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MPhil(R) thesis

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**Playwriting and Postcolonialism: identifying the key factors in the development and  
diminution of playwriting in Ghana 1916 - 2007.**

**Stephen Collins  
BA (hons)**

**Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of MPhil**

**School of Culture and Creative Arts  
College of Arts  
University of Glasgow**

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this thesis is playwriting in Ghana from the colonial era to the in 2007 and the Ghana@50 celebrations which marked fifty years of independence from Britain. Through the analysis of key playtexts produced in this period, which I use as a collective document of Ghana's cultural history, I seek to uncover the major factors that contributed to the flourishing of playwriting directly post independence and its recent dramatic diminution. Over this time period only a few dozen Ghanaian plays were published and of those only a handful have become known to an international audience. However, collectively they document an intricate relationship between politics and culture within a colonial and then postcolonial society. The story that is revealed by the analysis of that relationship unveils a fascinating trajectory in the development of playwriting in Ghana, and highlights a complex, often over-lapping, interplay between theatre and politics.

For this research I have drawn significantly on original interviews with artists and academics. The importance of Ghana as a choice of study lies both in analysing why the current situation exists and how, through that analysis, Ghana's postcolonial experience speaks to, and questions, dominant trends in postcolonial theory. Through an analysis of the work of colonial and postcolonial playwrights I interrogate the claim of the politician and playwright Mohammed ben-Abdallah that his plays fit within Fanon's 'third phase' of postcolonial artistic expression, and suggest that Ghana's actual position in terms of postcolonial theory (and the effect of the postcolonial experience on playwrights) is far more nuanced.

The findings of this research point towards the historic success of playwriting in Ghana being contingent upon the political promotion of a unitary sense of national identity, a situation that occurred both directly post-independence and in the 1980s after a series of military coups. Playwrights' synchronicity with politics during these periods (compounded by the establishment of institutions and the publishing of play texts as icons of Ghanaian culture) enabled political agendas to shape and influence the creative and performative codes of Ghanaian theatre. This led to the promotion of a strict model of legitimating criteria that simultaneously delegitimised alternative or pluralist voices. I argue that this process problematised playwriting and ultimately contributed to a situation where Ghana boasts strong theatrical institutions, but very few new published plays.

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**Authors declaration**

" I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name \_\_\_\_\_ "

## Introduction

In this thesis I will analyse the development of playwriting in Ghana from colonialism to the Ghana@50 celebrations in 2007, which marked fifty years of independence from Britain.<sup>1</sup> Over this time period only a few dozen Ghanaian plays were published and of those only a handful have become known to an international audience. However, the focus of this thesis is not the individual works but the fact that collectively they document an intricate relationship between politics and culture within a colonial and then postcolonial society. The story that is revealed by the analysis of that relationship unveils a fascinating trajectory in the development of playwriting in Ghana, and highlights a complex, often over-lapping, interplay between theatre and politics.

Throughout this thesis I analyse how the play texts, the playwriting process and national cultural policy describe specific socio-political moments. I then investigate how those moments articulate the ways in which contemporary politics shaped and influenced the development of a codified Ghanaian theatrical aesthetic. I argue that political agendas shaped the creation and performance style of Ghanaian theatre, its theatrical infrastructure and even the type of spaces in which it was performed. The result of the relationship between theatre and politics is that various political administrations (most notably the Kwame Nkrumah government of the 1960s and the J.J. Rawlings government of the 1980s and 1990s) invested in politically important icons, designed to communicate a robust and unitary culture, rather than developing a sustainable culture of playwriting in Ghana.<sup>2</sup>

This research is informed by my experiences of living and working in Ghana at various points over the past decade. I first travelled to Ghana in 2000 and then returned in 2004 to undertake research on the National Theatre of Ghana for my undergraduate dissertation. Through that research I met Dr Awo Asiedu, Head of the School of Performing Arts at the University of Legon, and began a fledgling investigation of the history and politics of Ghanaian theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> For a map of Ghana please see Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> For a full list of Ghana's post-independence leaders and their political affiliation please see Appendix B.

In 2007, prior to being Assistant Director for the UK premier of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* with Border Crossings and the National Theatre of Ghana, I returned to Ghana to meet the cast with whom we would be working: Dzifa Glikpoe, Agnes Dapaah, and the great Concert Party actor Ama Buabeng. Whilst in Ghana I was also able to work with the NGO Theatre for a Change (TfaC) which engages in Theatre for Development in Ghana and Malawi.

Many of the workshop facilitators working for TfaC were graduates of the School of Performing Arts and several had graduated from the playwriting specialism. Over the course of the following months we discussed the state of Ghanaian theatre and an apparent lack of contemporary playwrights. My initial misconception was that it was simply no longer fashionable in Ghana to write plays or make theatre. However, they explained that all playwriting students write a full length play as part of their assessment but that these plays are not performed, rather they are marked and placed in the library with the previous years' work. Furthermore, there are no opportunities at industry level for new writers to showcase their work. I was fortunate enough to read a great deal of plays from current students and recent graduates, some of which, particularly those written by Nii Quartey, Murtala Mohammed and Evelyn Eduku, were compelling pieces of theatre.

The plays seemed doubly important within the context of Ghanaian theatre because they spoke to the concerns of 21st Century Ghanaians and were so different from the work of well known Ghanaian playwrights, such as Efuia Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Mohammed ben-Abdallah, whose work I analyse throughout this thesis. However, the opportunities for production and publication of new plays in Ghana today is lower than at any point since independence and no Ghanaian play written this century has been published. Therefore, a generation of modern African voices are going unheard. It is this disconnect -- the reality that new plays of quality are regularly being written by Ghanaians within a robust and long standing training institution, but that none are being produced and no new playwrights are coming through -- that I investigate through this thesis. The aim of this thesis is, therefore, not to reconsider Ghanaian theatre history, but rather to examine why the rich legacy of post-independence Ghanaian theatre has not led to a proliferation, or even a continuation, of new plays and new playwrights adding to the Ghanaian theatre canon.



The scope of this study is, I believe, unique in Ghanaian theatrical discourse. As a result I have drawn significantly on original interviews with artists and academics undertaken as part of my research. These accounts offer a unique insight into the development of Ghanaian theatre. However, the necessity for such an investigation also highlights a lack of existing secondary material covering the period from the 1980s to the contemporary moment.

The general trend towards a decline in playwriting and critical discourse in Ghana are in marked contrast to the situation directly after independence. In the years following full independence in 1957, playwriting suddenly flourished as a form through writers such as Efua Sutherland and Joe de Graft. This development was actively encouraged by a wider political agenda that placed specific significance on theatre as a means of defining and communicating a unitary sense of nation. In 1961, at the inaugural performance of Sutherland's Ghana Drama Studio, Kwame Nkrumah, first President of Ghana, personally attended and addressed the audience. Robert July notes that his speech emphasised:

the desire that a network of theaters be established throughout the land, the hope for a renaissance of the arts in Africa [and] most of all, Nkrumah's recurrent dream of pan-African unity, aided in this instance by the universal language of art.<sup>3</sup>

Nkrumah clearly saw theatre as a means of promoting his own political agenda and funded it accordingly. However, productivity diminished during the upheavals of the military coups of the 1970s. Theatre re-emerged during the Rawlings government of the 1980s and 1990s but since that time playwriting in Ghana has suffered another long period of decline.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of Ghana as a choice of study lies both in analysing why the current situation exists and how, through that analysis, Ghana's postcolonial experience speaks to dominant trends in postcolonial theory. By analysing the development of Ghanaian playwriting with reference to postcolonial theory, I argue that the experience of Ghana as a postcolonial nation is under-represented in postcolonial discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 74.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of my writing Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *The Prison Graduates*, winner of the 2010 BBC World Service competition for radio plays is due to be self published in China. Mr Mawugbe was, until his recent death, the Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Ghana. The play was originally written in 2002 under the title APTS (Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome).

Although the experience of Ghanaian playwrights, particularly colonial era playwrights, within the wider context of British West Africa is not unique, in 1957 Ghana became the first sub-Saharan country to gain independence. Thus, Ghanaian independence set the precedent for other African countries as they struggled to gain independence from colonial rule. As Ngugi suggests, ‘all the continents’ nationalist roads of the fifties led to Nkrumah’s Ghana’.<sup>5</sup> I argue in the following chapters that it was Nkrumah’s response to a lack of coherent cultural insurgency in the Gold Coast that laid the foundations for Ghana becoming ‘the revolutionary Mecca of the entire anti-colonial movement in Africa’.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, I suggest that this status on the continent came at the cost of those colonial era writers who had used playwriting to express a multiplicity of jostling and contradictory accounts of the colonial experience.

To consider the experience of playwrights within the context of colonial British West Africa further, Janet Beik states that prior to Ghanaian independence in 1957 only ‘three long and three short plays [were] published in English’ in the whole of British Africa.<sup>7</sup> Though this figure is possibly misleading in terms of the totality of theatrical endeavor, as it does not take into account plays that were performed but not published and by no means allows for Ngugi’s suggestion that pre-colonial theatre in Africa was ‘was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those tether activities’,<sup>8</sup> it highlights both how few plays are extant from that time and introduces the key concept of how theatre was legitimated under the colonial system. As an example of this, in 1934 J.A. Winterbottom wrote in his book *Experimental Drama in the Gold Coast*, ‘there is no indigenous drama, in the sense in which a European understands drama, in the Gold Coast’. Despite the fact that two full length plays had been written in the Gold Coast by 1934 (Kobina Sekyi’s *The Blinkards* (1916) and J.B. Danquah’s *The Third Woman* (1934), both of which I analyse in the following chapter), the colonial structure had ignored them. The issue of legitimisation continued to be a contentious issue in Ghanaian theatre, and is discussed at length throughout this thesis.

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<sup>5</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Writing Against Neo-Colonialism”, *African Literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds., Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007) 158.

<sup>6</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Writing Against Neo-Colonialism”, *African Literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds., Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007) 157.

<sup>7</sup>Janet Beik, *Hausa Theatre in Niger: A Contemporary Oral Art* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987) 20.

<sup>8</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987) 37.

Coupled with the issue of legitimisation of playwriting in the colonial structure, is the issue of the influence of Christian missions in the areas of education, publication and dissemination of thought in the region (and their inconsistent support of what they valued and promoted). For example, Stephanie Newell's examination of playwriting in colonial British West Africa suggests that in the Gold Coast there were 'a trickle of printed vernacular plays' but that by contrast in Nigeria 'the missionary presses clamoured for vernacular texts above all else'.<sup>9</sup> However, these texts were not insurgent or seditious but linked to the aims of the missions who 'dominated literary output' across the region. In the Gold Coast, Newell suggests, a lack of published texts was 'intimately connected with the ownership and control of publishing facilities'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, even if, hypothetically, seditious or anti-imperialist plays were being written, they would not have found a publisher in British West Africa. This was not just the case with theatre but with every aspect of colonial life. Nkrumah, writing in 1963, spoke to this situation when he said that in colonial Ghana 'The mission bookshops more or less controlled the importation and distribution of [...] books'. The result of this cultural control was that:

Our text-books were English text-books telling us about English history, English geography, English ways of living, English customs, English ideas, English weather. Many of these manuals had not been altered since 1895.<sup>11</sup>

However, within the context of this thesis, the significance of interrogating the position of Ghanaian playwriting within dominant postcolonial discourse is informed by an interview conducted by James Gibbs and Anastasia Agbenyega with the Ghanaian playwright and politician Mohammed ben-Abdallah in the 1990s. In this interview, ben-Abdallah suggests that his plays fit within Frantz Fanon's 'third phase', in which 'the African artist liberates himself or herself utterly from [...] colonial enslavement'.<sup>12</sup> Ben-Abdallah was a prolific playwright during the 1970s and 1980s and is a significant figure in the history of Ghanaian theatre. By placing his work, and by inference Ghanaian playwriting as a whole, within the framework of postcolonial

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<sup>9</sup>Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: how to play the game of life* (Manchester University Press, 2002) 76.

<sup>10</sup>Stephanie Newell, *Literary Culture in Colonial Ghana: how to play the game of life* (Manchester University Press, 2002) 76.

<sup>11</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1963) 49.

<sup>12</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000) 64.

theory, ben-Abdallah established a revisionist, straight forward reading of Ghana's postcolonial cultural experience that made claims about the role of plays and playwrights within that experience. However, the reality was very different. As Fanon famously asserts, 'to fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation',<sup>13</sup> however in chapter one I will demonstrate how playwrights in the colonial era explored multiple concepts of national culture divorced from a concept of national liberation. So why ben-Abdallah saw his plays in this way, and where Ghana is actually situated in terms of postcolonial theory, forms a key strand of this thesis.

The questions, therefore, that this thesis will address are: what are the major factors that have contributed to the decline in Ghanaian theatre from independence to the present day? To what extent are the colonial and postcolonial theatres connected, and does this offer clues as to the flourishing and diminution of Ghanaian playwriting? And finally, does the analysis of Ghanaian theatre within the framework of postcolonial theory suggest the need for a renegotiation or reinterpretation of the place of playwriting within small postcolonial nations?

My object of study are published play texts. However, in Ghana other forms of dramatic expression exist that I will mention briefly here in order to define the place of play texts within the wider cultural output. Today in Ghana there exists a rich heritage of annual festivals and specific communal rituals that date from pre-colonialism. James Gibbs describes these as 'annual community gatherings [which] incorporate specific elements of drama'.<sup>14</sup> These gatherings, such as festivals, funerals and weddings, contain unique performative codes and fulfill specific cultural functions which throughout the colonial era stood distinct from British culture.

Further to this, the populist concert party form, in which small troupes perform skits, topical sketches and songs, flourished throughout the twentieth century in Ghana. Within the scope of Ghanaian cultural studies there is a growing body of research that focusses on the concert party. In her book *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, Catherine Cole states that the concert party started 'as British imperial cultural propaganda honoring Empire Day [May 24th]',<sup>15</sup> and was 'popular,

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<sup>13</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 31.

<sup>14</sup> James Gibbs "Ghana" *A History of Theatre in Africa* ed. Martin Banham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 159.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Cole *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 3.

modern, commercial, [and] traveling'.<sup>16</sup> From the 1920s 'African actors trekked the length and breadth of the British colony [the Gold Coast] performing comic variety shows'.<sup>17</sup> The concert party borrowed heavily from popular western forms, American humour, music and drama brought by African American sailors, and silent films showing stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Al Jolson. Though it too has diminished significantly in recent years, the concert party retains its performative style and its topicality.

Though the history and development of the concert party often overlaps with that of playwriting, it inhabits a distinct space from that of literary theatre in Ghanaian culture.<sup>18</sup> The key feature that distinguishes playwriting from the concert party (and what made it so appealing to Nkrumah) is the potential permanence of the play text, as opposed to the ephemerality of the performance. Whereas the concert party was designed to be immediate and transitory, playwriting provided a permanent, published product that could be disseminated to a national and global audience. For Nkrumah, published play texts were both a product of a robust culture and an icon of it.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha suggests that 'It is the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of enunciation'.<sup>19</sup> Using the playtexts as expressions of significant cultural moments of enunciation enables me to identify significant trends in the development of Ghanaian theatre at specific moments, and establishes an understanding of the changing function of playwriting through very different political eras. To that end, this thesis is structured chronologically in order to effectively analyse the development of playwriting in Ghana during the course of its turbulent political history. Throughout, I identify key practitioners in Ghanaian theatre, and place their work within the contemporary socio-political context. In this way I identify why certain periods were more productive than others, and how and why the unique aesthetic of Ghanaian theatre was established. This thesis mentions key texts and practitioners but is not an exhaustive list of all

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<sup>16</sup> Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard *West African Popular Theatre* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997) 2.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Cole *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 1.

<sup>18</sup> Performers often switched codes and the concert party troupe, the Workers Brigade Party, played an intrinsic part in the codification of Ghanaian theatre under the directorship of Felix Morrisseau-Leroy, who I mention further in chapter three.

<sup>19</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 34-35.

