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# UNIT 19 AFRICAN AND KENYAN HISTORY AND DRAMA IN KENYA

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## 19.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objectives of this Unit are manifold. The first is to trace briefly the history of the African continent since the pre-historic times, and also to discuss the various meanings implied in the epithet 'the dark continent' as applied to Africa by the European colonial powers

A brief account of the colonization of the continent from the time of the arrival of the first Europeans – the Portuguese – is also given. This has been done with the aim, primarily, of providing the political-cultural background to our study of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. In the second part of the Unit you will be given a detailed history of Kenya since the pre-historic times to the situation at the point of its Uhuru in December 1963. In between are the details of its first colonization by the Arabs and the Portuguese. The model of colonization followed by the British is described next. Some of you may be reading African literature for the first time. It is for this reason that a detailed background history is necessary. The struggles waged by the Africans – including the Mau Mau struggle – are also discussed in the Unit. All these have a significant bearing on our understanding of the text – *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* – which is based on the theme of the freedom struggle of Kenya.

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## 19.1 AFRICA – THE DARK CONTINENT

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In most books of history written by Europeans, the continent of Africa is referred to as 'the dark continent'. This expression – the dark continent – was most probably first used by travelers and missionaries who happened to visit the African continent much before political claims on its territory were made and it was colonized by various European powers. The term 'dark' has been used for describing the continent

of Africa because, firstly, the early travelers as well as missionaries considered as 'dark' anything that they did not understand much about. Secondly, and more importantly, these first visitors considered Africa to be inhabited by people who were primitive and uncivilized. The colour of ignorance, as we know, is black. According to these early missionaries, the Africans believed in magic and other so-called irrational rituals and customs. Once again, magic is associated with black colour as the term 'black magic' implies. Finally, there was the most obvious reason for calling Africa the dark continent: its inhabitants had very dark skins. These opinions, particularly about the Africans being primitive and uncivilized were accepted blindly by most Europeans who entered the continent either for trade or for colonization. In fact, the colonial administrations built upon this myth of primitiveness of the Africans by stating that Africa had no history, no culture, no past.

### **Africa – the Myth of Primitivism and Political Reasons Thereof**

From the European point of view, there was a sound reason behind accepting such an image of the Africans. The European powers used the excuse of 'civilizing' these savages for entering Africa and staying on for the economic and political exploitation of its people. Thus was created the myth of the white man's burden which expression meant – on the face of it – that the white man had taken upon himself the onerous task – the burden – of 'civilizing' the savage African.

However, as later researches into the history, politics, social organization and cultural achievements of the continent have shown, Africa was neither primitive nor uncivilized before the Europeans occupied it. Civilization, as we know, is much more than technological progress and cannot be equated with the possession of fly-by-wire aircrafts, flat screen television sets, personal computers, cell phones, microwave ovens and even under-the-skin planted chips. If this were so, people belonging to the most ancient civilizations like the Indian, the Chinese, the Egyptian and the South American would all be primitive and savage. Like these, ancient Africa also boasted of various centers of civilization and culture with well-organized social and political systems and significant achievements in their respective fields of fine arts like music and dance.

### **Africa and the Evolution of Man**

By now enough archeological and anthropological evidence is available to show that during the evolutionary process our ancestors – Australopithecus African or man-ape, as he was called – first emerged on the African continent. Rift valley region in East Africa was the most probable place where it happened. Excavations at the Olduvai Gorge in what is now called Tanzania have produced ample evidence of it being one of the oldest sites of world cultures. Discovery of primitive tools for hunting like the hand axe in not only east Africa but also in the Congo Basin and Zimbabwe shows a parallel development of this culture. This also compares well with the developments in other similar centers in India, China and parts of Europe.

### **Africa and the Ancient Egyptian Civilization**

However, the most fascinating evidence about the culture developments in Africa has been provided by a Senegalese school – Cheikh Anti Diop – who claims that the ancient Egyptian civilization was set up and nurtured by black Africans more than ten thousand years ago. Relying upon evidence from various sources including historical accounts, Cheikh Anti Diop convince us that when the great Sahara started drying up about 7000 B.C., before which it was a huge lake, a section of Africans began to trek along the routes of the river Nile. They finally settled in the valley at the mouth of the Nile delta where the river emptied into the Mediterranean. Here they set up the great ancient Egyptian civilization with unprecedented progress in speculative scientific research. This cycle of the civilizational progress lasted many thousands of years during the course of which these black Africans colonized neighbouring territories inhabited by whites. The Semitic world of today perhaps a result of a free cross breeding between the two races.

