/art/song), [dance](https://www.britannica.com/art/dance), and spectacle. Two titles of plays by Ogunde indicate the range of his writing: *The Garden of Eden and the Throne of God* (1944) and *Bread and Bullet* (1950). [Duro Ladipo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Duro-Ladipo) was also an accomplished [Yoruba](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba) opera artist, with sophisticated theatrical re-creations of Yoruba history and [myth](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth) (*Oba Koso*, 1963, and *Oba Waja*, 1964) and an extraordinary version of Austrian author [Hugo von Hofmannsthal](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-von-Hofmannsthal)’s *Jedermann* (*Everyman*), called *Eda* (1970). In the mid-1960s the [Kola Ogunmola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kola-Ogunmola) company, in conjunction with the Nigerian theatre designer Demas Nwoko, had great success with an [adaptation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation) of [Amos Tutuola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Amos-Tutuola)’s novel [*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Palm-Wine-Drinkard). In addition to the troupes led by Ogunde, Ladipo, and Ogunmola, numerous other Yoruba theatre companies enjoyed great success well into the 1980s, though they were gradually overtaken by the popularity of videos for [consumption](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumption) at home, which diminished their audiences. The Nobel laureate [Wole Soyinka](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wole-Soyinka), Africa’s leading playwright, acknowledged the influence of such artists as Ogunde upon his work, and modern Nigerian theatre also owes a debt to [James Ene Henshaw](https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Ene-Henshaw), whose well-crafted popular plays (*This Is Our Chance*, first performed 1948, published 1956; and *Medicine for Love*, 1964) can be seen as the beginnings of a literary drama.

Soyinka himself was part of a group of young playwrights who established their reputations in the years immediately before and after Nigeria gained its independence in 1960 and who are recognized as the formative creators of modern Nigerian theatre. Others were [J.P. Clark](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Pepper-Clark) (later known as J.P. Clark-Bekedemero), [Ola Rotimi](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ola-Rotimi), and Zulu Sofola. Soyinka maintained a strong theatrical output from the late 1950s (with two plays, *The Lion and the Jewel*, first performed 1959, published 1963; and *The Swamp Dwellers*, 1958, partly developed when he was associated with George Devine’s young writers group at the Royal Court Theatre, London) well into the 21st century (with *King Baabu*, 2002, and *Alápatà Àpáta*, 2011). Soyinka’s first major play was his [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) contribution to the independence celebrations, [*A Dance of the Forests*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/A-Dance-of-the-Forests), first performed 1960, staged by the company he formed on his return to Nigeria, the 1960 Masks. Unlike many of the [anodyne](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anodyne) celebrations of nationhood, Soyinka’s play brings ancestors to life to comment shrewdly on both the past and the present. In many ways that complex though (literally) fantastic play may be seen as a source for much of his later work. Soyinka’s main weapon was satire, from *The Trials of Brother Jero* (first performed 1960, published 1963) to *King Baabu*, which was loosely based on [Alfred Jarry](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alfred-Jarry)’s farcical *Ubu Roi*. In *Opera Wonyosi* (first performed 1977) he draws on [Bertolt Brecht](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertolt-Brecht)’s satirical [musical](https://www.britannica.com/art/musical) drama [*The Threepenny Opera*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Threepenny-Opera) (1928). Soyinka’s career—fragmented by imprisonment without trial during the [Nigerian civil war](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Independent-Nigeria#ref55321) and subsequent exile—has produced a range of major plays, some dealing with what he saw as the bizarre antics of African leaders (*Kongi’s Harvest*, first performed 1966; *A Play of Giants*, first performed 1984; *The Beatification of Area Boy*, 1995) and others with the clash between the spiritual and the mortal world (*The Strong Breed*, first performed 1963; *The Road*, 1965; *Death and the King’s Horseman*, 1975—the latter widely regarded as his finest play) and fierce personal assaults on [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny) (*Madmen and Specialists*, 1971; *From Zia, with Love*, 1992).

Clark’s first play, *Song of a Goat* (1964), was staged in the [Mbari](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mbari-Mbayo-Club) arts centre in [Ibadan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ibadan) in a production directed by Soyinka. One of a group of three plays published together—the others being *The Masquerade* and *The Raft*—*Song of a Goat* explored Clark’s native world of the Rivers area of the [Niger River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Niger-River) delta. His atmospheric and poetic style and his attraction to [family sagas](https://www.britannica.com/art/Icelanders-sagas) distinguish Clark’s playwriting. *The Bikoroa Plays* (first performed 1981), a cycle of three full-length plays, follows the fortunes of a Rivers family, and another family-centred drama, *All for Oil* (2000), combines Clark’s dedication to his family and region with a contemporary political commentary. Perhaps the most significant of Clark’s plays is his 1966 version of the epic [Ijo](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ijo) saga *Ozidi*—a seven-day community festival. Later, in 1977, Clark was to record and translate into English an oral version of the saga, but his rich play drawn from this fascinating source is not only a powerful drama in its own terms but also an informative introduction to the imaginative dramaturgy of traditional festivals.