Ghanaian plays or theatre artists.<sup>20</sup> James Gibbs has written extensively on Ghanaian theatre and his *Nkyin-kyin* is an excellent resource.<sup>21</sup>

Much of the early part of this thesis is bound up with the geo-political and geo-historical development of the Gold Coast that informs the cultural and political life of present day Ghana. Here, I give a sense of that development that speaks to the complex cultural, linguistic and territorial picture that influenced the ideologies of the cultural and political leaders in the early years of independence. In chapters one and two I analyse this situation further and argue that the patchwork of ethnicities that emerged from colonialism was a major reason for Nkrumah's patronage of playwriting. In 1472 the Portuguese Prince, Henry the Navigator, sent an expedition to find a sea route that bypassed the Arab dominated trans-Saharan gold trade. His explorers landed at a place they named El Mina, the mine. In 1482 they built the first fortified trading post, which became Elmina castle which still stands today.<sup>22</sup> In 1660 the British started trading interests in Ghana through the Company of Royal Adventurers, which was established by James Stewart, Duke of York. This was succeeded by the African Company of Merchants, which was abolished by the Crown in 1821 as the slave trade was suppressed and all privately held lands were taken over by the British government. The Gold Coast became an official Protectorate of Britain in 1874 after the Dutch and Danish signed over their interests and land. Still, at this time the Gold Coast colony was a small strip of coastal land in which the fort cities of Accra, Cape Coast and Sekondi controlled trade from the interior to the rest of the world. Following a series of wars with the Ashanti to the North, the Ashanti Region and Northern Regions were annexed by Britain in 1901. The only subsequent territorial change was the inclusion of British Togoland in 1956.<sup>23</sup> At independence in 1957 over sixty separate languages were spoken in Ghana, and this remains the case today.

From 1700-1877, Cape Coast was the administrative centre of British colony of the Gold Coast and is therefore the city with the longest history of missionary education and interaction between

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<sup>20</sup> For a list of plays analysed in this thesis see appendix 3.

<sup>21</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000)

<sup>22</sup> The name Elmina derives from the Portuguese La Costa d'El Mina d'Or, The Coast of the Gold Mines, which subsequently became anglicised to the Gold Coast.

<sup>23</sup> Britain ruled Togoland on a League of Nations mandate, ratified at the Treaty of Versailles, after Britain and France had seized German Togo in 1914. Togo remained a French colony until its independence in 1960.

British and indigenous cultures. As Gibbs states, ‘During the first part of the twentieth century, Cape Coast became a major centre for formal, Western education’.<sup>24</sup> It was here, in the ‘cradle of Gold Coast nationalism’,<sup>25</sup> that Kobina Sekyi wrote the first Ghanaian play, *The Blinkards* (1916) and Efua Sutherland (1924-1996) was born and educated by Christian missionaries. In 1877 the capital moved East along the coast to Accra and it was here that Mabel Dove wrote her commentaries on colonial life. In the mid and latter part of the twentieth century Accra grew into a sprawling modern African metropolis and became the centre for theatrical life. Sutherland founded the Ghana Drama Studio on the corner of Liberia Road and Independence Avenue in the heart of Accra (1960), a site that is now occupied by the National Theatre of Ghana. The University of Ghana, home to the Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio and School of Performing Arts, is situated about 13km North of Accra.

In chapter one I focus on playwrights in the colonial period and explore the ways these writers engaged with the process of playwriting and how the plays that they produced highlight the role of playwriting in the decolonising process in the Gold Coast. Nicholas Dirks states that ‘cultural forms became fundamental to the development of resistance against colonialism, most notably in nationalist movements that used Western notions of national integrity and self determination to justify claims for independence’.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Ngugi wa Thiong’o suggests that African literature produced ‘in the post-war world of national democratic revolutionary and anti-colonial liberation in [...] Ghana and Nigeria [...] was part of the great anti-colonial and anti-imperialist upheaval’.<sup>27</sup> However, the assumption that playwrights at this time were engaged in an anti-colonial resistance movement was highly complex, as was Dirks’ notion of national integrity.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> James Gibbs, ‘Efua Sutherland: The Mother of Ghanaian Theatre’, *Plays and Playwriting*

<sup>25</sup> Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks “Introduction: Colonialism and Culture” *Colonialism and Culture* ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Michigan: University of Michigan press, 1994) 4.

<sup>27</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “The Language of African Literature”, *African Literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds., Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007) 297.

<sup>28</sup>The lack of literary insurgency in the Gold Coast addressed in chapter one was evident throughout British Africa during the colonial period and is underlined by Michael Etherton in his essay ‘Plays about colonialism and the struggle for independence’ in which he undertakes an analysis of several plays from across anglophone Africa. Of the plays that fit his description all were written after independence and he is unable to cite a single example of genuinely insurgent theatre. However, Etherton does suggest that post-independence playwrights such as Kabwe Kasoma in Zambia and Ebrahim Hussein in Tanzania were ‘committed to creating local audiences for a theatre which is part of the process of national development’, an analysis which is strikingly resonant with the pioneering work of Efua Sutherland post Ghanaian independence. Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1982).

This complexity had a profound effect on the role of theatre in post-independence Ghana and Nkrumah's cultural policy which was motivated by the fact that the colonial era playwrights trained in the colonial schools and universities occupied such a culturally liminal space.<sup>29</sup>

In chapter two I trace the development of Efua Sutherland as a playwright and director and analyse how Nkrumah's political agenda enabled her work and initiated distinct trends in Ghanaian theatre. Through an analysis of her early work I explore how Sutherland, inspired by the changing political landscape and her 'determination to reach the ordinary person',<sup>30</sup> radically altered the place of literary theatre within Ghanaian culture. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi suggests that early postcolonial writers, what he terms 'the petit bourgeoisie', worked to create 'a common literary frame of references, which it otherwise lacked in its uneasy roots in the culture of the peasantry'.<sup>31</sup> It was the identification by Sutherland and Nkrumah that these roots were so uneasy that began a period of intense creativity for Sutherland in which she, as Gibbs notes:

stimulated the development of a writers' group, encouraged local publishing, created a literary journal, helped establish the study of African performance traditions at University level, and was the moving force behind a professional theatre group'.<sup>32</sup>

Though this thesis undertakes a critical analysis of the diminution of Ghanaian playwriting, Sutherland's role in its development cannot be over stated. To that end, I will here outline some of her major achievements. In 1959 Sutherland established the Experimental Players who rehearsed in a Sea Scout's hut on the Accra beach. In 1960, with financial help from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ghanaian government she took a radical step by designing and

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<sup>29</sup>Gender and the role of women in the development of Ghanaian theatre is a fascinating area of further study. Anne McClintock asserts that in postcolonial literature women are presented as the 'authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity'. However, both the depiction of women and the creative role of women in theatre in Ghana runs counter to expectations. This is particularly highlighted by the depiction of women in colonial era plays, and the role of women in the development of theatre, particularly Mabel Dove during the colonial era and Efua Sutherland after independence. Though this thesis does not focus in depth in on the subject of gender (though I do return to it briefly in the following chapter) it is interesting that women are not commonly depicted in Ghanaian theatre as atavistic or representative of nation. See Stephanie Newell and Esi Sutherland-Addy.

<sup>30</sup>Anthony Graham-White "Drama" *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 2*, eds. Albert S. Gerard and Gyorgy M. Vajda (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986) 812

<sup>31</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature", *African Literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds., Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007) 297.

<sup>32</sup>James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xx



building the Ghana Drama Studio. Sutherland's theatre, as Ngugi suggests, 'drew its stamina and even its form from the peasantry'<sup>33</sup> and key to Sutherland's cultural politics was a desire to reconnect with the 'peasantry' as both an inspiration for her work and an audience for it. She quickly began to explore and formalise the popular 'folk theatre' style that was so important in the development of Ghanaian theatre. As Gibbs notes:

In 1959 the Ghana Drama Studio Players 'put on an anansegoro, or 'spider play', in Akropong. The performance, for which a text was meticulously rehearsed and a set constructed, incorporated formalized exchange between a storyteller and the (paying) 'audience', and a songs (mboguo) which were performed by the cast and by members of the audience. The experiment showed Sutherland beginning to realize her dream of bringing together indigenous traditions, particularly those linked with Ananse stories, and relevant imported conventions.<sup>34</sup>

Within a few years Sutherland had instigated Ghana's greatest period of theatrical productivity in its history. As Gibbs notes by 1962 'the theatre in Ghana could be said to be flourishing'.<sup>35</sup> In 1963 the Drama Studio became part of the University of Ghana and Sutherland took on a role of Researcher in the newly formed School of Performing Arts.

In chapter two I argue that Ghana's recent colonial experience led Nkrumah and Sutherland to establish a theatrical form designed to construct a common frame of cultural reference that could foster a pan-Ghanaian sense of nation. This began two major trends in Ghanaian theatre: that of building symbolic edifices, such as the Ghana Drama Studio and the National Theatre, as icons of cultural robustness, and the codification of the creative and aesthetic modes of Ghanaian theatre.

The buildings in Ghanaian theatre have taken on their own political significance, and I will briefly describe the key buildings here before going on to analyse their political dimension in chapters two and four. The Ghana Drama Studio, built in the centre of Accra, was 'a courtyard theatre which drew in concept upon traditional [African] performance areas at a time, 1960,

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<sup>33</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature", *African Literature: an anthology of criticism and theory*, eds., Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007) 297.

<sup>34</sup>James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xx

<sup>35</sup>James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xx

when African theatre buildings were usually modeled upon European theatres'.<sup>36</sup> It had a capacity of approximately five hundred seats and the audience would sit on three sides of an octagonal playing area. The Drama Studio was home to *Kusum Agroma*, the resident company who would perform both at the Drama Studio and 'go out to tour schools and colleges with plays in English and the vernacular'.<sup>37</sup> As Gibbs notes, after an agreement signed with the Chinese government in 1985, 'the Drama Studio was razed and 'rebuilt' on the campus at Legon [University of Ghana]'.<sup>38</sup> The newly named Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio, with a capacity of four hundred, became the University theatre. With a resident audience of students and a thriving School of Performing Arts, it has remained popular ever since. In 2009, during my research trip, a production was staged at least every month in term time by various student companies. These productions ranged from Ghanaian and Nigerian classics to adaptations of Jeffry Archer novels. That season, only John Agyeman's *Asanteman* was a new, untested play. Performances generally ran over three nights and were well attended by a mainly student audience.

The National Theatre of Ghana was built by the Chinese on the site of the Ghana Drama Studio in the centre of Accra. Unlike the Drama Studio the auditorium of the National Theatre seats one thousand, four hundred and ninety-two people and, as Gibbs observes, 'The facilities are dominated by a vast proscenium stage with a huge auditorium [...] The design of the whole building requires huge expenditure on air-conditioning - a cost that has made the hiring the hall prohibitively expensive'.<sup>39</sup>

The National Theatre's resident theatre company, *Abibigromma*, was originally made up of members of the *Abibigromma* company formed by ben-Abdallah at the University of Ghana in 1982. The campus based company were invited by the government to take up residence at the National Theatre in 1991 and though most agreed, some did not, preferring to stay at the university. As a result two *Abibigrommas* now exist. Currently the National Theatre's

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<sup>36</sup> Anthony Graham-White "Drama" *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 2*, eds. Albert S. Gerard and Gyorgy M. Vajda (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986) 812

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Graham-White "Drama" *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 2*, eds. Albert S. Gerard and Gyorgy M. Vajda (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986) 812

<sup>38</sup> James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xxii

<sup>39</sup> James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xxii

*Abibigromma* have a permanent company of twelve and is run by the actor and director Dzifa Glikpoe with whom I undertook extensive interviews for this research.

Capturing an audience for the National Theatre has been a key issue since the theatre opened its doors in 1991. In an interview for this research Glikpoe, who was a founding member of both *Abibigrommas*, describes the methods the company initially adopted:

When we came here at first, we wanted people to know about *Abibigromma*, so lunch break we went out to the offices. We would go to Bank of Ghana [...] we would go to their canteen, play and dance, do all sorts. Tomorrow we go elsewhere, we go elsewhere, we go *elsewhere*, just to build our audiences so people were coming here. Then it wasn't difficult to buy air time, shoot a clip and advertise your shows. It wasn't difficult, we were doing it. Now we don't have money for that [...] so it became very difficult. When we were at Legon we didn't have a problem with publicity, we had a captive audience there. All you have to do is write something in front of their hall with chalk [...] Here you need to do a lot of publicity work [...] our transport system is not what you have in Europe, you finish a performance here at night, how do people get home? It's difficult.<sup>40</sup>

The result is that very few performances are now staged at the National Theatre and the facilities are more often used for filming beauty pageants or as a venue for conferences. In 2009 there were no theatre performances in the month that I was in Ghana researching. Indeed in 2008 *Abibigromma*'s production of Sutherland's *Edufa*, directed by Glikpoe, played at Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio at the University of Ghana, rather than at the National Theatre in order to guarantee an audience. The current situation of the National Theatre and the reasons behind it are described in greater detail in chapters four and five.

In chapter three I analyse how the playwrights and institutions such as the Drama Studio, established during Nkrumah's rule, developed under a series of short lived military and civilian regimes from 1966-1981. In this chapter I undertake a textual analysis of Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) and Mohammed ben-Abdallah's *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* (1982). As Sutherland's final major play *The Marriage of Anansewa* contains all the elements of her *Anansegoro* developed throughout the 1960s, and fulfils Nkrumah's vision for Ghanaian

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<sup>40</sup> Dzifa Glikpoe interview. Conducted 28/9/09

theatre.<sup>41</sup> *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* demonstrates how the next generation of playwrights adopted and developed *Anansegoro* within very different political circumstances. During the analysis of these two plays I engage with Frederick Jameson's theory of third-world literature as national allegory. I argue that the most seminal text in Ghanaian theatre, Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, as a moment of enunciation, cannot be read as national allegory in a political sense, as it speaks far more to the Nkrumah era. Whereas, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* can be read as national allegory, as the performative and thematic choices speak directly to the political situation in which it was written. The analysis of these texts demonstrates Ghana's continuing atypical trajectory as a postcolonial nation and therefore enables a clearer understanding of the developing role of plays and playwrights in postcolonial Ghana.

In chapter four I examine how the forms of theatrical creation and presentation defined in the Nkrumah era, and reinforced by ben-Abdallah, had successfully become a cypher for a pan-national culture by the late 1980s. As a result, when President J.J. Rawlings followed a similar cultural policy to Nkrumah, born from a need to unify the country after a decade of military coups, the modes of Ghanaian theatre established in the 1960s re-emerged. This included ben-Abdallah's development of *Anansegoro* into his own *Abibigoro*,<sup>42</sup> which firmly established the performative codes of Ghanaian theatre, and the replacement of the Ghana Drama Studio with the National Theatre of Ghana. Thus, rather than establishing an alternative, diverse theatrical landscape, the Rawlings era reinforced the role and modes of theatre within Ghanaian culture and continued to deligitimise alternative or insurgent voices. This affirmation of the political worth of theatre in Ghana contributed to the establishment of the 1985 Copyright Act which commodified folk culture and restricted its use in the creation of new works. The reinforcement of unitary creative and aesthetic modes, contingent on political sponsorship, and compounded by the Copyright Act, were key factors in the subsequent decline of Ghanaian theatre after the restoration of democracy in the 1990s.

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<sup>41</sup> *Anansegoro* was developed by the playwright Efua Sutherland in the decades following independence and mixes traditional storytelling techniques with western theatrical forms. Key features of *Anansegoro* are the use of a storyteller who communicates directly with the audience, and a chorus who comment on the action. Music and dance form an integral part of the performance and often the stories revolve around the trickster god Ananse. I explain *Anansegoro* more fully at the beginning of chapter three.

<sup>42</sup> *Abibigoro* adopted many of the performative elements of *Anansegoro*, but took the stories from a national to a pan-African landscape.

In the final chapter I examine the next significant progression of Ghana's theatrical conventions through an analysis of Yaw Asare's 1990s play, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (2006). I analyse how Asare's innovations reflect the ways in which playwrights negotiated their position within a new democracy where, with the icon of the National Theatre established, playwriting was no longer as politically important. Furthermore, I trace how trends developed from the colonial era to the Rawlings government of the 1980s and 1990s, contributed to the slow decline of playwriting in Ghana after the building of the National Theatre, and suggest that this is exemplified by the 2007 Ghana@50 programme during which one Ghanaian play was staged every month.

Therefore, the plays, when analysed collectively, illustrate how the modes of theatrical creation and aesthetics were established in response to specific political agendas during the Nkrumah and Rawlings governments. The result is a national theatre limited by its specific cultural role and political association, where (as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis) new writers must continually adopt and maintain the codes of Ghanaian theatre in order to remain legitimately Ghanaian.

## Playwriting in the Gold Coast, 1916 - 1957.

In this chapter I will examine the emergence of playwriting in the Gold Coast from 1916 to independence in 1957. Throughout, I will refer to the plays of four writers: Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1916), Mabel Dove's *A Woman in Jade* (1935), J.B. Danquah's *The Third Woman* (1934) and F. Kwesi Fiawoo's *The Fifth Landing Stage* (1943). I will analyse the very different ways in which these writers, who were not career playwrights, used playwriting to articulate very different responses to colonialism. I will examine how the plays reveal the complexities of the relationship between cultural and political nationalism within the colonial structure, and analyse the status and 'cultural authority'<sup>43</sup> of playwrights within Gold Coast society and ultimately the reasons why these playwrights were unable to construct a common literary frame of references.