However, like many other ancient civilizations, this civilization set by black Africans in the valley of the Nile also ran out of steam. In the course of time it was overruled by the Persians. Then came the Macedonians, the Romans, the Arabs and the Turks in that order. More recently, the French and the British occupied the territory. This prolonged colonization resulted in the snapping of the links between the delta and the original centers of the civilization back in Africa. These centers lost touch with not only the Egyptian art but with one another as well, surviving for some time as isolated pockets during which period they concentrated more on the social, political and moral organization of their societies rather than on material development. In the mean time, Europe benefited from the ancient Egyptian civilization via the Greeks and the Romans. Thus, while Africa lagged behind in technological progress, Europe marched ahead full steam. The great empires of Ghana, Mali, and life in West Africa, Ethiopia in the East, Zimbabwe in the South and Congo in South West are a testimony to the great civilization that the Africans built thousands of years ago.

Whether the hypothesis of Cheikh Anta Diop is wholly or partially true is really not so important for us for the time being. What matters is the fact that it establishes beyond any doubt that ancient Africa at that time was as much primitive or developed, as much barbaric or civilized as any other part of the world, including Europe. It, therefore, proves as false the opinion of the European powers that when they arrived in Africa they found its people to be primitive.

#### **Africa under Europe**

Africa's recent contact with Europe took place at the end of the fifteenth century when the Portuguese set up some rest and recuperation stations as also military garrisons on both the west coast of Atlantic and the east coast of the Indian ocean route to the East where they were headed, led by the legendry Vasco da Gama, for exploring the fabled riches of the Orient. Later, as the naval supremacy of France and Great Britain increased after the defeat of the Spanish Armada at the end of the sixteenth century, they, too, entered Africa to explore its interior for economic exploitation. By the end of the nineteenth century many more European powers had entered Africa. In fact, there were military clashes among them for proclaiming supremacy over various parts of Africa. It is this that led to the holding of an European conference in Berlin in 1885 to portion out Africa among them. With this, the process of colonization of Africa was initiated with common European consent and was soon completed.

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## **19.2 PRE-HISTORIC KENYA – LOCATION, ANTIQUITY**

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The Republic of Kenya – abode of legendry Gikuyu and Mumbi – is an ancient land, lying on the east-central coast of Africa, across the Equator and encompassing some of the most arid as well as most fertile parts of Africa within its geographical bounds of 5,82,644 square kilometers. Bordered in the north by Sudan and Ethiopia in the east by Somalia and the Indian Ocean, in the south by Tanzania and in the west by Uganda, Kenya is a former British colony which at one time was known as East Africa Protectorate.

Anthropologists would have us believe that man first appeared on the earth in these parts of Africa, as also in many other parts of the continent, about a million years ago. Once again, like in other parts of the world, the people in this region too passed through various stages of development.

The inhabitants of Kenya seems to have come in contact with traders from some of the civilized countries of that time, such as Egypt, Greece, Persia and India. In all probability, it is these traders who first introduced agriculture and domestication of animals to the people of this period.

## **Social and Political Structure in Pre-historic Kenya**

There were no classes in most Kenyan societies at that time. There were only different ethnic groups with varied styles of political and economic organizations. Because of a lack of means of communication, they lived in isolation from each other. The mode of production was subsistence-oriented and was based on a communal system of labour utilization which was either voluntary or obligatory or both. Each tribe was a distinctive unit, generally managed by the tribe-elders, as was the case with the Gikuyu, for instance. Land tenure was a complex affair. While land was not saleable, each adult had rights to its use that was controlled by the tribal authority. A member had temporary use on a piece of land, which ceased when he moved to another assigned area under the shifting cultivation system.

## **Modern Kenya – the First Colonization by Arabs and First Contacts with Europe – the Portuguese**

The first colonization of these people and of the coastal region began with the arrival of Arab Muslims in the eighth century, who came to propagate Islam but stayed on to trade in ivory, gold, timber, iron and black slaves.

