

*African Drama.*

Possible ways of developing the dramatic expression of the African have been studied by the British Drama League for a number of years. Like other peoples, African tribes have a natural faculty for mimetic representation; it is closely akin to dancing and is generally used in religious or magical ceremonies, but it has in certain cases been deprived of its sacred character and become a form of amusement. Like other indigenous types of self-expression it is dying out, because European forms of recreation are taking its place. It may, however, take on a new life if educated Africans can be induced to take an interest in it, and, where this interest exists already, to let it grow and develop without too much European interference.

The African likes drama and acting. Many missionaries know of cases where school-children almost instinctively turned Bible-stories which they had learned into a play and acted it, sometimes before large audiences; there were no written words learnt by heart, it was simply the impressions received from the story put into action. If such plays were repeated at regular intervals and the participants were given time for practice and also help and advice, a training ground for actors would easily evolve. The subjects should be African, and needless to say the plays must be performed in the vernacular. If pupils spontaneously use Bible-stories it shows that these stories have become African, and there is no objection to using them.

Naturally they will also turn to scenes from their own life. Two years ago in the Institute's Prize Competition for Books by Africans a manuscript in Ewe was submitted, which is a real drama based on certain customs of the Ewe. It is written by a 'sophisticated' African, and is preceded by a long preface which enlarges on Aristotle and his views on drama. And yet the drama itself is purely African in language, in style, in views and ideals. The action takes place in pre-European days. The author handles his language with remarkable mastery, and interprets the untouched African mind in a surprising way. This author, Mr. Fiawoo, was able to write the play because he had remained faithful to his people and its genius, because he possessed an education which, though opening the channels to European thought, had not estranged him from his own mental heritage, and because he is a dramatist.

In the Report of the British Drama League some proposals are made with the idea of helping the evolution of African drama. One is 'to ask the African teachers to make a selection of the native themes, so that a large amount of African folk-lore shall be ready for dramatic use', and another, 'that a book on the development of drama from the earliest times down to the entirely modern theatre is needed for the study of teachers and others, in order to give them the general experience of ages, and encourage all kinds of experiment'.

Both suggestions seem somewhat out of touch with reality. The African

dramatist will not suffer from lack of themes, his own store of folk-tales is more than sufficient, and for his themes he will in no way restrict himself to folk-stories. Moreover, African folk-lore in a European translation is a poor substitute for the original text and will not greatly inspire the poet, for it is printed paper instead of life-blood. Would a collection of Aesop's fables arouse enthusiasm in the European dramatist? Nor is a book on the history of drama from the earliest times what the African needs; probably few would read it, they would prefer to learn from life, from their environment and from the living traditions of their nation; they will also freely use subjects originating in foreign cultures, European or otherwise, which captivate their imagination.

More important than printed literature is personal encouragement. The young man who has dramatic inclinations will easily find a European friend, a teacher or missionary, to whom he can confide his plans. This affords opportunity for giving advice and help, and for removing difficulties. The European friend can also help in creating an interest in the production, in having it performed and possibly published. What the Europeans can do is to encourage talent and to sponsor native efforts; this will always be an individual matter; the less we try to force development or to assist it by artificial means, the better. If Africa is to have an indigenous dramatic art and not a European imitation of a lifeless bastard form, that art will have to grow slowly and find its own way.

### *Help for the African artist.*

In *Listen* (vol. iv, no. 2) a story is told of a blacksmith in Sierra Leone who on his own initiative modernized and thereby revived the old art of making knives, common among the Mende, by inventing a clasp-knife and selling it for one penny. Since his knife is good and cheap and is provided with a convenient haft of polished camwood, he is finding plenty of work to do, 'for he is a craftsman whose mind is open to new ideas, but who yet trusts his own judgement in craftsmanship'.

This is one of the few cases where a native craft has found the necessary encouragement and is therefore able to survive. A second case may be seen on the opposite shore of Africa, in the harbour of Port Sudan; there the Government has opened a shop in which objects produced by native artists and producers of handicrafts may be purchased, and many travellers avail themselves of this opportunity. Could not the same be done in other African ports all round the Continent? The African artist is not yet extinct, but may be found in many a village. In schools the pupils are taught wood-carving, modelling in clay, weaving, leather-work, and similar accomplishments, and some who have particular skill continue these activities after they have left school. Thanks to the African's artistic gift, which is decidedly above that of the European average, almost all these productions have some-