The place of these writers within Gold Coast society is highlighted by Frantz Fanon's statement that 'The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, 'the others''.<sup>44</sup> Fanon's identification of 'those who are unlike the original inhabitants' equally describes a *native* 'Merchant-Lawyer class'<sup>45</sup> that is educated in British culture and customs and thus caught on 'the boundaries of cultures',<sup>46</sup> what Robert July refers to as 'cultural hybrids'.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Homi Bhabha suggests that within a colonial context, the boundaries of culture exist between coloniser and colonised, however, the boundary that the playwrights of this period straddle is located at the meeting point of the educated and uneducated African population. Therefore the work that they created exists in an equally liminal space. It is this sentiment that forms the central theme of Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards*.

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<sup>43</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 34.

<sup>44</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 31.

<sup>45</sup>Kofi.E.Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957", *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>

<sup>46</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 34.

<sup>47</sup>Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 13.

Written in a mix of Akan and English, suggesting that it was intended solely for an educated, native audience, *The Blinkards* satirises ‘thoughtfully but mercilessly, a kind of social epidemic which first appeared along with the missionaries [that confused] all that was good with all that was European’.<sup>48</sup> Set in the ‘Kaiser-days’<sup>49</sup> of the First World War, the play deals explicitly with colonial life in the Gold Coast from the point of view of the educated middle class, and explores the frustration and confusion of inhabiting a complex space that exists in a hinterland between the binarised positions of what Fanon terms ‘the settler’ and ‘the native’.<sup>50</sup>

The play had only one performance in 1916 in a school classroom, and that performance had to be curtailed after the second act ‘owing to the tardy shifting of the scenes due to the want of proper apparatus’.<sup>51</sup> The drama of the play occurs when a young couple get engaged ‘in the English fashion’.<sup>52</sup> They marry in a chapel but it later transpires that the bride, Miss Tsiba, has previously married ‘under the native law’.<sup>53</sup> As a result she is charged with bigamy but Mr Onyimdze, a lawyer, successfully argues that as her second engagement did not follow native custom as, ‘the proper witnesses to an engagement [...] are certain relatives of both parties, and not the parties themselves’<sup>54</sup> (whereas ‘In England, the young people get engaged first, and break the news to the parents afterwards.’),<sup>55</sup> the ensuing marriage is declared void. Underpinning the play is Sekyi’s philosophy, espoused by Mr Onyimdze, that ‘our genuine Fanti old men who are proud in every way of their nationality are wiser, healthier and infinitely more respectable and dignified than those who are anglecised’.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) vii.

<sup>49</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 128.

<sup>50</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 31.

<sup>51</sup> James Gibbs ‘Seeking the Founding Father: the story of Kobina Sekyi’s *The Blinkards* (1916) (unpub, 2010) 11.

<sup>52</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 73.

<sup>53</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 167.

<sup>54</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 167.

<sup>55</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 73

<sup>56</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 59

A review of the first two acts appeared in *The Nation* on 19 October 1916,<sup>57</sup> in which it was noted that ‘Before the production, certain wild rumours had been circulated by some person or persons to the effect that the play was of an impious nature’.<sup>58</sup> The ‘impiety’ seems to be a euphemism for seditious and anti-imperial sentiment. However, Sekyi uses the act of playwriting to struggle with ideas that do not easily allow for a straight forward anti-colonial diatribe. Rather, he explores a fundamental paradox of colonialism: that of the ‘social hybrids, born into one race, and brought up to live like members of another race’,<sup>59</sup> who are not in binary relationship with the coloniser but are ‘heavily hyphenated, located at the meeting point of English and West African cultures’.<sup>60</sup> Ngugi suggests that this hyphenation is reflected in language, stating that ‘Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture’,<sup>61</sup> a sentiment that parallels Sekyi’s central argument that the affectation of English, and the valuing of English language and culture is an active denial of Fanti language and culture. Sekyi emphasises his argument with moments of acerbic comedy that touch on the domestic and seemingly minor realities of colonial life. When early in the play there is a knock at the door Mrs Borofosem, who has recently returned from a visit to England, states, ‘I think the man who knocked must be in native dress. If he were in European clothes, he would have rung the bell’.<sup>62</sup>

Sekyi uses the play to explore the dilemmas of the educated population, who acknowledge a dislocation from the ‘historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past’.<sup>63</sup> Through that acknowledgement Mr Borofosem, a business man, perceives an originary past in both the ‘coloniser’ and ‘native’ from which he is excluded, underlining his liminal position in the colonial system. Again, Sekyi highlights this through a moment of domesticity when Mr Borofosem states that, ‘I feel hampered when I put on native

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<sup>57</sup>The reviewer states that the play was ‘the first attempt by a native and the effort has been crowned with marvelous success’ thereby citing this production firmly as the first of its kind in the Gold Coast.

<sup>58</sup>James Gibbs ‘Seeking the Founding Father: the story of Kobina Sekyi’s *The Blinkards* (1916) (unpub, 2010) 11.

<sup>59</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 35.

<sup>60</sup> Mabel Dove, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) xv.

<sup>61</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “The Language of African Literature,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*; eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 291.

<sup>62</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 16.

<sup>63</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 37.



dress, because I do not know how to wear it properly'.<sup>64</sup> The implication is that the wearing of certain clothes is demonstrative of a connection to an originary past from which he and the audience are excluded. This moment is quickly passed over but the play is peppered with such asides and Sekyi loses no opportunity to enable his audience to reflect upon their own situation.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout, Sekyi equates Westernisation to feminisation, taking a masculine, almost misogynist, stance towards the effects of colonialism and the desire of his peers to mimic British customs. Anne McClintock states that 'Women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation'.<sup>66</sup> However, this sentiment is subverted by Sekyi, as he uses his characters to articulate a reversal of the binary of colonial power which sought to emasculate and infatalise colonised peoples. This is evident in Mr Onyimdze statement that 'To be civilised is to be made effeminate: your wants increase, and your contentment decreases in proportion'.<sup>67</sup> The gender differences attributed by Sekyi become thematically important as they are perpetuated throughout the play. Early in the play when Mrs Borofosem takes on Miss Tsiba in order to 'make her English',<sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup> Mr Onyimdze laments, 'I am afraid the dear girl will be metamorphosed into an idiotic, conceited, simpering piece of femininity in a short while'.<sup>70</sup>

The play concludes with Mr Brofosem addressing the audience with a speech which gets to the heart of Sekyi's philosophy:

If only we were national, we should be more rational and infinitely more respectable. Our ways and our things suit our climate [...] The people of the old days were wise indeed: if only we would follow the customs they left us a little more, and adopt the ways of other races a little less, we should all be as healthy as they were.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 9.

<sup>65</sup> Sekyi furthers the domestic satire when later in the play he focusses on the newly imported concept of kissing. Mr Tsiba, Miss Tsiba's father states, 'I read the other day that white men kiss their wives. So, yesterday, I try to kiss my wife: but she scratch my face, and say I am drunk'. Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 75

<sup>66</sup>Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest* (London: Routledge, 1995) 354.

<sup>67</sup> Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 65.

<sup>68</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> Coincidentally, Miss Tsiba's family name is Araba Mansa, which was also the name of Efua Sutherland's maternal grandmother and the name she gave to her house in Accra.

<sup>70</sup>Kobina Sekyi, *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997) 39.

<sup>71</sup>Sekyi, *The Blinkards*, 173.

The play's reviewer suggests that 'the lessons [the play] taught were wholesome and they brought some valuable home-truths to those who overstep the boundary of impropriety in engrafting foreign customs on their own'.<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the themes and criticisms that Sekyi presents in the play were evidently not revolutionary, but current in contemporary discourse.<sup>73</sup> The 'impiety' referred to by the reviewer is therefore complex and aimed at Fantis, not the British. This play does not call for an end to colonialism but rather a re-examination of how the people of the Gold Coast live with, and make themselves distinct from, the British. Therefore, the 'moment of enunciation' does not reflect a moment of decolonisation. Rather, it demonstrates an acknowledgement by the playwright that he, and his audience, are separate from both the 'native' and the 'settler'. Therefore, Sekyi is unable to fulfill the role of the colonised artist as Fanon sees it, which is to 'fight for national culture'<sup>74</sup> as there was no clear sense in 1916 (only fifteen years after the annexation of Ashanti and the Northern regions), what the nation was, nor what a unitary national culture could or should look like.

Page proofs of *The Blinkards* for the publishers Alan and Unwin dating from the early 1940s have recently been uncovered in the Cape Coast archive by James Gibbs, and, as he suggests in an interview given for this research, their existence indicates that Sekyi 'had nursed hopes of seeing it in print [and] had made some progress towards that end'.<sup>75</sup> However, the play was not published at this time and as a result did not enter into discourses surrounding pre-independence Ghanaian theatre. Despite Sekyi's efforts the play 'dropped out of the memory of Cape Coast'.<sup>76</sup> In 1967, eleven years after Sekyi's death, K.A.B. Jones-Quartey wrote a biographical article for the *Legon Research Review* in which 'no mention was made of Sekyi the dramatist'.<sup>77</sup> Since the play's rediscovery in 1974, *The Blinkards* has been acknowledged as an important work, however its treatment at the time emphasises the lack of cultural authority exercised by

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<sup>72</sup>James Gibbs 'Seeking the Founding Father: the story of Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1916) (unpub, 2010) 11.

<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, as Gibbs points out, Sekyi donated the proceeds of the performance to 'the Red Cross Fund', which, though taking place thousands of miles away in Europe, foregrounds the prominence of World War I and the concerns of the colonial regime whilst simultaneously investigating the domestic effects of colonialism.

<sup>74</sup> Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 120.

<sup>75</sup> James Gibbs Interview, conducted 1 September 2010

<sup>76</sup> Gibbs interview.

<sup>77</sup>James Gibbs 'Seeking the Founding Father: the story of Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1916) (unpub, 2010), 11

playwrights in this period. Furthermore, that Sekyi was not remembered as a playwright speaks to the fact that plays which explored life within the colonial structure, rather than contributing to revolutionary change, were effectively disregarded post independence; a clearer example of which can be seen in the completely contrasting play *A Woman in Jade* (1934) by the columnist Mabel Dove.

Like Sekyi, Mabel Dove wrote for a specific audience, though not a theatre audience. As a journalist writing for Danquah's *The Times of West Africa*, she had a readership of 'married and unmarried, old and young, male and female',<sup>78</sup> all of whom were educated. She wrote in English on an array of subjects, using her daily column to discuss 'women's issues [and] to provide Gold Coast women with knowledge and information for 'proper' moral living and self-edification'.<sup>79</sup> Hers was the first daily column written by a woman in West Africa and she wrote prolifically for a host of publications until the onset of blindness in 1972. Born in 1905 to wealthy parents in Accra, her mother regularly 'hosted amateur dramatics performances and English song recitals',<sup>80</sup> which formed Dove's early theatrical education. Mabel Dove was briefly married to Danquah and her upbringing and education marked her out as 'a [westernised] 'modern' elite African woman'.<sup>81</sup> However, In 1975, just three years after she had retired, Mabel Dove gave an interview to K. A. B. Jones-Quartey who commented that '[t]he present generation knows nothing about her [...] history [...] seems to be passing this woman by without further notice'.<sup>82</sup>

Dove's play *A Woman in Jade*, is naturalistic and was serialised in *The Times of West Africa*, but never performed. Like much of her journalism, the play has a highly moral overtone and warns young women about the potential perils of mixing with young white officers in the Gold Coast, whilst at the same time proselytising English customs and culture. Set in Accra, the play draws on 'the resources of the Edwardian drawing room'<sup>83</sup> of her youth. The plot consists of a young engaged woman, Baake Quaynor, flirting with an English Officer, Captain Hawke, and because of her loose morals, losing her African fiancée and reputation.

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<sup>78</sup> Mabel Dove, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) viii.

<sup>79</sup> Dove, *Selected Writings*, vii.

<sup>80</sup> Dove, *Selected Writings*, xiii.

<sup>81</sup> Dove, *Selected Writings*, xv.

<sup>82</sup> Dove, *Selected Writings*, xxi.

<sup>83</sup> Gibbs interview

Throughout the play the adoption of ‘English customs’<sup>84</sup> are presented as the ultimate aspiration, and Dove attributes characteristics according to gender and race in a similar way to Sekyi. The young African women, who are the main focus of the play, are vapid and dangerously amoral, painted as the ‘quintessence of evil’;<sup>85</sup> the young British officers are seen as morally vacant and corrupting influences; the British missionaries are pious and despairing; and the young African men, who are both lawyers, are aspirational and articulate and seem to represent Dove’s own Eurocentric, patriarchal standpoint. In one exchange between the lawyer, Harry Quashie-Bentil and the English missionaries, he tries to explain the young women's inability to lead moralistic lives:

Out here, a girl or a child may be the offspring of a polygamic union: it [the child] does not necessarily live with the father; it often is permitted to live with the mother who is also far removed from the direct control of the husband. How can the mother impart to the daughter high moral precepts of which she herself does not know!<sup>86</sup>

As a widely read and long standing columnist, it can be expected that Dove’s politics reflected those of her readership and that her views were representative of contemporary concerns.

These contemporary concerns are illustrated in a passage in which the other lawyer, Clement, states ‘We look to the European in this country for certain material upon which to model our ethics’.<sup>87</sup> Further to this, the characters’ wish for a ‘pure type of English that revolts against [...] moral lapses’,<sup>88</sup> delivers a key, and quickly unfashionable, insight into the relationship between deracinated, educated Africans based on the coast and the colonial administration. Though Fanon suggests that ‘the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man’s values’,<sup>89</sup> in 1935 amongst the intellectual and political vanguard, independence was not yet conceived of as a viable alternative to colonial occupation. Therefore, Dove’s work, of which *A Woman in Jade* is a small part, reflects her concern for the moral welfare of the young women of the Gold Coast within the

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<sup>84</sup>Mabel Dove, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) 73.

<sup>85</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 32.

<sup>86</sup>Mabel Dove, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) 73.

<sup>87</sup>Dove, *Selected Writings*, 75.

<sup>88</sup>Dove, *Selected Writings*, 75.

<sup>89</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (Oxford: Clarendon PRes, 1998) 34.

contemporary reality of colonial life. It is, as Stephanie Nudent suggests, a search for a ‘usable present’<sup>90</sup> that seeks to work with, rather than against, the colonial administration. Therefore, through exploring the contemporary concerns of the educated elite, Dove was unable to connect with a broader native audience and was consequently quickly forgotten.

The struggle to imagine and articulate an independent Gold Coast evident in these plays, is perhaps best represented in the work of J.B. Danquah. Danquah was a lawyer, a nationalist and in 1946 formed Ghana’s first recognised political party: the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC).<sup>91</sup> He founded and edited *The Times of West Africa*, which had launched the career of Mabel Dove, and ultimately became a source of support and encouragement for Efuia Sutherland and Ghana’s National Theatre Movement. His play, *The Third Woman* (1934), which was performed once and published in 1943, offers an insight into the early development of a key figure in Gold Coast nationalism. The play also effectively demonstrates the place of playwriting within the nationalist movement, as an arena for complex philosophical thought, not designed to articulate liberatory politics or be the vanguard of revolutionary cultural change.<sup>92</sup>

The play is an artistic reflection Danquah’s political struggle to fuse Western and indigenous values in order to create a new, useable sense of national identity. All of the five acts are written in iambic pentameter and Danquah draws the themes from ‘three main sources: legend, folklore and Christian doctrine’.<sup>93</sup> The eponymous third woman is Oni, who is made at the beginning of the play by the demiurge Odomankama, the Akan god of creation. She is created to be the equal of man and bring an end to fighting. The dramatic peril in the story is delivered in the form of a deadly gnome, Kwasi Sasahooden, whose cries are fatal and who can only be placated by gluing hair to his bald head. Despite the story of Oni seeming to be the main theme, it is the story of Sasahooden that lends drama and structure to the play. Priesie, the village fool, puts himself

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<sup>90</sup> Mabel Dove, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004) xv.

<sup>91</sup>From the formation of the British Colony of the Gold Coast, nationalist bodies had formed to protect the interests and culture of the indigenous population. Padmore notes that the Aborigines’ Rights and Protection Society, formed in 1897 in Cape Coast, was a ‘body of chiefs and educated Africans whose purpose was to serve as a link between the traditional rulers and the British Government’. Crucially he also states that, ‘It was never conceived as an organization to advocate complete severance from the British’. Padmore makes a direct link between the aspirations of the Aborigines’ Rights and Protection Society and Danquah’s UGCC. George Padmore, *The Gold Coast Revolution* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1953) 58.

<sup>92</sup>Danquah went on to be a towering presence in Ghanaian politics and is recognised as one of the ‘Big Six’, the founding fathers of Ghana. His opposition to Nkrumah eventually led to his imprisonment and death in 1965.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Angmor, *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911-1978: A Critical Evaluation* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1996) 197.

forward as the kingdom's champion, defeats Sasahooden with a chant, and so gains Oni's hand and the kingship.