In course of time, a number of independent city states – mostly ruled by Arabs came up all along the coast from Mogadishu to Kilwa. Most of the Arab influence was, however, confined to the coastal areas only and there is no evidence of a similar contact with the natives of the interior.

By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Portuguese who had by then become a major colonial power and who were looking for controlling the sources of ‘exotic’ products of the Orient for trade purposes, made their first penetration of the coast, in their search for gold and spices and began to expand their slave trade. In doing so, they drove the Arab rulers from the coastal areas of Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania, which they continued to occupy and exploit for the next 200 years.

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## **19.3 THE BRITISH**

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The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, saw more European powers, particularly the British, the Germans and the French becoming more interested in Africa in general and the East Coast in particular. A number of explorers and missionaries traveled into the interior and made contacts with the Africans.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European interests in the continent had reached competitive proportions. In a conference held in Berlin in 1884-85, in which Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Austro-Hungarian Empire, etc. participated, it was decided to ‘partition’ Africa. Germany and Britain, however, continued to clash over supremacy in East Africa. Eventually, it was agreed that Lake Victoria would form the boundary between their respective areas of influence. The territories lying north of the lake – Kenya and Uganda – came under the British control, while the territories lying south of the lake – Tanganyika – became the German domain. The British government, however, chose not to administer these areas directly.

### **East Africa Trading Company**

A trading company – The Imperial British East Africa Company – was founded in 1888 through the granting of a Royal Charter to Sir William Mackinnon, a shipping magnate. Besides, Kenya and Uganda, a ten-mile strip of the East Coast was obtained from the Sultan of Zanzibar on lease. The Company, it was claimed, had been ‘formed for the purposes of pushing forward the civilization of Africa’. The *modus operandi* of this colonization in the name of civilization was once again the same as in Asia: eventual political control in the guise of trade.

However, the Company soon found out that the trade, particularly in ivory, cost enormously on account of transportation. It was then decided to construct a railway right from Mombassa up to Lake Victoria. During the construction, which was being done with the help of labour force brought from India, the Company had to bear huge financial burdens. The Company was wound up. Its Charter was annulled in 1895.

### **East Africa Protectorate**

The East Africa Protectorate was proclaimed in 1895, with Lord Harding as its first Commissioner. By 1896, the British control over the area had stabilized, and the work on the railway was progressing smoothly.

Big game hunters and explorers passing through the region had been struck particularly by vast tracts of fertile land in the Rift Valley region. Among such travelers was one Captain Lugard who dreamt of large-scale agricultural farming and stock-raising.

The principal inhabitants of the region, which later came to be known as 'white highlands' were the Gikuyu who were primarily agriculturists.

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## **19.4 THE SETTLERS – THE LAND GRAB**

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With the completion of the railway in 1901, the idea of European settlement in the area was taken up in earnest so that the traffic derived from settlement would make the railway a profitable undertaking. This together with the transfer of the Eastern Province of Uganda where most of the highlands were situated, to the East Africa Protectorate in 1902, further strengthened the possibility of non-African settlement. Harry or Johnston, who was then the Special Commissioner for Uganda, proposed initially to develop the area 'as a white man's country'.

Reports of the fertility of the land sent out of the administration to South Africa attracted a number of Europeans and as per the available records, the first batch of settlers mainly from Great Britain and South Africa arrived in 1902. These settlers occupied large chunks of fertile land for both farming and trading. Through a number of ordinances, the government reserved the highlands exclusively for the white Europeans, excluding the native Africans and Indians. The principal sufferers were of course the Gikuyu, since it was they who primarily inhabited the area and who were dislocated more than once after their land had been 'alienated' and given away to the European settlers – for a song. As the land lust of the settlers increased, other tribes were deprived of their land as well. The Masai, the Nandis and the Kissis too suffered through removal to far-flung areas labeled as 'native reserves'. A series of land legislations – Land Regulations of the East Africa (1897), Indian Land Acquisition Act (1902) – provided the government with control of all land in Kenya and parts of Uganda for selling, granting lease or otherwise disposing of.