With *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* in 1971, Sofola became the first woman playwright to establish herself in Nigeria. *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) and *King Emene* (1974) are two of several plays that explore the strains imposed upon traditional values; other plays have drawn [criticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism) because of a perceived social [conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism) in Sofola’s attitude.

Of the quartet of early playwrights, the one who best compares to Soyinka is Rotimi. His first major play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (first performed 1968), is a reworking in Nigerian terms of [Sophocles](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sophocles)’ [*Oedipus Rex*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oedipus-Rex-play-by-Sophocles). It immediately established Rotimi’s stature as a theatrical craftsman. He worked generally on a large scale, incorporating many different ethnic influences in the performance structure of his plays (in terms of song, dance, language, etc.). He also was deeply concerned with the [dynamics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynamics) between actor and audience, going so far in that respect as to design his own performance spaces, of which the most significant was the Ori Olokun centre in [Ife](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ile-Ife), [western](https://www.britannica.com/art/western) Nigeria. Rotimi’s themes were always political and often were based in the re-creation of incidents of Nigerian history: *Kurunmi* (first performed 1969) deals with the internecine wars of the [Yoruba](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yoruba) in the 19th century; *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (first performed 1971) treats the British colonial punitive expedition to [Benin](https://www.britannica.com/place/Benin); *Hopes of the Living Dead* (first performed 1985) examines the struggle in the 1920s for the dignified treatment for [lepers](https://www.britannica.com/science/leprosy); *Akassa You Mi* (2001)—published posthumously—presents the 1895 conflict between the Nembe people and the [Royal Niger Company](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Royal-Niger-Company). Whatever the historical reference, however, Rotimi draws a contemporary parallel. The radical power of his playwriting is also evident in the pessimistic play *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (1983), though a sense of satiric fun is also seen in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) and *Holding Talks* (1979). Rotimi had formal training in playwriting at [Boston](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boston-University) and [Yale](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yale-University) universities, and that training is reflected in his workmanship, but he created a very personal style of theatre, richly inventive and experimental. He was a [dynamic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynamic) director of his own work, forming at Ife the Ori Olokun Acting Company and later the African Cradle Theatre (ACT).

The example of the four playwrights mentioned above created an explosion of theatrical activity in Nigeria. A strong radical voice—both in content and in form—was established by, among others, playwrights such as Bode Sowande (*Farewell to Babylon*, 1979; *Flamingo*, 1986; *Tornadoes Full of Dreams*, 1990); Olu Obafemi (*Nights of a Mystical Beast*, 1986; *Suicide Syndrome*, 1987; *Naira Has No Gender*, 1993); Tunde Fatunde (*No Food, No Country*, 1985; *Oga Na Tief-Man*, 1986); and Segun Oyekunle (*Katakata for Sofahead*, 1983). A significant element of much of the new radical work was the use of [pidgin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/pidgin)—a language of mass communication accessible to a much-wider audience than the educated elite. The plays of actor and director Wale Ogunyemi should also be noted—dramas based in Yoruba lore and history, as well as an ingenious adaptation of [*Macbeth*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Macbeth-by-Shakespeare) (*Aare Akogun*, 1969).

Two other major figures emerged in the latter part of the 20th century—Tess Onwueme and Femi Osofisan. Onwueme’s early plays were based on domestic incidents, but she became more adventurous with political [allegories](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegories) (*The Desert Encroaches*, 1985; *Ban Empty Barn*, 1986), and—after a move to teach in the U.S.—her work expanded in range and ambition with strong feminist dramas, often with an evangelistic edge. They include *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Tell It to Women* (1994), *The Missing Face* (1997), *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000), and *Then She Said It* (2002). Osofisan, however, is the colossus of Nigerian theatre in terms of output and popularity over the last decades of the 20th century. His plays have been frequently staged in Nigeria and Ghana, and in Britain and the U.S. His dramaturgy is characterized by provocative open-endings, as in *Once upon Four Robbers* (first performed 1978), where, at the end, the audience is asked to vote on whether the armed robbers should be punished or released. Osofisan also reworks other texts either—if they are Nigerian—as a [critique](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/critique) of an earlier generation (*No More the Wasted Breed*, 1982, in response to Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*, 1963; *Another Raft*, 1988, commenting on Clark’s *The Raft*, 1964) or, if international, as a vehicle for his own interpretation of contemporary events (among them, *Who’s Afraid of Solarin?*, 1978, from Russian writer [Nikolay Gogol](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nikolay-Gogol)’s [*The Government Inspector*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Government-Inspector), 1836; *Tegonni: An African Antigone*, 1999; *Women of Owu*, 2006, from [Euripides](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Euripides)’ [*Trojan Women*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trojan-Women), 415 BCE). Major plays include *The Chattering and the Song* (first performed 1976) and *Morountodun* (1982), both examples of Osofisan’s radical political agenda, and a play about former nationalist leader of Ghana [Kwame Nkrumah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Kwame-Nkrumah) in exile—*Nkrumah-ni…Africa-ni!* (1999). Osofisan said that he wished to speak to a young educated audience, as he felt that they were the people who could revolutionize society. He was hugely productive, with well over 20 plays to his name. His [robust](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/robust) plays are often crusading but are always inventive and entertaining and engaging with real issues: he may be regarded as one of the leading African dramatists of the 20th century.