*The Third Woman* is a result of what Helen Tiffin describes as a 'a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology' which resulted in 'the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity'.<sup>94</sup> Like Sekyi, Danquah had studied in London, gaining a law degree and returning to the Gold Coast in 1927. This similarity underlines the idea that young educated Africans were returning to their homelands 'hybridised',<sup>95</sup> and disconnected from the broader native population. This is exemplified in the play by the presence of Akan gods who, though key to the narrative, occupy a demi-god status, subservient to a Christian hierarchy. Danquah's foregrounding of native gods presents the audience with a scene that is unmistakably Akan, as Danquah attempts to create a compromised world view that accepts westernisation without sacrificing tradition.

The play is reflective of Danquah's political stance during the 1930s in which he tried to articulate a political nationalism within reality of colonialism whilst taking into account the multiplicity of ethnicities in the Gold Coast. In his book *Liberty of the Subject* (1938), Danquah states that 'The national State shall be completely realized in a homogenous government of Gold Coast races only'.<sup>96</sup> This contradictory statement, which points to a simultaneous homogeneity and a plurality of races in the Gold Coast, illustrates the complexity of Danquah's political position, and later Nkrumah's, that first and foremost had to construct a sense of a unitary national culture with a culturally diverse society.

George Padmore, a prominent pan-Africanist, writing in 1953 and a staunch supporter of Kwame Nkrumah, is highly critical of Danquah and what he sees as the 'confusion of [political] ideas of the Akan philosopher-politician'.<sup>97</sup> The title of 'philosopher-politician' implies that in Padmore's, and so Nkrumah's eyes, Danquah was intellectually ephemeral and politically ineffectual. A sentiment echoed by Charles Angmor in his criticism of *The Third Woman*, in which he suggests

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<sup>94</sup> Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter Discourse," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006), 99.

<sup>95</sup>Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter Discourse," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 99.

<sup>96</sup>George Padmore, *The Gold Coast Revolution* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1953) 58.

<sup>97</sup>George Padmore, *The Gold Coast Revolution* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, 1953) 58.

that the play is ‘so overloaded with such a flux of ideas that Danquah’s point of view is blurred’.<sup>98</sup> However the value of Danquah's play lies precisely in the fact that ‘of all the ideas displayed, it is difficult to pinpoint Danquah’s central theme’.<sup>99</sup> Though the criticism is reflective of Danquah’s inexperience as a playwright, it equally demonstrates the development of political nationalism in the Gold Coast, as in 1939 Danquah was articulating a desire for autonomy that went a small but significant step beyond the ‘useable present’ of Dove and Sekyi.<sup>100</sup>

Of the four plays analysed in this chapter the only one that does articulate a ‘shared knowledge of referential truths’,<sup>101</sup> is F. Kwesi Fiwoo’s *The Fifth Landing Stage* (1943). By so doing the play also exemplifies the complexity of constructing a unitary pan-national culture in the Gold Coast, as the referential truths contained in the play are exclusive to the Ewe people of eastern Ghana. Eweland was geographically on the periphery of the colonial administrative centre, on the eastern limits of the British colony. Therefore Fiwoo’s national scope was limited precisely because of the specificity of his cultural authority within the micro-culture of Eweland. Unlike his contemporaries, Fiwoo ‘did his play many times’ in Eweland to ‘raise funds for his school’.<sup>102</sup>

*The Fifth Landing Stage* is set in the second half of the nineteenth century and Fiwoo draws upon historical fact to explore the tension between the modern world and the traditions of the Ewe people.<sup>103</sup> The play centres around the character of Agbebada, a ‘reprobate’<sup>104</sup> who, through a series of misadventures, is sentenced to death at the fifth landing stage, a punishment that involved being buried to the neck at low tide and drowned as the tide came in.

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Angmor, *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911-1978: A Critical Evaluation* (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1996) 197.

<sup>99</sup> Angmor, *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911-1978*, 197.

<sup>100</sup> However, by 1949, the political landscape had changed to such an extent that Danquah’s politics was seen as tired and conservative, leading Nkrumah to break away from the UGCC and form the Convention People’s Party (CPP) under the slogan ‘Self Government now’, as opposed to the UGCC’s ‘Self Government within the shortest possible time’. David Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah: Vision and Tragedy* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2007) 68.

<sup>101</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 34-35.

<sup>102</sup> Gibbs interview

<sup>103</sup> Eweland now makes up parts of Eastern Ghana and Togo.

<sup>104</sup> F. Kwesi Fiwoo, *The Fifth Landing Stage* (Accra: Sedco Publishing Ltd, 1983) xiv.

The drama of the play focusses entirely on local, traditional concerns and customs as Agbebada is condemned, escapes and eventually returns to face his fate. The only European character in the play is a Portuguese slaver based in Accra, and though his status as a slaver is significant, his geographical distance from Eweland is matched by his peripherality to the plot. The play is naturalistic, well written and perhaps the most dramaturgically successful of the plays described in this chapter. However, by not exploring the tension between ‘coloniser’ and ‘native’, as the other plays of this period do,<sup>105</sup> the local success of *The Fifth Landing Stage* underlines a lack of a pan-national identity shared between the various peoples of the Gold Coast. By so doing it emphasises the complexities of establishing a collective liberatory movement within the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic context of the Gold Coast.

However, though the play did not identify with a pan-national culture Fiawoo did translate *The Fifth Landing Stage* into English for publication. This seems to be an acknowledgment that in order to be seen as a legitimate contribution to culture within the colonial structure, and to access a transnational reading audience, the play had to conform to the dominant legitimising cultural codes. Significantly, and perhaps in an act of defiance, the play’s cultural specificity is underlined by the Publisher’s Note, which states that in the translation ‘the sounds and tones of the appropriately selected words and phrases cannot be enjoyed. They are in the *Ewe* original alone’.<sup>106</sup>

This period of playwriting in the Gold Coast draws to an end with the establishment in 1943 of the British Council in Accra. Kofi Agovi suggests that the ‘from 1943, the British Council gradually came to replace both formal and informal colonial policy initiatives and institutions that were consciously used as part of the network of colonial indoctrination of British theatre and culture in Colonial Ghana’.<sup>107</sup> Though Agovi sees the British Council as responsible for stifling an indigenous counter-cultural movement, it was also responsible for exposing potential artists to theatre, and the potential of theatre to politicians.

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<sup>105</sup> Though *The Third Woman* does not explore this directly, tension between Western influences and indigenous values are thematically important within the play.

<sup>106</sup> F. Kwesi Fiawoo, *The Fifth Landing Stage* (Accra: Sedco Publishing Ltd, 1983) xi.

<sup>107</sup>Kofi.E.Agovi, “The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957”, *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>



From the 1950s the British Council encouraged the establishment of theatre companies and the documenting of theatrical work, and from then on there are records of many more performances being staged by various groups.<sup>108</sup> The role of playwriting fundamentally changed from a solitary intellectual medium (or one that spoke to specific, regional concerns) to becoming part of the apparatus of nation building, a situation that was echoed across British Africa.

Nkrumah's commitment to theatre as part of the apparatus of nation building was evident as early as 1955 when he established

a ten man government Committee of the Ministry of Education [which] was appointed "to examine how best a national theatre movement could be developed"<sup>109</sup> This was followed by an 'Interim Committee for an Arts Council [which] was set up and charged "to formulate and carry out a practical policy for a National Theatre Movement". Soon afterwards, an Arts Council of Ghana was formally constituted by an Act of Parliament in 1958.<sup>110</sup>

Therefore, only a year into independence Nkrumah had established a new cultural body with the aim of facilitating a national theatre movement that would investigate, formulate and disseminate a specifically Ghanaian form of theatre.

The legacy of the writers of this period is ambiguous as collectively they represent a non-unified artistic movement that failed to initiate a productive instability or effectively connect with a political nationalist urgency in the Gold Coast. However, the collective importance of the plays is evidenced by the insight they deliver into early twentieth century colonialism, in which contentious aspects of contemporary life, its confusion and frustrations, are foregrounded against the fact of colonial occupation. Through their striking differences, these plays represent the scope of hybridity at play within the colonial structure of the Gold Coast, and illuminate the role of the artist-intellectual in the Gold Coast as disconnected from, or perhaps simply too far ahead of, the urgent political decolonisation that spread through the Gold Coast in the 1950s.

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<sup>108</sup> James Gibbs, *Bibliography*

<sup>109</sup> Kofi.E.Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957", *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>

<sup>110</sup> Kofi.E.Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957", *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC> 3

Fanon suggests that the articulation of culture within the decolonising process underlines ‘the legitimacy of the claims of a nation’.<sup>111</sup> However, the presence of multiple voices articulating multiple views on colonialism in the Gold Coast, served to highlight the absence of a pan-national cultural authority and a lack of a coherent insurgent movement. When it did happen, the decolonising experience of the Gold Coast was not represented by ‘a murderous and decisive struggle’,<sup>112</sup> but by a complex negotiation of political devolution that took eight years to complete. Trevor Jones makes clear that:

What followed resembled nothing so much as a strange waltz in which the British Government danced the female part [...] As the nationalist moved forward, so the British withdrew - not so fast as to throw them off balance, but not so slow as to risk a collision.<sup>113</sup>

The absence of a coherent cultural movement within the colonial period became a key issue during the early Nkrumah period, inspiring a reinvention of the role of playwriting within the apparatus of nation building. The colonial experience enabled Nkrumah to understand the value of a unitary and authoritative Ghanaian culture that could describe a pan-national cultural identity. It was Nkrumah’s understanding of this situation that led him to move playwriting from the margins of culture and redefine it as a central, significant space post independence.

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<sup>111</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 167.

<sup>112</sup>Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 28.

<sup>113</sup>Trevor Jones, *Ghana’s First Republic 1960 - 1966: the pursuit of the political kingdom*, (London: Methuen, 1976) 11.

‘The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people- the peasantry in particular - in their life, history and struggles’<sup>114</sup>

### **Playwriting and nation building in Nkrumah’s Ghana, 1957 - 1966.**

In this chapter I will analyse the relationship between playwriting and politics developed in Ghana from 1957 to the military coup that deposed Kwame Nkrumah in 1966. Working with Robert July’s statement that ‘The early years of independence were politically trying. Opposition to the government tended to be regional, ethnic, and potentially secessionist, serious concern to those committed to national unity’.<sup>115</sup> I will analyse how Nkrumah employed theatre in Ghana, as part of a wider nation building process, to construct cultural symbols that were designed to communicate a homogenous sense of nation, and analyse how Nkrumah’s drive for pan-national unity led to the promotion of English in Ghanaian theatre. I will trace the development of Efua Sutherland as a playwright and educationalist and analyse how her work complemented, and was enabled by, Nkrumah’s political agenda. I will compare the reception of key texts by Sutherland and Joe de Graft, and the role of the exiled Haitian poet and dramatist Felix Morrisseau-Leroy who had sought refuge in Ghana, in order to trace the emergence of a single, dominant ‘framework of aesthetics’<sup>116</sup> in Ghanaian theatre. I argue that theatre’s political association had the effect of limiting the potential of playwrights to explore individualist or multiple notions of self and nation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, playwriting had not flourished in Ghana prior to independence and there was therefore, no legacy or set of accepted aesthetic codes to inspire and

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<sup>114</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987) 41

<sup>115</sup>Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 167.

<sup>116</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 114.

inform new artists post-independence. Efua Sutherland, in an interview given to Robert July, cites the influence for her artistic work as the move towards political independence rather than the theatrical output of the colonial era.

Suddenly in 1951 I started writing, I started creative writing seriously [...] It wasn't until 1957 I said, oh, I see, Independence [...] Let's get on with this business of writing for ourselves.<sup>117</sup>

With this statement Sutherland explicitly connected her own artistic awakening with the development of Ghanaian nationalism, implicating her work with the key dates in Ghanaian decolonisation: Nkrumah's election as Prime Minister in 1951 and full political independence in 1957. The statement also offers some clarification of the relationship between the artist-intellectual and the nationalist political movement in Ghana: that politics inspired art, rather than art inspiring politics.

Chinua Achebe suggests that the 'writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact [s]he must march right in front'.<sup>118</sup> Sutherland saw the mission of re-education and regeneration as bound up with cultural decolonisation, which is why her response to independence was to establish a writers' group. As she recalled later: 'I felt that a newly independent country needed a society of writers'.<sup>119</sup> During the period of colonialism the 'intellectual vanguard' had not seen literature or literary theatre as an effective tool for deconstructing the colonial apparatus. However, with independence, the mood changed and Nkrumah made it part of the job of the intellectual to contribute to 'the systematic effort to achieve cultural decolonization'.<sup>120</sup>

Sutherland's focus on the education of future generations led her away from a nativist, revisionist path and caused her to search for an accessible means of education, and it was this search that led her to drama and playwriting. Pal Ahluwalia in his essay 'Negritude and

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<sup>117</sup> Robert July, "'Here, Then, is Efua': Sutherland and the Drama Studio," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 161

<sup>118</sup> Mabel Komasi, "Efua Theodora Sutherland: Visionary Pioneer of Ghanaian Children's Literature," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 71.

<sup>119</sup> Robert July, "'Here, Then, is Efua': Sutherland and the Drama Studio," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 160.

<sup>120</sup> Felix Morrisseau-Leroy, "African National Theatre: For Whom?", *Okyeame*, 4.1 (1968): 91-95.

Nativism’, draws on Césaire’s definition of *negritudism* as ‘the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the existence of this fact [...] of our history and our culture’.<sup>121</sup> Although this ideology formed a part of what motivated Sutherland’s exploration of ‘traditional drama’, where she was involved in ‘evolving a form from a theatrical tradition’,<sup>122</sup> she was also aware of the need to ‘tear away at the superficiality of blind adherence to tradition and replace it with a carefully considered reinterpretation of ritual structures to promote the essence of a future ideal’.<sup>123</sup> Her ‘ideal’ emphasised progress over revisionist tradition, and nation over tribe as evidenced in her early play *Foriwa* (1962).

At independence cultural debates ‘focussed attention on the vital issue of cross cultural communication in a linguistically pluralistic society and beyond that, how to create an integrated and homogenous national theatre audience’.<sup>124</sup> This cultural agenda was reflected in the political arena as the Nkrumah government undertook the huge task of forming a homogenous nation from a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural state. Independence brought a reconsideration of what it meant to be Ghanaian, and an acknowledgement at a political level of ‘the importance of cultural awareness in generating [...] a single coherent, cohesive new nation from the disparate peoples that made up the Gold Coast colony’.<sup>125</sup> With *Foriwa* Sutherland explicitly responded to the need to create a theatre that reflected the contemporary political agenda. The play tells the story of Foriwa, the daughter of the queen mother of Kyerefaso, a small Ghanaian village, ‘sunk in stagnation and decrepitude’.<sup>126</sup> The dramatic tension of the play arrives in the form of the university educated Labaran, ‘an *otani*, a northerner in a southern Ghanaian town’.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Pal Ahluwalia “Negritude and Nativism” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge 2009) 231.

<sup>122</sup> Robert July, “‘Here, Then, is Efua’: Sutherland and the Drama Studio,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 163

<sup>123</sup> Anne V. Adams and Esi Sutherland Addy, “Introduction” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 12

<sup>124</sup> Kofi.E.Agovi, ‘The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957’, *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>

<sup>125</sup> Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 181.

<sup>126</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, “When *Anansegoro* Begins to Grow: Reading Efua Sutherland three Decades on,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 33.

<sup>127</sup> Jeyifo, “When *Anansegoro* Begins to Grow: Reading Efua Sutherland three Decades on,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland*, 33.

Foriwa falls in love with Labaran and together their progressive values reinvigorate the village. The play is essentially a representation of Nkrumah's post independence nationalist policies. Sutherland confronts intra-national divisions directly and strikes a triumphantly nationalist note when Labaran states 'Who is a stranger, anywhere, in these times, in whose veins the blood of this land flows?'.<sup>128</sup>

Sutherland's next play, *Edufa* (1966), expands on the themes of progress and traditionalism present in *Foriwa*. In a significant move away from the straight forward naturalism of *Foriwa*, Sutherland begins to explore the place of ritual in performance and introduces performative elements that she later develops into the codified framework of aesthetics of Ghanaian theatre. *Edufa* tells the story of a successful business man who, fearing his own death, mistakenly tricks his wife into dying instead of him. The play is fraught with generational conflict between the old, traditional values and modern, rational, consumerist values. The interplay between the two is far more nuanced than in *Foriwa*, demonstrated by the fact that at one point Edufa's father mockingly refers to his son as the 'Emancipated one'.<sup>129</sup> Throughout the play the chorus of old women undertake rites and Edufa, abandoning his rational beliefs as he desperately tries to save his wife, enacts the ceremonial burning of a charm in an attempt to negate his first fatal oath. The prominent use of ritual demonstrates Sutherland's politico-cultural trajectory as she moved towards 'a carefully considered reinterpretation of ritual structures [which] promote the essence of a future ideal',<sup>130</sup> an idea which became essential to her development of *Anansegoro*. *Edufa* represents a huge leap forward in the status of theatre in Ghanaian society. The play was, for the first time in Ghana, the work of a career playwright whose work was supported by, and explicitly linked to, the political administration.