### **Forced labour**

Land grab was not the only problem brought about by the colonial policy of European settlement. The settlers wanted a constant supply of cheap or free labour to work on these farms and with the African reluctance to work for outsiders i.e. European farmers, they found it increasingly difficult to obtain cheap labour. The Africans' reluctance was due to the fact that their basic needs were provided by the subsistence economy and moreover, they did not want to work for the colonialists. In those cases where African settlements were part of European acquired lands, the Africans were declared squatters with permission to cultivate a small plot of land on the farm premises and to keep the members of their families as well as a few cattle.

Appalling working conditions and severe restrictions on both the physical movements of the squatters and also on the number of cattle they could keep and the kind of crops they could cultivate were definitely oppressive. Moreover, the wages were abysmally low. They were subjected to most cruel punishments on the flimsiest of excuses. In fact, their plight in many ways was worse than that of their brethren who had been sold as slaves in the Americas by the Arabs and the Europeans. The result was that as in other countries of Tropical Africa, labour force in Kenya was created by the 'method of extra economic coercion'.

In fact, the settlers, with the help of successive government legislations, seized more than 7.6 million acres of most fertile land. Yet, even close to the end of colonial period, only 18% of this land was cultivated while millions of Africans strived to eke out a living on highly congested reserves.

### **Native Reserves**

These steps together with prohibitive rates of poll and hut taxes led to massive migration of peasants in search of living. This led to further problems in the native reserves, from which most able-bodied males were absent. Earning money as wage labourers for paying personal taxes (it caused physical hardships to peasants who walked large distances, sometimes hundreds of miles for many weeks and sometimes months to gain employment) also stripped the African villages of its most efficient labour force, leaving behind mainly old men, women and children.

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## **19.5 FIRST PROTESTS – K.A., Y.K.A., K.C.A., HARRY THUKU**

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By now, the Africans were sufficiently alarmed about the settlers' conspiracy to annex their land permanently and they formed two Associations to defend their interests. The Kikuyu Association (K.A.) was formed in 1920 with the primary aim of defending Gikuyu land. It comprised mainly Gikuyu chiefs and headmen. A year later, more broad-based and more militant association – the Young Kikuyu Association (Y.K.A.) – was formed with Harry Thuku as its secretary. Thuku, a government telephone operator, launched his agitation against not only the policies of annexing Gikuyu land, the 'Northey circulars' on forced labour, but also against the policy of carrying of Kipande – a card bearing the finger-prints of the bearer – by all African male adults and the doubling of the hut and poll taxes from Rs. 5 to Rs. 10. Thuku received generous help from M.A. Desai, an Indian leader and journalist, in running his association. Although he started by enrolling only the Gikuyu, he soon extended its membership to other tribes as well. His arrest and subsequent deportation by the government led to a large demonstration in Nairobi in which over 20 Africans were killed by police firing. This act of the government triggered off the militant struggle by the Africans which led to the full scale national liberation movement and eventual independence of Kenya in 1963.

Thuku's Y.K.A. which had been banned after his arrest and subsequent deportation, reappeared in 1925 under the new name Kikuyu Central Association (K.C.A.). Its appearance had coincided with the transfer of authority among the Gikuyu from one age-group to another – an event which occurred once in about twenty years. The K.C.A. immediately demanded, among others, the Africans right to grow coffee, the appointment of a Gikuyu Paramount Chief, the publication of laws in Gikuyu language and the release of Harry Thuku. It also demanded direct representation by twelve Africans on the legislative council since the Europeans had neither true sympathy nor thorough contact with the people. They also expressed their fears about the security of title of their land after the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1915.

## Female Circumcision

In the meantime, yet another confrontation broke out, this time between the missionaries and the Africans. In 1929, The Church of Scotland condemned the tribal practice of female circumcision – a form of clitoridectomy – as ‘savage’ and barbarous. Female circumcision was a custom that was regarded by the Gikuyu as also many other tribes, as an essential element of their social structure. The issue was immediately taken up by K.C.A. and it held large meetings in the Gikuyu reserves, highlighting the condemnation as yet another attack on their way of life by the Europeans, since the missionaries threatened to debar from church those persons practicing female circumcision and polygamy and also those disallowing the children of such parents from obtaining education in missionary schools. Most schools, as we know, were at that time run by Christian missions. It, therefore, called the bluff of the missionaries of doing the wonderful job at least in educating the Africans. The Africans went to the extent of setting up their own African Church and Independence African Schools, both of which institutions were to play a crucial role in the Kenyan struggle for national independence. The controversy also provided an excellent opportunity to Jomo Kenyatta, the general secretary of the K.C.A. to increase the sphere of the influence of this organization as well as to project himself as a leader. He addressed big political meetings that helped the organization in enrolling new members and collecting money for the struggle.