The political association of Sutherland's work delivers insights into the means with which cultural, and therefore national, homogeneity was constructed in Nkrumah's Ghana, which raises the question the use of English in Ghanaian theatre as 'both a means of communication and a

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<sup>128</sup>Jeyifo, "When *Anansegoro* Begins to Grow: Reading Efua Sutherland three Decades on," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland*, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Efua Sutherland, *Edufa*, (Accra: Sedco, 1966) 16.

<sup>130</sup>Anne V. Adams and Esi Sutherland Addy, "Introduction," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 12.

carrier of culture'.<sup>131</sup> Frantz Fanon suggests that 'To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture'<sup>132</sup> and Nkrumah recalled that as a school boy, 'Our text-books were English text-books telling us about English history, English geography, English ways of living, English customs, English ideas, English weather'.<sup>133</sup> However, the construction and legitimisation of a national culture through the denial of the colonial language and the reclamation of an indigenous language is a debate that seems to have found very little traction at a political level in Nkrumah's Ghana. In his essay 'The Politics of Language' (1989), Chinua Achebe suggests that the reason for this was pragmatic, writing that:

Ghana faced the practical question of teaching mother tongues when ethnic mixing had reached significant levels in urban and rural schools as a result of internal migrations. Already by 1956 the Bernard Committee had found that schools where the pupils spoke a single mother tongue were far fewer than schools in which more than five languages were represented in fair number, the simple consequence of this is that if the policy of teaching in mother tongues were to be enforced the schools concerned would have to hire more than five teachers for every class.<sup>134</sup>

Nkrumah summarised his position on this subject when he wrote 'The fact that I speak English does not make me an Englishman'.<sup>135</sup> By separating nationality from language Nkrumah was attempting to legitimise English as a mode of Ghanaian expression by suggesting that language need not be a carrier of colonial culture but the means by which a newly defined Ghanaian culture could be legitimately carried. A view which was actively supported by Sutherland who stated that English should 'be used to serve the mind and spirit of the drama in Ghana'.<sup>136</sup>

By promoting the use of English to facilitate a linguistic commonality between otherwise disparate ethnic groups, Nkrumah gave playwrights the legitimating ability to construct symbols of Ghanaian culture in English that could achieve a national 'homogenizing effect'.<sup>137</sup> Sutherland

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<sup>131</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 291.

<sup>132</sup> Frantz Fanon, "National Culture," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 120.

<sup>133</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1963) 49.

<sup>134</sup> Chinua Achebe, "The Politics of Language," *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London: Routledge, 2006) 271.

<sup>135</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite* (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1963) 217.

<sup>136</sup> Efua Sutherland "The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement," *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, and Film*, eds., Anyidoho, Kofi, and James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000) 47.

<sup>137</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 35.

and Nkrumah's response to the issue of language is traceable to the experience of colonial era playwrights wherein Fiwoo, who possessed the cultural authority necessary to communicate with an Ewe audience, was unable to communicate a pan-national agenda. However, the promotion of English also offers clues as to why the aesthetics and role of theatre in Ghana became so strictly codified as the use of Ghanaian languages in theatre changed significantly from this moment. This is demonstrated within the plays of Sutherland, and Ama Ata Aidoo where Twi is used as a dramatic device rather than as a language.<sup>138</sup> In Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), for example, the family speaks Twi in Eulalie's presence in order to highlight her alienation, whereas when Eulalie is absent they speak English. Unlike Sekyi, post independent writers at this time did not use Ghanaian languages to include or exclude a specific audience. Rather, the use of English in plays became an accepted extension of English as the language of education, thereby marginalising native languages to concert party performances, and making a linguistic distinction between the high art of the theatre and populist entertainment.

As well as promoting a unitary language, Nkrumah's sought to construct symbols of cultural robustness and national unity. He had appointed a committee in 1955 "to examine how best a National Theatre Movement could be developed";<sup>139</sup> followed by an 'Interim Committee for an Arts Council', and finally after that an Arts Council of Ghana was formally constituted by an Act of Parliament in 1958'.<sup>140</sup> Nkrumah's belief in institutions as symbols of progress was shared by Sutherland. In 1959 Sutherland had founded the Ghana Experimental Theatre in a hut on the beach, but soon she saw the need for a permanent home that would:

not just provide us with a space for the programme, but would also stand as a symbol [...] Something tangible that people could point their fingers at and say, 'That's a place where African drama [...] is going on.'<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Twi is the language of the Akans.

<sup>139</sup> Kofi.E.Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957", *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>

<sup>140</sup> Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana", 3

<sup>141</sup> Robert July, "'Here, Then, is Efua': Sutherland and the Drama Studio," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 163.



By 1960 Sutherland's success had drawn international attention, Sutherland made one of her most significant moves as an educationalist and dramatist when she 'moved out of the shed and into the Drama Studio'.<sup>142</sup> Peter Carpenter noted that:

her work in the small wooden rehearsal hut above the seashore in Accra where the drum rhythms of her group with the beat of the surf beneath them, attracted the attention not only of the Arts Council of Ghana but also of the Rockefeller Foundation and the American "Fund for Tomorrow". From these two philanthropic bodies and from the Council, the Experimental Theatre received money grants. The greater part of this money, plus a Government grant, was devoted to building the Ghana Drama Studio, Ghana's first professional theatre, which cost (without equipment or seating) £8,500<sup>143</sup>

The Ghana Drama Studio was both a home for Ghanaian Theatre and an icon of it. Through creating a core company and establishing an actor training model specific to the demands of her developing neo-folk drama, Sutherland provided an effective political image which represented the active cultural experimentation that Nkrumah sought.

Throughout this period the link between education and cultural development at a political level in Ghana is explicit and the Drama Studio lasted independently for only two years before becoming attached to the University of Ghana. Nkrumah made it part of the job of the intellectual to contribute to 'the systematic effort to achieve cultural decolonization'.<sup>144</sup> To that end, in 1963, Nkrumah opened the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana and Efua Sutherland was invited to become a Research Associate, with her Drama Studio being 'absorbed into the Institute'.<sup>145</sup> On opening the new School of Performing Arts, headed by Joe de Graft, Nkrumah made a speech in which he articulated his view on the responsibility of artists and educators within post independence Ghana:

Your researchers must stimulate creative activity; they must contribute to the development of the arts in Ghana and in other parts of Africa, they must stimulate the birth of a particularly African literature.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> July, "'Here, Then, is Efua': Sutherland and the Drama Studio," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland*, 163.

<sup>143</sup> Anthony Graham-White "Drama" *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 2*, eds. Albert S. Gerard and Gyorgy M. Vajda (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986) 811-812

<sup>144</sup> Felix Morrisseau-Leroy, "African National Theatre: For Whom?," *Okyeame*, 4.1 (1968): 91-95.

<sup>145</sup> Amowi Sutherland Phillips "Chronology," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 240.

<sup>146</sup> Samuel Obeng, *Selected Speeches of Kwame Nkrumah, Vol. 5* (Accra: Afram Publications Ltd, 1997) 128.

Nkrumah was not content that intellectuals might revert to their pre-independence role of forming a disconnected elite within society, but bound Sutherland and her colleagues to the task of developing and defining an ‘African literature’.

In her new role at the University, Sutherland began to research the stories that formed the folk traditions of Ghana and their performative codes in order to ‘Find out what the forms of traditional drama that exist can do for modern theatre’.<sup>147</sup> Possibly the greatest testament to Sutherland’s success during this period is noted in Pietro Deandrea’s book *Fertile Crossings*. In an interview given by Mohammed ben-Abdallah he states:

[Sutherland and de Graft] started the School of Music and Drama, but the interesting thing is that quite a few people came from Nigeria to study the model and then went back, and suddenly Nigeria took over. There was Wole Soyinka, J.P.Clark, Ola Rotimi, Duro Ladipo’.<sup>148</sup>

Dzifa Glikpoe, Director of the National Theatre of Ghana Players, recalls that ‘When we were young, in the village, there was no electricity, no television. So we would go to an old woman, or old man and ask them to tell us stories’.<sup>149</sup> Glikpoe also recalls that many of these stories focused on ‘Kweku Ananse, the trickster, the spider’.<sup>150</sup> It was through this research that Sutherland began to develop what would become the most recognisable manifestation of Ghanaian theatre: *Anansegoro*. Constructed as a framework of aesthetics that drew explicitly from village storytelling experience, *Anansegoro* was not a historical or nativist reconstruction of Ghanaian culture, but a cultivation an oral literature that complimented Nkrumah’s concept of a new African literature. Roach suggests that ‘orature goes beyond a schematized opposition of literacy and orality as transcendent categories; rather, it acknowledges that these modes of communication have produced one another interactively over time’.<sup>151</sup> Sutherland sought to engage in an active dialogue between the oral folk culture and her own literary theatre, she felt

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<sup>147</sup> Robert July, “‘Here, Then, is Efua’: Sutherland and the Drama Studio,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 163.

<sup>148</sup> Pietro Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2002) 222

<sup>149</sup> Dzifa Glikpoe interview, conducted 24 September 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Glikpoe interview

<sup>151</sup> Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 11.

that there was a ‘natural transition of the oral tradition to the written tradition’.<sup>152</sup> Key to this process was not just the enactment of orature but also a final published play text.

Early in her artistic development Sutherland had led the Ghana delegation to the 1958 Afro-Asian Writers’ Conference in Tashkent, USSR. She later recalled:

what moved me was to see a huge exhibition of books from all the other countries that were represented, and see the African area...the few shelves...I said to myself then that I would help fill those shelves.<sup>153</sup>

Therefore, a key part of Sutherland’s motivation for writing was the production of a symbol of African literary activity. *Anansegoro*, therefore, represents the high point both of her theatrical experiments and explorations, and the relationship between theatre and politics in the Nkrumah era.

By 1964 Nkrumah had banned political opposition and appointed himself President for Life. This sense of an indefinite and singular political model was reflected in the cultural policy that began to define and promote a single vision of Ghanaian culture based on the work of Sutherland. However, at this time playwrights still continued to explore alternative notions of nation and expressed a multiplicity of national identities within contemporary Ghana. The reception the playwrights received is demonstrative of how clearly delineated the function of theatre in Ghana had become.

The most prominent of these writers was Joe de Graft, head of the School of Performing Arts, whose play *Through a Film Darkly* (1970) was first performed in 1962 and revised in 1966. The play begins with the confused and distressed shouts of Ofiri on discovering his friend John lying bleeding on the floor. Before the audience can determine who these characters are or what the situation means, Fenyinka, the storyteller, enters, strumming his guitar and, apologising to the audience, he declares this ‘a false start’.<sup>154</sup> The Stage Manager enters, also apologising to the audience and saying that ‘Our leading player cut open an artery, and upset the lighting man so

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<sup>152</sup> Vivian Windley, “Pan-African Partnership on Children’s Literature: Reminiscences of a Diaspora Educator,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 196.

<sup>153</sup> Robert July, “‘Here, Then, is Efua’: Sutherland and the Drama Studio,” *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayeibia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 161.

<sup>154</sup> J.C. De Graft, *Through A Film Darkly*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 2.

badly that he messed up the switchboard. We'll be ready to start in a few minutes'.<sup>155</sup> Through acknowledging both the theatricality and the physical reality of the performance space, de Graft places his audience firmly within the present, and unfolds within the space a subtle and nuanced narrative that explores the darker side of nationalism.

Throughout, de Graft uses his characters to question Ghana's post-independence trajectory. In an attempt to prevent the audience from seeing the issues articulated in the play as distinct from their lives, de Graft uses Fenyinka as a bridge between the action and the audience. His reference to 'the play' as both separate but indistinguishable from the constructed 'reality' of his direct address, blurs the line between the narrative, Fenyinka, and the audience. At the beginning of the play Fenyinka addresses the audience directly, stating:

My wife is in the play: Janet is her name. You'll be seeing her soon/ I'm very fond of her, that's why I don't fancy her being in this play. You see I don't like people insulting my wife; but there's a chap in this play who *can't help* insulting her.<sup>156</sup>

John insults Janet because she is white. Fanon argues that 'it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence'.<sup>157</sup> Within the context of the play it is Janet's presence that perpetuates John's existence as a 'native' and a product of a colonial system. John, having spent time in London, and fallen in love with an English girl called Molly, had his heart broken when he found Molly's anthropological notes detailing 'Every thought I confided in her analyzed, every intimate feeling set down and examined, every action cross-checked and indexed'.<sup>158</sup> This experience has left John bitter and unable to separate his experience of one white person with the race as a whole. De Graft, unlike Sutherland or Aidoo, does not seek a collective resolution where the values of a homogenous Ghanaian nation are able to overcome the colonial experience. Rather, he uses the characters to explore the contemporaneous effects of colonialism present within society.

The playwright's suggestion that Ghana is still negotiating its sense of self within the complex framework of postcolonialism, runs counter to the national narrative proscribed by Nkrumist

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<sup>155</sup> De Graft, *Through A Film Darkly*, 3.

<sup>156</sup> De Graft, *Through A Film Darkly*, 4.

<sup>157</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 28.

<sup>158</sup> J.C. De Graft, *Through A Film Darkly*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 55.

cultural policy. Therefore, the play represents for the first time in Ghana an oppositional voice that seeks to question the political regime, rather than work with it. The oppositional stance of the play is compounded by de Graft's constant reminders to his audience that the play is about them, and its themes relevant to them:

remember that this play is about young Ghanaians [...] all of them articulate and intelligent, and living in a Ghana that is changing so rapidly in so many ways that you're simply pissing in your pants if you think you can go on imagining that we're still in Livingstone's Africa.<sup>159</sup>

Through not adhering to the emerging dominant aesthetics and function of Ghanaian theatre, and actively questioning the darker connotations of the nationalist movement, Agovi suggests that de Graft was 'completely at odds with the ideology of the [national theatre] Movement'.<sup>160</sup> Agovi's assessment, though dramatic, is indicative of a view promoted by the head of the Traditional and Experimental Theatre Division, the Haitian poet Felix Morrisseau-Leroy,<sup>161</sup> who held that the task of theatre post-independence was to define and promote a unitary sense of national identity inline with Nkrumaist policy. Anything that deviated from that task was not considered, at a political level, as a legitimate contribution to Ghanaian culture. The evidence for this can be seen in two essays written in 1965, one by Sutherland and one by Morrisseau-Leroy.

Morrisseau-Leroy, writing in *The Ghana Cultural Review* states, 'The playwrights, actors and producers of Ghana are agreed that traditional forms of drama should constitute the basis of a National Theatre'.<sup>162</sup> Here, by explicitly identifying 'traditional forms of drama' as the basis of a national theatre, Morrisseau-Leroy promoted a unitary model for theatrical creation based on 'work already begun on the exploration of the dramatic possibilities of our folklore and the development of our traditional folk drama'.<sup>163</sup> This defined Ghanaian theatre at a policy level as a specific set of performative codes crystallised in Sutherland's *Anansegoro*. Further to this, Sutherland, in 'The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement in Ghana', evaluates the progress made by the movement in the years following independence. In it she states, 'The

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<sup>159</sup>De Graft, *Through A Film Darkly*, 18.

<sup>160</sup>Kofi.E.Agovi, "The origin of literary theatre in colonial Ghana, 1920 - 1957", *Research Review*, 6.1, 1990, 20 May 2010. <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC>

<sup>161</sup>Morrisseau-Leroy was appointed in 1965 by Nkrumah when the Ghana Institute of Art and Culture became the the Ministry of Art and Culture

<sup>162</sup> James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre: A Bibliography* (Unpublished, 1995/7) 23.

<sup>163</sup> James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre*, 24.

National Theatre Movement is only just beginning to achieve the character to which several important statements and actions by the President of Ghana aspire', demonstrating how implicit Nkrumah and his cultural policy were in Ghanaian theatre.<sup>164</sup> Morrisseau-Leroy linked the performative codes developed by Sutherland to the National Theatre Movement that Sutherland had explicitly linked to Nkrumah's cultural aspirations, and summarised them as the 'complete fusion between African culture and African politics'.<sup>165</sup> Though Sutherland did not synonymise the National Theatre Movement with her own *Anansegoro*, and actively encouraged and supported playwrights such as de Graft and Ama Ata Aidoo whose work explored very different performative and thematic areas, the political success of *Anansegoro* informed Morrisseau-Leroy's stance which, through defining Ghanaian theatre, actively sidelined alternative voices.

Joe de Graft, in the forward to a collection of poems, articulated his frustration at these reductive and constrictive cultural classifications:

I do not imagine that any of my readers will like more than a very few of my poems in this collection... But I hope they will desist from asking me why I have not written them "African poetry". Simply because I am this individual; neither a tribe living in some long inaccessible African jungle, nor a committee of pan-Africanist ethnographers'.<sup>166</sup>

Fanon suggests that 'decolonisation is simply the replacing of a certain 'species of men' by another 'species' of men'.<sup>167</sup> De Graft's forward highlights the tension between the political desire to define and disseminate a single vision of Ghanaian culture, and the sense that for the artist, the definition of the role of culture post-independence had replaced one set of legitimatising cultural codes with another.

Despite the feelings of de Graft, under Nkrumah, the National Theatre Movement gained momentum. In 1965 the National Drama Company was launched to 'foster the continued growth of and expansion of the emergent theatre movement'.<sup>168</sup> The founding of the company represents

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<sup>164</sup> Efua T Sutherland, "The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement in Ghana," *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, and Film*, eds Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs, (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000) 45.

<sup>165</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, "1964 Drama Workshop", *Ghana Cultural Review* I, (1965) 30.

<sup>166</sup> Sandra E. Green, "Developing the Arts for Development: Perspectives on Ghana:", *Africa Notes* (1998). [http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing\\_the\\_Arts\\_for\\_Development.pdf](http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing_the_Arts_for_Development.pdf) 4 accessed August 24 2010

<sup>167</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 2001) 27.

<sup>168</sup> James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre: A Bibliography* (Unpublished, 1995/7) 24.

the success of Sutherland's continuing work, and the claiming of that work at a political level. Morriseau-Leroy wrote in 1965 that 'The theatre workers find great inspiration in the keen interest Osagefo [sic] [Nkrumah] takes in the theatre'.<sup>169</sup> Nkrumah's increasing dominance of cultural life in Ghana culminated with the establishment of the Osagyefo Players in February 1965. The company were founded 'by direct order of the President', and Nkrumah said of them 'I look upon this Drama group to be the intellectual centre for artistic stimulus and driving force behind the theatre movement in Ghana and the cultural revival of Africa'.<sup>170</sup> That Nkrumah founded the company at this time demonstrates how politically effective the National Theatre Movement in Ghana had been. Throughout his Presidency, Nkrumah had increasingly moved theatre and playwrights closer to politics, funding their ability to work, and then creating institutions that implicated his regime in their success. Largely thanks to Sutherland's belief in Nkrumah's cultural policy, there was now a theatre industry in place where an artist could expect to make a living wage.

By 1966, the year in which Nkrumah was deposed in a military coup,<sup>171</sup> at least ten new plays had been published, including two transcripts of concert party plays. In addition, dozens of articles, reviews and works in progress had been written and performed. Both the university campus and the Drama Studio had become thriving arenas in which the next generation of playwrights were beginning to form their ideas under Sutherland's guidance. The University campus began to grow an international reputation, with Nigerian artists like Soyinka making regular visits. In nine years Nkrumah and Sutherland had created and defined a theatre industry which had become 'a vehicle for the development of a modern African reality'.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup>James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre*, 21.

<sup>170</sup> James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre*, 21.

<sup>171</sup>In February 1966, while on a diplomatic trip to Hanoi, Nkrumah was deposed by a military coup. Increasing tensions between Nkrumah and the West, particularly America had led to a doubling of CIA agents in Accra. At home, with concern about being mobilised for a campaign in Rhodesia, and increasing cut backs, the military grew restless. Two days national holiday was declared and the National Liberation Council came to power.

Nkrumah accepted an offer for hospitality from Sekou Toure, President of Guinea and a fellow Pan-Africanist. He named Nkrumah joint Head of State of Guinea, a position he held until his death in 1972. From Guinea, Nkrumah continued his involvement in Ghanaian politics, growing 'more theoretical his views he became more revolutionary and more extreme'. During his exile he wrote *Dark Days in Ghana*, *Conciencism*, *Axioms* and *The Class Struggle in Africa*. Fittingly he also founded the publishing house PANAF to publish his books, ensuring the continued dissemination of his ideas and the education of future generations. David Rooney, *Kwame Nkrumah: Vision and Tragedy* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2007) 68.

<sup>172</sup> Anne V. Adams and Esi Sutherland Addy, "Introduction," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 14.

This period of Ghanaian history successfully defined a theatrical aesthetic that was intrinsically linked to the political ideology of the Nkrumah government. It delivered a mode of theatre that conveyed a pan-national cultural authority through codifying a framework of aesthetics that drew on folklore, and produced published texts written in English by career playwrights. Robert July states that ‘For Mrs Sutherland, creation of authentic African theater was one of two major objectives; the other was continuity’.<sup>173</sup> However, as will be explored in the next chapter, by perusing continuity through codifying the creative and aesthetic modes of Ghanaian theatre, Sutherland problematised the position of playwriting. Through building institutions that represented and crystallised a specific nationalist ideology and proselytised a unitary cultural model, Nkrumah enabled playwriting Ghana to flourish, whilst simultaneously actively excluded pluralistic cultural expressions.

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<sup>173</sup>Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 77.



**‘An era of decline’: playwriting in Ghana 1966 - 1981.<sup>174</sup>**

In this chapter I will analyse how playwrights and theatre institutions established during the Nkrumah era developed during the series of military coups until J.J. Rawlings’ 31 December Revolution of 1981. I will argue, with reference to Efua Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) (which contains all the elements of her *Anansegoro* developed throughout the 1960s), that playwriting in Ghana, having established firm aesthetic and creative codes in response to Nkrumaist nationalist policies, became increasingly marginalised by the military governments. Working with the statement that within a postcolonial context the patterns of cultural expression ‘become part of the objective situation confronted by later generations [...] having once been part of the solution to a dilemma, [they] then become part of the new problem’,<sup>175</sup> I will analyse how the creative and aesthetic patterns of theatre in Ghana established by Sutherland problematised the creative process for the new generation of playwrights. I will examine how these problems led artists to challenge Sutherland’s position at the forefront of Ghanaian culture and briefly, but significantly, challenge the concept authorship in Ghanaian theatre. To analyse how playwrights adapted to the changing political landscape I will undertake a close textual analysis of Mohammed ben-Abdallah’s *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* (1982). I will argue that with this play ben-Abdallah gave a glimpse of something radically different to the inherited codes of Sutherland’s work whilst maintaining a legitimacy within the context of Ghanaian theatre.

Throughout the 1970s Efua Sutherland found herself increasingly in the ‘political wilderness’.<sup>176</sup> The end of Nkrumah’s regime enabled the questioning of previously integral politico-cultural

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<sup>174</sup>The period of 1966-1981 represents ‘an era of decline’ in the relationship between theatre and politics in Ghana, and in Ghana generally. During this period Ghana ‘was governed by six regimes; two elected civilian governments and four military ones’. By 1982 there had been five successful coup attempts, two affected by the same man, Jerry Rawlings. Throughout the period Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan note that despite ideological differences, the regimes shared a ‘tendency toward authoritarian rule, ethnic favouritism, intolerance of criticism, and above all, inability to overcome economic deterioration’. Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan, *Ghana: Coping with Uncertainty* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986) 47.

<sup>175</sup>Frederick Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986) 78.

<sup>176</sup>James Gibbs, “Efua Sutherland: “The Mother” of Ghanaian Theatre,” *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, and Film*, eds Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs, (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000) 111.

trajectories, which included the position of theatre in Ghana.<sup>177</sup> Sutherland's theatrical response to the coup itself was minimal (as had been any criticism of Nkrumah's regime in the years leading up to the coup). This is evident in her seminal play *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) where there is an absence of any explicit connection between the play and the contemporary political situation. The play stands as the purist distillation of Sutherland's *Anansegoro* and as the fullest expression of the folk theatre that Morriseau-Leroy and Nkrumah advocated. The play contains all of the performative and dramaturgical devices that Sutherland developed with her various companies since the forming of the Experimental Theatre Company in 1959.

Sutherland suggests that 'Ananse is, artistically, a medium for society to criticise itself'.<sup>178</sup> The stories are parables, wherein Ananse overreaches himself, achieving successes that are 'doubtful and temporary'.<sup>179</sup> In the forward to the play Sutherland explains that

there are in existence some specialist groups who have given it [*Anansesem*] a full theatrical expression with established conventions. It is this system that I have developed and classified as *Anansegoro*.<sup>180</sup>

Fundamentally, therefore, Ananse is a known quantity, a familiar folk character that audiences recognise, and are therefore able to acknowledge their own position within the formulaic story telling process.

*The Marriage of Anansewa* traces the fortunes of George Kweku Ananse as he attempts to make money by betrothing his daughter, Anansewa, to four different chiefs at the same time. His plans go too well as each Chief falls in love with a photo of Anansewa and George eventually needs to extricate himself from the ensuing confusion by faking the death of his daughter. Three of the chiefs express their condolences, but Chief-who-is-Chief offers to pay for the funeral as though he and Anansewa were already married. Anansewa miraculously recovers and she, George and Chief-who-is-Chief live happily ever after. Throughout, the audience find enjoyment in observing Ananse's increasing predicament, as the Storyteller says to the audience, 'All of us

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<sup>177</sup>A significant effect of the coup was to contextualise the preceding decade as Nkrumaist, inferring a binarised alternative. A concept that was exploited by the new regime as it attempted to construct itself in opposition to Nkrumah.

<sup>178</sup> Efua Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, (Accra: Sedco, 1975) v.

<sup>179</sup>Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, v.

<sup>180</sup> Sutherland *The Marriage of Anansewa*, v.

have seen this knot that has been tied. How do you suppose Mr Ananse will untie it?’<sup>181</sup> There is little sympathy for George, as he is the author of his own problems, but his crimes are essentially victimless.

The play has a heightened theatricality in performance with devices such as a props man being present on stage and a Storyteller who both inhabits the world of the play and maintains a dialogue with the audience. The acknowledged theatricality is referred to by Sutherland in the Forward as a key element of *Anansegoro*:

People come to a session to be, in story-telling parlance, ‘hoaxed’. [...] Hence in the course of a particularly entrancing story it is normal for an appreciative listener to engage in the following exchange:

LISTENER: Keep hoaxing me! (*Sisi me!*)

NARRATOR: I am hoaxing you and will keep on hoaxing you! (*Mirisisi wo, misisi wo bio!*)

The formula is practically a form of applause, an encouragement to the Storyteller to sustain his artistry<sup>182</sup>

The significance of the play within the context of the National Theatre Movement, therefore, is not the narrative but the performative elements. Sutherland demonstrates a progression from *Edufa* (in which the chorus are characters who inhabit the world of the play) as she clarifies the function of the chorus within *Anansegoro*, stating ‘I have used the device of moving on to the stage a pool of *Players* representing both the specialist performers and the audience [in order to invoke an] element of community participation’.<sup>183</sup> Throughout, Sutherland foregrounds the societal role of the chiefs, Ananse, and traditional engagement rituals which she juxtaposes with a modern setting and modern values in order to present an updated version of a traditional *Anansem*. These themes are supported by the codified framework of aesthetics which together create a distinctly Ghanaian performative experience.

Although the *The Marriage of Ananewa* is the culmination of Sutherland’s theatrical exploration, it strikes an anomalous note within its socio-political context precisely because it is

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<sup>181</sup>Sutherland, *The Marriage of Ananewa*, 65.

<sup>182</sup>Sutherland, *The Marriage of Ananewa*, vii.

<sup>183</sup>Sutherland, *The Marriage of Ananewa*, vii.

not ‘the story of the private individual destiny [as] an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society’.<sup>184</sup> The play does not speak to the increasingly embattled situation of Ghanaian society but is a residual product of the nation building policies of the Nkrumah presidency. The dislocation between the National Theatre Movement and the changing political regime evident in the play, demonstrates how reliant on Nkrumah’s nationalist policies the National Theatre Movement had been. However, the grandiose rhetoric of stimulating a ‘truly African literature’, had been displaced in 1966 by a regime that ‘took altogether a much more modest administrative assessment of Ghana’s role in Africa and the world’.<sup>185</sup> Therefore, the play highlights that without political support, playwriting in Ghana was in danger of reverting to the liminality of the colonial era.

As the explicit support of the political hierarchy drifted away, the whole Nkrumaist cultural apparatus came under scrutiny as artists began to question the dominant cultural narrative and Sutherland’s place at the forefront of the post independence cultural movement. In *Fragments* (1969) the novelist Ayi Kwei Armah uses his characters to expose the inequality and ineffectual development of literature in post independence Ghana. In a chapter entitled ‘Osagyefo’, a title given to Nkrumah meaning ‘conquerer’<sup>186</sup> (and therefore making a blatant comment on the cultural dominance of Sutherland), Armah introduces a thinly disguised pastiche of Sutherland, Akosua Russell, as ‘our leading writer’.<sup>187</sup>

Armah uses a disaffected and struggling novelist at a literary party to describe how ‘that woman arranges these so-called soirees for only one thing: to get American money for her own use’.<sup>188</sup> Displaying the full extent to which the fictionalised Sutherland manipulates and controls the funding and image of Ghanaian cultural development, Armah goes on:

She’ll tell the Americans it was she who taught you to write. Or if that’s too much she’ll say she encouraged you, inspired you, anything, and she’ll get more money to continue the good work. She’s some sweet poison.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>184</sup>Frederick Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986) 69

<sup>185</sup>Dennis Austin and Robin Luckham, *Politicians and Soldiers in Ghana 1966-1972* (London: Frank Cass, 1975) 19.

<sup>186</sup> A.K.Ocran, *A Myth is Broken* (Accra: Longmans, 1968) 38.

<sup>187</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (London: Heinemann, 1969) 109.

<sup>188</sup>Armah, *Fragments*, 109.

<sup>189</sup>Armah, *Fragments*, 111.

Perhaps the most damning statement in the chapter comes when Armah's struggling novelist pays the ultimate insult to a playwright when he says that 'She's no writer, and she knows it'.<sup>190</sup>

Gibbs suggests that 'anyone who wielded as much influence as Efua Sutherland would inevitably come in for criticism and would encounter resentment'.<sup>191</sup> However, the criticism is at least partly justified. In the case of *The Marriage of Anansewa* Gibbs writes that 'Although the play credits Efua Sutherland as the sole author, this obscures the sharing of ideas that went into its creation'.<sup>192</sup> Mohammed ben-Abdallah, who as a young actor had been a member of Sutherland's *Kusum Agromba* theatre group, goes further in an interview given in 1984, when he states that 'the group makes the play, she doesn't write, she works with them on the play [...] when they finished she wrote the script in Akan and then translated it into English'.<sup>193</sup> Sutherland is revealed in this statement as a skilled deviser and dramaturge, a 'formidable team leader',<sup>194</sup> who developed plays over a long and collaborative process, transcribing works for publication once they had been tried and tested.

However, due to the intertwined nature of culture and education advocated by Sutherland and Nkrumah, Armah's criticism strikes at a much more significant issue in the development of Ghanaian theatre. Through Sutherland's work as an artist-educator, and her elevated profile due to investment in her work, she fostered a generation of writers committed to a collaborative and prolonged process, alongside a dedicated group of trained actors who performed her plays. As Sutherland's *Anansegoro* had become synonymous with Ghanaian theatre, so her creative process became the way that Ghanaian theatre was made. Indeed, an example of her influence is manifest in the career of Ama Ata Aidoo who worked as Sutherland's assistant at the School of Performing Arts during the late 1960s and was an advocate of the extended creative process. In a recent interview she states that her second play, *Anowa* (1970), 'was only produced after it had

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<sup>190</sup>Armah, *Fragments*, 117.

<sup>191</sup> James Gibbs, "Efua Sutherland: "The Mother" of Ghanaian Theatre," *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, and Film*, eds Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2000) 111.

<sup>192</sup> James Gibbs, "What is *The Marriage of Anansewa* and who performed the wedding ceremony?" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) 135.

<sup>193</sup>James Gibbs, "What is *The Marriage of Anansewa* and who performed the wedding ceremony?" *Nkyin-Kyin*, 135.

<sup>194</sup> James Gibbs, "What is *The Marriage of Anansewa* and who performed the wedding ceremony?" *Nkyin-Kyin*, 135.

been published and so could not be amended during production'.<sup>195</sup> As a result, Aidoo states that 'I myself killed my dramatic impulses because I swore never to write [another] play unless I had a group to work with'.<sup>196</sup> Both *Anowa* and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* became globally famous works, but Aidoo's aversion to writing plays unless she could collaborate and alter her work, has resulted in her never writing another play. In the same interview, Aidoo also says that she was 'lucky to fall into the hands of someone like Efua Sutherland',<sup>197</sup> and describes her as 'an enabler',<sup>198</sup> which she doubtless was. However, the cultural policy that had invested so heavily in Sutherland as she sought to define and capture a single national form, had effectively led to the disproportionate favouring of that type of work, thereby hindering the development of alternative or multiple creative practices and artistic voices.