## Joint Struggles by Africans and Indians

The joint fight by the Indians and Africans was brought about through contacts among the trade union leaders. The government tended to overlook the strength of the African Associations. The government decision in 1938 to destroy thousands of cattle heads belonging to the Wakamba provoked a mass protest by them and brought them in touch with the Gikuyu.

At the same time, the simmering discontent over appalling working conditions among the labour broke into a full scale strike. Makhan Singh, an Indian printing press worker, who had organized the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, and the K.C.A. played a stellar role in organizing this strike that led to the appointment of a Commission to enquire into the working conditions of the labour force in Kenya. The report revealed government neglect and a scandalous state of affairs. With the outbreak of the war, K.C.A. and other such organizations of the Kamba and Teita tribes were banned and their leaders arrested. The Indians and Europeans too suspended their political activities.

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## 19.6 THE EMERGENCE OF JOMO KENYATTA

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The Kikuyu African Union (K.A.U.), feeling frustrated, began to talk of a revolutionary struggle to free themselves from the colonial yoke. It was at this stage that Kenyatta returned to Kenya after his long stay in England and other countries of Europe and was accorded a hero's welcome.

Kenyatta found that the country was a fertile field for political activities because of the post-war discontent. The war-returnees had become aware of national liberation movements in Asia. As unemployment grew both in the cities and in the countryside, the cry of ‘Africa for Africans’ grew stronger. Overcrowding in the reserves and extensive soil erosion had made the Africans talk of getting back their ‘stolen lands’ from the Europeans. Kenyatta began to travel around the country and addressed large meetings. In June 1947, he was elected the President of the Kikuyu African Union (K.A.U.) and began to attack the government policies.

## **African Trade Union Congress – the First Demand for Total Independence**

African Trade Union Congress under the leadership of Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh also supported the struggle launched by Kenyatta in a big way. In fact, it was the ATUC, on May 1, 1950, that demanded for the first time in Kenya, total independence. Both Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were arrested for being office bearers of an 'illegal' labour organization. Although the ensuing strike failed finally, it further strengthened the increasing cooperation between the Africans and the Asians in Kenya. As frustration increased and as Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh were deported, the custom of oathing began in a big way across the whole country and a militant movement – Mau Mau – began to take shape which believed in inflicting damage on government machinery, among others, through violent means.

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## **19.7 BANNING OF MAU MAU – THE EMERGENCY**

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In 1950, the government banned the so-called Mau Mau movement. Although Kenyatta and other so-called moderates denounced the movement, it continued to gain strength through the active cooperation of the people at large. As subsequent events were to prove, proscribing it proved to be counterproductive for the British government that got bogged down by it more and more with each passing day. The Europeans started putting pressure on the government to arrest the Gikuyu leaders and declare a state of Emergency in order to check what they called the 'Mau Mau' activities and which according to them were both anti-Christian and anti-European. On October 20, 1952, the Governor, Sir Evelyn Baring declared a state of Emergency. Not only Jomo Kenyatta and eleven other top African leaders were arrested but killing and arrest of ordinary Kenyans began at an unprecedented scale. Over 90,000 Kenyans were detained and over 10,000 killed during the Emergency that lasted five years.

### **Lifting of the Emergency and the Constitution Conference in London**

Finally the Emergency was lifted in 1957 and the process of devolving more powers to the Africans began. A Constitutional Conference was called in London in 1960, wherein it was decided to give the Africans majority seats – 33 out of 65 – in the Legislative Council. The Africans would also have the largest number of ministers, viz. four against three Europeans and an Asian. The plan naturally irked the Europeans who dubbed it as a 'victory of Mau Mau' and attacked the British volte face. The fond hope of an Uhuru in not so distant a future gave a new fillip to the efforts of Africans. A new mass organization – Kenya African Nation Union (K.A.N.U.) was formed incorporating the member of the K.A.U. and Jomo Kenyatta was nominated as the President. Soon, however, there was a split and another party – Kenya African Democratic Union (K.A.D.U.) was formed with the aim of opposing K.A.N.U.

### **Uhuru – Kenyatta as the First Prime Minister**

In 1961, first national elections were held and K.A.N.U. dominated the K.A.D.U. and in June 1963, Kenyatta became the first Prime Minister. Finally, on December 12, 1963, Kenya gained its much awaited Uhuru.

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## **19.8 DRAMA IN KENYA – THE BEGINNINGS**

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Like in any other society, drama in Kenya too had its origin in man's interaction with nature. Like any other group of people, primitive people in Kenya, too, tried to overpower nature for sustaining themselves. Thus, they cleared jungles, planted and harvested crops, first with their hands and later with the help of some tools. These tools for them were no less than things endowed with magical powers and they expressed their gratefulness to them by worshipping them or performing certain rituals relating to them.



Sustaining life in the face of all kinds of difficulties and calamities was no less than a miracle and hence there were rituals and rites for various mysteries of life, too: birth, circumcision, initiation, marriage, death.

Again, nature was not just benign but cruel, too. There were diseases and epidemics, floods and droughts, devastation and death. So nature and gods needed to be propitiated. More ceremonies, rituals and rites started happening. It was believed that these could help convert a hostile nature to a friendly and kind one.

And then, there were man-made calamities, too. Battles and wars, thefts and robberies, wounding and killing took place. Once again, men turned to rituals and ceremonies to seek nature's assistance in combating the enemies.

Most of the rituals and rites, ceremonies and propitiations involved the community and were carried out in the open and in everyone's presence. A large number of them involved imitating or miming with the help of masks or without, pretending to be this or that. In other words drama was central to all these ceremonies and rituals. It was so with all human societies at that stage of evolution, including in pre-colonial Kenya. Thus drama came to be associated with what Ngugi calls 'the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community'. And it was enacted in 'empty spaces' where everyone could be present and participate, if required. Some of these dramatic activities could last days or weeks or even more. So specific periods of time were chosen so as not to disrupt the daily flow of life and everyday chores. However, some continued over fairly long periods of time. The Ituika ceremony, for instance, was held every twenty five years among the Gikuyu in Kenya. This coincided with the power change from one generation to another and the celebrations involving feasting, singing and dancing over a period of six months. New songs and dance forms as well as dramatic performances were created specifically for such occasions.

Thus we can see that drama in pre-colonial Kenya was not an isolated event. It was, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o puts it, 'an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities.'

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## 19.9 DRAMA UNDER COLONIALISM

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This tradition of drama in Kenya as enunciated above was destroyed during the period of colonialism under the British. Missionaries termed some of these rituals, rites and ceremonies as works of the devil and hence many performances were banned. For instance, the Ituika was banned in 1925. For other ceremonies, they made obtaining of a license compulsory. Again, 'empty spaces' were converted into community halls, school halls, and church buildings or even open prisons with barbed wires surrounding them, as was the case during the Emergency after the 'Mau Mau' movement.

The kind of plays that were encouraged to be staged were propagandist in nature, eulogizing the colonial administration. In the name of naivete of the people from the countryside, who could not handle the urban situation and mechanical devices, Kenyan people were presented as fools and their cultural practices ridiculed. Also, plays were produced in English that were based on English literary texts, thereby alienating the masses from dramatic activities. Besides the plays of Shakespeare presented in simplified versions, West End comedies and sugary musicals, as Ngugi calls them, were staged regularly in Kenyan National Theatre, a government establishment. The colonial regime also encouraged radio plays with Africans depicted as clowns.

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## 19.10 DRAMA AFTER INDEPENDENCE

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The situation did not change much after Kenya gained independence in 1963. Theatre continued to be confined to enclosed spaces like 'halls' and musicals like *Annie Get your Gun* or *Boeing* continued to be popular performances. Expatriate professionals continued to comprise both the production teams and the cast and very few if any Africans were involved in either production or performance of these.