The result of these strict and resource heavy creative processes is evident in Sutherland's 1965 essay 'The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement in Ghana', in which she calls for 'Much more writing of dramatic literature'.<sup>199</sup> Sutherland highlights the pressures placed upon artists, stating that 'even the few capable of providing creative materials have been sucked too heavily into organization, teaching and training'.<sup>200</sup> When James Gibbs joined the English Department at the University of Ghana in 1967, Alastair Niven, a colleague of Gibbs, wrote that 'There has been a disgraceful lack of dramatic activity at Legon this year and Mr Gibbs's two offerings...have almost single handedly filled the vacuum'.<sup>201</sup> That just two productions could 'fill the vacuum' of a year's worth of work after the most prolific period of playwriting in Ghanaian theatre is curious and suggests that under J. Scott Kennedy, an American returnee who had succeeded Joe de Graft, the School of Performing Arts had struggled to address the lack of dramatic literature.

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<sup>195</sup>Ama Ata Aidoo, 'I Have Published Less Than I Would Have Wished', *ndn.nigeriadailynews.com*, accessed 22/8/10

<sup>196</sup> Aidoo, 'I Have Published Less Than I Would Have Wished'

<sup>197</sup>Aidoo 'I Have Published Less Than I Would Have Wished'.

<sup>198</sup>Aidoo 'I Have Published Less Than I Would Have Wished'.

<sup>199</sup>Efua Sutherland, "The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement," *FonTomFrom*, ed., James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Mantutu, 2000) 45.

<sup>200</sup>Sutherland, "The Second Phase of the National Theatre Movement," *FonTomFrom*, 46.

<sup>201</sup>James Gibbs, "The Legon 7: The Story of a Campus Drama Group, October 1968 - June 1970," *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) 174.

Artists found the ability to sustain a career increasingly difficult as the political situation in Ghana grew worse.<sup>202</sup> Though plays continued to be published during the early part of the decade (with *The Marriage of Anansewa* being published as late as 1975) this points to the strength of the University of Ghana, publishing houses established in the Nkrumah era, and the global attention on West African writers, rather than to a support for theatre at a political level. As Gibbs points out, ‘Just because there is a lot published on that period, does that suggest that there is a ferment of creativity?’<sup>203</sup> The teaching institutions and the existence of the Arts Council of Ghana are highlighted in UNESCO’s 1975 cultural policy report on Ghana<sup>204</sup> as effective and progressive, and the report highlights the significant progress that had been made post independence. However, 1975 ‘proved to be a critical turning point, and by 1977, the economic disorder was unprecedented’.<sup>205</sup> Cultural progress, without financial and ideological support, was unsustainable. In just ten years the national narrative had changed rapidly from a progressive success story to an economic disaster.

The move towards small scale touring theatre that began with Gibbs’ campus based company the Legon 7 in 1970, and continued with ben-Abdallah’s Legon Road Theatre, seems to have been both a financial necessity and a strategic move to capture audiences that had previously been the quarry of the populist concert party. However, touring was not a simple option as the organisational infrastructure that had been developed failed to sustain post Nkrumah. In 1969, the director of the Arts Council of Ghana said that ‘some of his departments were dead, some of his regional organizers did nothing, and that the Accra headquarters could not help the regions because the regions did not “have the facilities that will call for an expert to go to the site’.<sup>206</sup> Despite this the company did undertake some touring with the assistance of Sutherland’s minibus. With the Legon Road Theatre, ben-Abdallah wrote *The Alien King*, *The Slaves* and *The*

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<sup>202</sup>On the 13th January 1973 General Ignatius Acheampong staged the coup that removed the short lived civilian government of Dr Kofi Busia and his Progress Party, and brought an end to the Second Republic. As Sandra Greene states, in 1973 ‘international oil prices skyrocketed, and what little support for the arts existed between 1966 and 1973 virtually evaporated.’ Sandra E. Greene, ‘Developing the Arts for Development: Perspectives on Ghana’, *Africa Notes* (1998) [http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing\\_the\\_Arts\\_for\\_Development.pdf](http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing_the_Arts_for_Development.pdf) accessed August 24 2010

<sup>203</sup> Gibbs interview

<sup>204</sup> Cultural Division of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Accra, “Cultural Policy in Ghana”, (Paris: The Unesco Press: 1975)

<sup>205</sup>Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan, *Ghana: Coping with Uncertainty* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986) 58.

<sup>206</sup>Anthony Graham-White “Drama” *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, Volume 2*, eds. Albert S. Gerard and Gyorgy M. Vajda (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986) 811

*Verdict of the Cobra*, all of which were produced between 1969-1971. Gibbs wrote of these productions that ben-Abdallah demonstrated ‘a particular knack of communicating to popular audiences’,<sup>207</sup> and that the company would have been lost in the never-never land of Nkrumah’s grandiose theatre, but in the harsh realities of Ghanaian theatrical life, they have earned a place in the national theatre movement.<sup>208</sup>

Though the political situation was very different to the Nkrumah period, writing in 1972, Gibbs firmly placed the Legon Road Theatre within the National Theatre Movement, suggesting a continuation of the Ghana’s theatrical trajectory with ben-Abdallah very much a part of that cultural linearity.

However, when ben-Abdallah left Ghana in 1974, having gained a scholarship to study in America, the geographical distance seems to have afforded him the liberty to break with Ghanaian theatres codified forms and directly address the contemporary political situation in Ghana. This can be most clearly seen in *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* (1982), which was premiered at the University of Georgia. In an interview published in 2000 ben-Abdallah elaborates on the process of the play, stating that:

*The Trial of Mallam Ilya* took a long time. From 1967 till 1976, it was not the writing which caused the delay [...] Every time I was ready to start something relevant happened.<sup>209</sup>

The play marks a significant shift from Sutherland’s creative codification. Since ben-Abdallah was not residing in Ghana, the play was not developed with a specific company. Recalling the process ben-Abdallah states, ‘I put together a little outline, and for about seven months it was turning over in my head. Then, some evening from about 4 till 11 o’clock, I wrote it’.<sup>210</sup> Perhaps more significantly, the play does not draw upon Akan folklore. Therefore, the play represents the emergence of a counter narrative, one not tied to the creative or cultural codes of the National

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<sup>207</sup>James Gibbs, “The Legon 7: The Story of a Campus Drama Group, October 1968 - June 1970,” *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) 174.

<sup>208</sup>James Gibbs ‘Mohammed ben-Abdallah and the Legon Road Theater’, *African Arts* Vol. 5, No. 4 (UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center, 1972), 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3334590> - accessed 20 Aug 2010

<sup>209</sup> Anastasia Agbenyega and James Gibbs, “Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting,” *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000) 61.

<sup>210</sup>Anastasia Agbenyega and James Gibbs, “Mohammed ben Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting,” *Fontomfrom*, 61.



Theatre Movement, but one that speaks directly, and accusingly, to the contemporary political situation.

Set in the fictional historic African kingdom of Angah, the play deals with the aftermath of the deposing of a dictator, Kuhmran, a thinly veiled representation of Nkrumah, and charts the fortunes of Mallam Ilya whose life intertwines with that of Kuhmran. The play takes the form of a trial staged when Ilya is an old man. Tellingly, it is the new generation holding the old to account, and the play reflects the deep frustrations felt by the new generation at the procession of coups in which ‘One group of uneasy warriors followed another’.<sup>211</sup>

At the beginning of the play Ilya’s interrogator, Malwal, describes Ilya’s life in terms that reflect Ghana’s transition from colonialism to independence, ‘Mallam, you have lived through the periods of glory, humiliation, assimilation, rejection and freedom’.<sup>212</sup> Ben-Abdallah invites his audience to read the play as a ‘set of figures and personifications to be read against [a] one-to-one table of equivalences’,<sup>213</sup> and make the simple leap from the fictional Angah to the factual Ghana, thereby making every question of the interrogators pertinent and politically charged. When Kouyate asks Ilya ‘For how long shall our people be squeezed through the fingers of one generation of leeches right into the open palms of another?’<sup>214</sup> for the contemporary audience, the question would have resonated with questions that they would wish to ask of the ruling regime.

The play moves fluidly from one setting to the next, effectively establishing location through lights and suggestion, and enabling the audience to constantly be immersed in the meaning of the play. Significantly, ben-Abdallah continues several of the performative conventions established by Sutherland and in many cases develops the devices in order to achieve greater communion with the audience which supports the play’s political urgency. For example, in a key passage, ben-Abdallah uses the character of Ilya’s prosecutor, Malwal, to fulfill the traditional role of the Storyteller. As with in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, and *Through a Film Darkly*, the Storyteller

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<sup>211</sup> Mohammed ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya and Other Plays* (Accra: Woeli Publishing, 2003) 109.

<sup>212</sup> ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, 65.

<sup>213</sup> Frederick Jameson, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), p73

<sup>214</sup> Mohammed ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya and Other Plays* (Accra: Woeli Publishing, 2003) 108.

both acts as a bridge between the action and the audience, and at points becomes involved himself within the action of the play. However, rather than being an omniscient character gently reminding the audience of the key themes, during Ilya's dramatised reminiscences Malwal violently shouts 'Cut! Cut!',<sup>215</sup> bringing the action abruptly back to the present in order to continue the trial of the old Ilya. At these points the action is moved from the stage to the audience, and at one point the device is used to encourage the audience to question Ilya about the revolution against the old king, Kuhmran, and his part in it. In a significant development of one of the key devices of *Anansegoro* the Storyteller facilitates a dialogue between the audience and the action, the stage instructions state, '*The following questions from the cast in the audience are to stimulate questions from the audience*'.<sup>216</sup> Through extending the function of the Storyteller, and enabling a politically charged dialogue, ben-Abdallah effectively highlights the lack of an alternative political voice.

Though there is no specific chorus, singing, dancing and ritual underpin the play in an extension of what Sutherland termed *Mboguo*.<sup>217</sup> In one lengthy passage a masquerade takes place in a village square in which Henry the Navigator, Queen Victoria, Cecil Rhodes and David Livingstone enact 'wildly grotesque'<sup>218</sup> representations of the history of European expansionism in Africa. Though the passage is not contextualised within the dialogue of the play, its purpose is to cite the fictionalised country of Angah within a pan-Africanist landscape. This gesture takes Sutherland's national agenda and expands upon it, enabling the warnings articulated within the play, such as Kouyate's, the leader of the masquerade, when he states, 'We live in a crucible where the horrors of the past are smelted with the violence of today to be forged into the monster of tomorrow',<sup>219</sup> to apply as legitimately to the whole of Africa, as they do explicitly to Ghana. Whereas Sutherland had focused exclusively on Ghanaian nationalism, ben-Abdallah, through developing Sutherland's theatrical conventions, began to renegotiate the place of theatre in

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<sup>215</sup>ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, 115.

<sup>216</sup>ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, 101.

<sup>217</sup> *Mboguo*, as defined by Sutherland, are the musical performances present in *Anansegoro* and are 'part and parcel of the stories themselves'. *Mboguo* are the songs that come between the story that advance the plot. Originally they had been used as a device for keeping people in the villages awake, so that after an evening meal when the storyteller felt that his audience was becoming drowsy he would begin a folk song that everyone knew. When the audience was revitalised from singing, the storyteller would continue with the narrative.

<sup>218</sup>Mohammed ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya and Other Plays* (Accra: Woeli Publishing, 2003) 90.

<sup>219</sup>ben-Abdallah, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, 106.

Ghana as a means of exploring pan-African concerns within the framework of a legitimately Ghanaian theatre.

Having spent over a decade in the political wilderness, the explicit link between politics and playwriting in Ghana began to reemerge at the end of the 1970s as nationalist narratives were reclaimed and expanded at a political level. General Acheampong was deposed in 1978 in a palace coup with the country falling further into economic turmoil. Nine months later in June 1979 the young Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings staged his first coup, which again promised swift transition to civilian rule. It also included the most violent and symbolic establishment of a national counter narrative yet seen in Ghana. As head of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), Rawlings immediately undertook a programme of 'housecleaning'. By July 1979, Acheampong, Akuffo and Afrifa, all former Heads of State, had been executed by firing squad in Accra. Rawlings ruthlessly established the beginning of a new chapter in Ghanaian political history. Recognising the significance of the individual as a representation of a pervasive narrative, Rawlings had broken the power of one narrative and begun a new one in which the story of Nkrumah was reinvigorated and reclaimed for a new generation. By the following september the Third Republic began with Dr Hilla Limann, the 'heir apparent to Nkrumah',<sup>220</sup> elected as President. Two years later in 1982, the Limann government having failed to tackle the massive economic problems and endemic corruption, Rawlings staged his second coup. In the same year ben-Abdallah returned to take up a lectureship at the University of Ghana to find that there were only two members of staff in the School of Performing Arts.

The period of 1966-1981 highlights several key factors in the development of Ghanaian playwriting and the development of the place of the playwright within Ghanaian society. The affect of the codification of the process of theatre making, which constructed a performative aesthetic in line with the political desire to promote a pan-national cultural homogeneity, inadvertently created a scenario in which alternative, multiple or insurgent voices and processes were undermined. Politically, Rawlings had demonstrated that through reclaiming and retelling national stories in the political arena, a new narrative could emerge that enabled a new generation to supersede the old one. Simultaneously, ben-Abdallah had demonstrated that through claiming and developing the performative and dramaturgical techniques developed by

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<sup>220</sup>Deborah Pellow and Naomi Chazan, *Ghana: Coping with Uncertainty* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1986) 50.

Sutherland, a new theatre could emerge, that could reclaim its relevance and cultural authority within Ghanaian society, whilst remaining legitimately 'Ghanaian'.

### **The playwright, the President and the National Theatre: 1981 - 1991.**

In this chapter I will examine the development of playwriting in Ghana throughout the country's longest period of single party rule. Over this time period I will trace and analyse the influence of Mohammed ben-Abdallah as a playwright and his transition into politics as a Secretary of State in Rawlings' military government. With reference to ben-Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti* (1989), I will argue that his work is both a development and a rebuttal of Sutherland's *Anansegoro*, and that the development of ben-Abdallah's *Abibigoro* (which included '[t]he fusion of the music, of the dance, of the mime, of the dialogue')<sup>221</sup> represents a desire to reclaim theatre's position in Ghana as a central and significant arena in postcolonial nation building. I will analyse how and why ben-Abdallah used postcolonial theory to make claims about the place of his work within a broader postcolonial landscape, and argue that the success of ben-Abdallah's renegotiation of the political worth of theatre, compounded by the question of cultural authorship inherited from Sutherland's creative process, contributed to the introduction of the 1985 Copyright Act which restricted the use of folklore in new artistic works. Furthermore, I will argue that this success is evident in the re-emergence of institutions as icons of cultural robustness which resulted in the building of the National Theatre and the demolition of the Ghana Drama Studio. Ultimately, I will argue that by reclaiming and extending the theatrical and politico-cultural modes of the 1960s, the cultural trajectory of the 1980s reinforced the aesthetics and function of theatre in Ghana within much stricter parameters.

This period signaled the re-emergence of an entwined political and cultural narrative in Ghana. In a radio statement, broadcast shortly after Jerry Rawlings' return to power at the end of 1981, he said that 'this is not a coup. I ask for nothing less than a revolution, something that would transform the social and economic order of this country'.<sup>222</sup> The definition of this moment as a popular revolution rather than a military coup carried with it the implication of a new politics emerging in Ghana that significantly broke from the past. To this point the aim of a military coup in Ghana had been to intervene in a chain of democracy, with the implicit inevitability of

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<sup>221</sup> Glikpoe interview.

<sup>222</sup> Paul Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (London: Pinter, 1995) 15.

reinstating civilian rule over a flexible time period. Rawlings, through invoking a revolutionary rhetoric, was legitimising his intent to remain in power at the head of a military government; there was no need to return to a popular democracy, because he spoke for the populace.

Playwriting in Ghana had gone through a prolonged period of inactivity during the second half of the 1970s. Mohammed ben-Abdallah returned to Ghana in 1981 having spent eight years studying in United States and took up a lectureship at the University of Ghana, joining a staff of two in the School of Performing Arts. Energised by the new political regime, ben-Abdallah took the opportunity to question, and then to influence and change, the established codification of Ghanaian theatre developed by Sutherland. He quickly began to create a new model of Ghanaian theatre, couched firmly in his pan-African political views and a re-emergent postcolonial urgency to communicate a unitary national identity through culture.