However, a counter movement had started in schools and colleges during the last phase of colonialism where young students wrote scripts in Kswahili. Some of the popular productions included *Nakupenda Lakini* by Henri Kuria, *Maisha ni Nini* by Kimani Nyoike and *Atakiwa na Polisi* by B.M. Kurutu.

Immediately after independence, an alternative tradition, more nationalistic in character, came into existence. This included playwrights like Francis Imbuga, Kenneth Watene and Micere Mugo and directors like Seth Adagala, Tirus Gathwe and David Mulwa. Some of these plays were openly patriotic, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist in their message. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* scripted by Micere Mugo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the high point of such a trend, if not the tradition. The seventies also saw a movement to wrest the control of the Kenya National Theatre from the clutches of white expatriates and clamour for African Theatre grew stronger. A debate ensued whether a theatre was only a building or a location or it had something to do with the kind of plays that were staged there. Schools Drama Festival now came to be dominated by Africans and instead of being located at the Kenyan National Theatre in Nairobi, it became a touring festival. Kiswahili replaced English as the language of the plays. Thus the seventies saw Kenyan theatre undergoing major changes with drama trying to break from its colonial confinement.

### **Kamirithu Community and Educational Cultural Centre**

One such attempt was the setting up of the Kamiriithu Community and Education Cultural Centre – a four acre plot with mud-barracked four rooms that were falling apart and the rest only grass. The peasants and workers from the neighbourhood built the stage and a semi-circular bamboo wall behind to separate it from rooms that served both as a store and changing rooms. With no roof over it, it was an open air theatre, much in the tradition of empty spaces that we have spoken about above. Over 10,000 people could be accommodated to watch performances. When Miri and Ngugi wa Thiong'o collaborated to script a play, they decided to do it in Gikuyu rather than in English, a language in which Ngugi wa Thiong'o had done all his earlier writings. The result was a play called *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will Marry when I want*) that resulted in what Ngugi himself has called an 'epistemological break' with his past, particularly in the area of theatre.

The play depicted the proletarianisation of the peasantry in a neo-colonial society through the family of a poor peasant – Kiguunda – who owns a small piece of land that sustains him and the family but is deprived of the same by a multi-national consortium with the help of comprador landlords and businessmen.

The play was path – breaking in more than one ways. It asked several questions – about national freedom, its objectives, people's perception of post-colonial societies and the role of the leadership in meeting people's aspirations. At the level of language while it was Gikuyu, it had been revised after repeated consultations with people at large through practice performances. Many aspects of the pre-colonial dramatic form were brought into the script – song, dance and mime. But what was most crucial about the play was its depiction of history that had been done, once again, after extensive consultation with the community. And this is what the authorities

found to be most unpalatable and hence the play was banned on November 16, 1977. Ngugi was arrested and spent a most horrible year in jail without any charges. A second attempt in 1982 to stage another play with a similar theme – Maitu Njugira (Mother Sing for me) by Ngugi wa Thiong’o was again outlawed. And this time, the whole building itself was razed to the ground.

As stated above, song, dance and mime were an integral part of the African drama in pre-colonial times and playwrights brought it back as an integral part of theatre after independence for the simple reasons that it continued to be an integral part of their lives – at birth, circumcision, marriage, funerals and many other ceremonies. Thus plays like *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* have a number of songs, dances and mime as part of the structure and movement in the plays. However, what gives the form of these plays tautness and special character is the content, involving man’s interaction with nature through history. But these plays also focus on correcting distortions of history introduced by the colonizing forces. And one of the ways of making such corrections was to introduce African languages rather than English as the medium of expression in plays since it is through language that many such distortions are slipped into the portrayal of history. Thus African drama with its focus on dance, song and mime but above all with its use of African languages has gained some of its pre-colonial significance and glory.

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## 19.11 LET US SUM UP

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This unit enables us to trace the history of Africa since the pre-historic times. It gives a detailed history of Kenya since the pre-historic times to the situation at the point of its Uhuru in December 1963. The various struggles waged by the Africans including the Mau Mau Struggle is also discussed briefly. This unit also deals with the tradition of Drama in Kenya.

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## 19.12 EXERCISE

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1. Why Africa is called ‘the dark continent’?
2. Write a short note on the importance of Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya’s modern history.
3. Write a short note on the dramatic tradition in Kenya.