Despite having created the politically oppositional *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* without a dedicated company, during the closure of the University of Ghana directly after the 1981 coup,<sup>223</sup> ben-Abdallah led a group of staff and students in the establishment of a small campus based troupe (as ben-Abdallah's previous company, the Legon Road Theatre was disbanded when he left for America). As Dzifa Glikpoe, a student at the School, and current Director of The National Theatre Players, recalled in an interview given for this research, 'they decided to pick some people and start a [...] resident theatre company for the School of Performing Arts [...] they invited some of us'.<sup>224</sup> The company was named *Abibigromma*, and would perform *Abibigoro*. The name of the company was a significant statement of intent from ben-Abdallah and demonstrates both his political maturation during his time in the United States, and, through explicitly adopting the codes of *Anansegoro*, his desire to challenge Sutherland's dominance in Ghanaian theatre. As Glikpoe states, '*Anansegoro* had to do with Ananse stories [...] What Abdallah did is to tell the story of the black man [...] *Abibigoro*, that's a play about the black race'.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup>The universities had been closed both to nullify the prospect of continuing student protests that had been so prevalent during the previous government and to free up students to help with voluntary schemes that were taking place across the country.

<sup>224</sup> Dzifa Glikpoe Interview, conducted 22.09.2009

<sup>225</sup> Glikpoe interview.

Ben-Abdallah drew explicitly from *Anansegoro*, placing his work within the framework of aesthetics established by Sutherland. As Dzifa Glikpoe recalls, ‘Efua [Sutherland] developed *Anansegoro* from the everyday storytelling, and she developed it for stage. Then Abdallah went into history using the same elements’.<sup>226</sup> With *Abibigromma* ben-Abdallah developed his most famous works including *The Witch of Mopti* (1989) and *Land of a Million Magicians* (1989). The opening scene of ben-Abdallah’s *The Witch Of Mopti* represents a summation of contemporary Ghanaian theatre and his own artistic intent. The elements of Sutherland’s *Anansegoro* are immediately evident in the presence of a Storyteller and a musical chorus who greet the audience before the story begins. The stage directions stipulate a sign ‘down left, across the proscenium line’<sup>227</sup> reading ABIBIGROMMA. The sign boldly declares the newness of this theatre movement and sparks the first dialogue of the play. By having the Storyteller, Abotsi, and his assistant, Kofi Onny, argue in Twi and English about whether the audience understand ‘the white man’s English’,<sup>228</sup> ben-Abdallah immediately confronts the question of expression and definition of culture in a postcolonial society. His solution is not to attempt to offer his audience an answer, but to let them know that he is aware of the question. By so doing ben-Abdallah equalises English and Akan on stage, rather than using Akan as a dramatic device in a predominantly English text as Sutherland had done.

Moreover, ben-Abdallah makes explicit the pan-Africanist politics of *Abibigromma* by placing much of his work in a historical setting. *The Witch of Mopti* is set in ‘an old-walled city far away on the banks of the Niger’.<sup>229</sup> Fanon suggests that ‘The native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent’.<sup>230</sup> In this respect, setting the play in Mopti: is a pertinent choice, it is in Mali, a centre of ancient African civilisation closely linked geographically to the ancient Empire of Ghana. Mopti is Muslim and its official language is French. By choosing it as a setting ben-Abdallah is implying that modern Ghanaian audiences have commonalities with stories and people that centuries of colonialism have interrupted but not removed.

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<sup>226</sup> Glikpoe interview

<sup>227</sup> Mohammed ben-Abdallah, *The Witch of Mopti* (Accra: Woeli Press, 1988) 3.

<sup>228</sup> ben-Abdallah, *The Witch of Mopti*, 3.

<sup>229</sup> ben-Abdallah, *The Witch of Mopti*, 6.

<sup>230</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001) 170.

From the beginning of the play ben-Abdallah signals that his new theatre is both legitimated as Ghanaian theatre by its adherence to the codes of Anansegoro, but also expands it to articulate the distinctness of *Abibigoro*:

ABOTSI

Some people think we do concert.

NII ASI

Some think we are just jokers.

...

TOGBI

Dondology! Some say we are dondologists.

OSABUTEY

Some even say we do drama and play all sorts of musical instruments.

KOFI ONNY

Ebinomm koraa se ye to anansesem. [*Some say we do ananseseem*]

NII KWEI

But, the truth of the matter is...

ALL

We do all of those things and more!<sup>231</sup>

In this passage ben-Abdallah lists all the various skills and performative elements that make up his *Abibigoro* and out of which contexts they have grown. They draw on the traditions of Ghanaian concert party; they draw on it but are not limited to it. They are jokers, fools and comedians. They study ‘dondology’, the art of Ghanaian drums and drumming. They do dramas, play instruments and tell Ananse stories. In a manner reminiscent of Sutherland’s engagement with orature, in this passage ben-Abdallah acknowledges what precedes him but does so in order to place those stories firmly in the past. As the politics of Ghana is moving forward and redefining itself, so is its theatre.

This redefinition is evident in the way the ban-Abdallah extends the function of key elements of *Anansegoro*. For example, in *Anansegoro* the Storyteller acts as a way of ‘moving in and out of a secondary characterisation in order to objectify and comment critically upon certain events and

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<sup>231</sup>Mohammed ben-Abdallah, *The Witch of Mopti* (Accra: Woeli Press, 1988) 4-5.



relationships'.<sup>232</sup> However, ben-Abdallah extends the technique, placing the Storyteller at the centre of the theatrical event as the link between audience and story in order to articulate his own theatrical manifesto. Ben-Abdallah uses the moment to explicitly break from the past in a statement that sets out clearly what Ghanaian theatre now is and equally clearly, therefore, what it is not. Sutherland had left such politicisation of her work to others, allowing the likes of Morriseau-Leroy and Nkrumah to foreground her work as part of a postcolonial political agenda. However ben-Abdallah proactively politicises his work, drawing on Sutherland's aesthetic, he positions his work as the new Ghanaian theatre to compliment the new Ghanaian politics.

As well as contextualising his work within the political landscape, ben-Abdallah goes further by placing his work within the broader context of postcolonial discourse. In an interview given to James Gibbs in the 1990s ben-Abdallah suggests that his plays belong within Fanon's 'third phase' where 'the African artist liberates himself or herself utterly from [...] colonial enslavement'.<sup>233</sup> He suggests that in the 1960s much of the theatre was that of assimilation to Western culture and later to the "'glorification of the African past'"<sup>234</sup> and the 'total rejection of Western culture'.<sup>235</sup> This historiographical reading of the development of Ghanaian theatre, that ignores the debates around language and politico-cultural iconography, suggests that ben-Abdallah was attempting to consciously impose a linear postcolonial reading on the progression of theatre in Ghana, with the result that Sutherland's work was maneuvered into the 'second phase' in which Fanon suggests that 'old legends will be reinterpreted within the light of a borrowed aestheticism'.<sup>236</sup> Though *Anansegoro* reinterprets Ghanaian legend, Sutherland did not borrow an aesthetic but painstakingly constructed one that reflected a post-independence nationalist agenda. That Sutherland's work does not fit within Fanon's definition suggests that ben-Abdallah's motives are more political than cultural. This is underlined by Fanon's suggestion that in the third phase the artist-intellectual creates 'a revolutionary literature',<sup>237</sup> thus

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<sup>232</sup> *The Legacy of Eflua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebeia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 174.

<sup>233</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000) 64.

<sup>234</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom*, 64.

<sup>235</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom*, 64.

<sup>236</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001) 179.

<sup>237</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 179.

highlighting a synchronicity of theatrical and political rhetoric that underlines ben-Abdallah's conscious repositioning of theatre within the Rawlings' regime.

Rawlings understood the potential of the arts, and particularly theatre in a way that no Ghanaian president had since Nkrumah. However, unlike Nkrumah, Rawlings invested political power in artists. During this period Rawlings gave ministerial positions to a succession of playwrights in his military regime: Ama Ata Aidoo, Asiedu Yirenkyi and Mohammed ben-Abdallah all served in the Rawlings government. From helping 'here and there'<sup>238</sup> on Rawlings' speeches, ben-Abdallah quickly moved into political office. In 1984, he took over the position of Secretary for Culture and Tourism from Asiedu Yirenkyi. The political link between culture and education again became explicit when ben-Abdallah's portfolio changed from the Department of Culture and Tourism to the Ministry of Culture and Education.

During this period the task of defining Ghanaian theatre as a cultural asset became part of the political agenda as the government struggled to turn round the crippled economy. The intervention of the IMF in the Rawlings regime during the early 1980s, as well as recommending huge currency devaluation, provided an economic imperative for the government to define and monetarise Ghanaian culture. Since independence various administrations had seen the diplomatic value of Ghana's cultural heritage as they pursued national and international agendas. Now, however, the success of culture as a diplomatic and nationalising tool led to its commodification. In 1985, on the recommendation of both Unesco and WIPO, who defined folklore as, 'the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals',<sup>239</sup> ben-Abdallah was involved in the passing of a copyright law (PNDC Law No. 110) that 'removed folklore and other works of cultural heritage from the public domain'.<sup>240</sup> As a result of the law, Ghanaian folklore was 'no longer free for anyone anywhere to copy, perform, or adapt'.<sup>241</sup> This law was recommended to developing countries as a way of

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<sup>238</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, "Mohammed ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting," *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000) 64.

<sup>239</sup> UNESCO, 'Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore': [[http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13141&URL\\_DO=DO\\_PRINTPAGE&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13141&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html)] - accessed 21.9.2010.

<sup>240</sup> Katheleen Ludwig, 'The Nationalization and Commercialization of Ghanaian Folklore', [[www.mjpa.umich.edu/uploads/2/9/3/2/2932559/ghanaian\\_folklore.pdf](http://www.mjpa.umich.edu/uploads/2/9/3/2/2932559/ghanaian_folklore.pdf)] - accessed 22.9.2010

<sup>241</sup> Ludwig, 'The Nationalization and Commercialization of Ghanaian Folklore'

protecting their cultural sovereignty from outside exploitation, but effectively it made Ghanaian culture a definable international brand.

Though Fanon suggests that ‘a national culture is not a folklore’,<sup>242</sup> the folk culture that had been so influential in the development of Ghanaian theatre, and was implicit within *Anansegoro* and so *Abibigoro*, was now defined in law as belonging to the government. Ironically ben-Abdallah recalls that when he was working in Kumasi as a ‘drama organizer’ years before he realised ‘that all the teachers I met when I was going round to encourage them to do plays lacked scripts, so I kept saying, “You can do plays out of our folklore, Ananse stories and so on and so forth”’.<sup>243</sup> However, later amendments to the law extended liability to Ghanaians also, thereby legally preventing playwrights, teachers, or anyone else, from drawing on the country’s collective cultural past unless they could pay a fee to the National Folklore Board.<sup>244</sup>

Though the law does suggest a governmental desire to profit from Ghana’s cultural wealth (as it was designed to raise revenue from the use of folklore), that a playwright was involved in the government that implemented it suggests a desire on the part of ben-Abdallah to finally answer the question of ownership and authorship that had been so ambiguous and contentious in Sutherland’s prolonged and collaborative creative processes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ben-Abdallah had raised concerns over the issue of authorship in Sutherland’s work which relied heavily on input from actors and, as her artistic practice developed, folklore. Whilst developing *Anansegoro* Sutherland had gone to villages and had learned from those who, in her words, had ‘minded the culture’.<sup>245</sup> In an interview with Robert July she recalled ‘I was so stuck with that village [Ekumfi Atwia]<sup>246</sup> [...] I couldn’t rest. I thought, now what do you do about this

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<sup>242</sup>Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001) 188.

<sup>243</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, “Mohammed Ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting,” *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000), 62.

<sup>244</sup>The National Folklore Board was created in 1991 from the revenue raised from royalty on Paul Simon’s *Rhythm of the Saints*. The Board’s tasks included interpreting the definition of folklore provided in the 1985 Act, and compiling an inventory of works that qualify as Ghanaian folklore. The law officially entrusts the National Folklore Board with ‘the protection of folklore, expressly extends the folkloric royalty to Ghanaians, and mandates jail time or fines for non-compliance’.<sup>236</sup> Katheleen Ludwig, ‘The Nationalization and Commercialization of Ghanaian Folklore’, [[www.mjpa.umich.edu/uploads/2/9/3/2/2932559/ghanaian\\_folklore.pdf](http://www.mjpa.umich.edu/uploads/2/9/3/2/2932559/ghanaian_folklore.pdf)] accessed 22 September 2010.

<sup>245</sup> Gibbs interview.

<sup>246</sup> Sutherland invested both time and money into the village of Ekumfi Atwia over several years, and established the Kodzidan, the Storytelling House.

mine of sources?’.<sup>247</sup> In his own work ben-Abdallah acknowledged the actors who had contributed to his play in print. As he later recalled, ‘if you look at *The Witch of Mopti*, it is written specifically for that company - to the extent of having the names of real performers in the play’.<sup>248</sup> The gesture is significant because it represents how ben-Abdallah sought to resolve the issue of how the resources upon which playwrights drew (both the collaborative resource of actors and the resource of folk culture) were being acknowledged and protected.<sup>249</sup>

The Rawlings administration continued throughout the decade to take ownership of Ghana’s national image in a wider sense, and ben-Abdallah continued to play a key role in securing that ownership. Throughout the 1980s restrictions on the press grew. Paul Nugent states that in 1989, the government revoked the licenses of all publications and required their editors to reapply for registration. This was accompanied by the passage of the more stringent Newspaper Licensing Law (PNDC Law 221) and new licensing regulations. The latest controls were justified by the Secretary for Information, Dr Mohammed Ben-Abdallah, as an attempt to restore basic standards of decency in journalism and (more feebly) to conserve scarce paper for essential educational publications.<sup>250</sup>

Ben-Abdallah’s part in Government ended soon after, health problems led to him leaving office and eventually return to the University of Ghana to lecture.

The success of ben-Abdallah in redefining the theatre in Ghana as a means of diplomacy and an expression of national identity led to the resurgence of the National Theatre debate and the reemergence of institutions as icons of culture. The National Theatre Movement had stuttered and faded during the second half of the 1970s. Further to this the perennial economic problems in Ghana ‘constantly postpone[d] the realization of a National Theatre for Ghana which Sutherland has constantly promoted’.<sup>251</sup> However, throughout the 1980s, and due to the strong working relationship between ben-Abdallah and Rawlings, the theatre demonstrated its

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<sup>247</sup>Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 78.

<sup>248</sup> Anastasia Agbeyega and James Gibbs, “Mohammed Ben-Abdallah: On Plays and Playwriting”, *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, eds., Kofi Anyidoho and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Matutu, 2000) 61.

<sup>249</sup>Ben-Abdallah had been part of Sutherland’s *Kusum Agromma* company that developed *The Marriage of Anansewa* but his contribution is not acknowledged in the published text.

<sup>250</sup>Paul Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (London: Pinter, 1995) 190.

<sup>251</sup>*The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*, eds., Martin Bahnam, Erroll Hill, and George Woodyard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 41.

diplomatic worth to Rawlings' political agenda. In 1986 a new politico-cultural body was formed and, as Sandra Green notes:

Rawlings supported the founding of The National Commission on Culture, an agency that was designed, in part, to seek foreign donations to revive the arts. Money was obtained from China to build the National Theatre.<sup>252</sup>

The building of the National Theatre is a clear illustration of the Rawlings administration's relationship with the arts. Established under PNDC Law 259, the National Theatre was funded by the Chinese government, designed by Chinese architects and built by a Chinese contractor. During the mid 1980s the Chinese were beginning to establish relations with many African nations in order to promote trade and diplomatic links; in Ghana they offered a prestige building and Rawlings was offered either a sports stadium or a National Theatre. As Gibbs tells the story 'Rawlings thought, "well, we already have a nice stadium, so let's have theatre"'.<sup>253</sup>

In 1992 the Drama Studio was demolished to make way for the National Theatre. Gibbs remembers that 'as part of the contract with the Chinese the Drama Studio was to be rebuilt at Legon'.<sup>254</sup> This was ben-Abdallah's own contribution to the contract, insisting that a replica Studio be built on campus. He also added a small open air amphitheatre to the side of the National Theatre, imagining that in that space a new age of experimental Ghanaian theatre would be shown. The demolition of the Drama Studio, which had just celebrated its twenty-five year anniversary, represented the end of the Ghanaian theatrical development that Sutherland had pursued. Though it had been part of the University of Ghana for most of its existence, the Drama Studio's geographical position in the heart of Accra, several miles from the University, had enabled a sense of independent endeavor. It had been both a home and a symbol of theatrical experiment, particularly for Sutherland who had seen it as a place at which 'people could point their fingers [...] and say, "that's a place where experiments in African drama are going on"'.<sup>255</sup>

The contrast in the types of performance space in the two buildings is significant in the changing narrative of Ghanaian theatre. Ngugi suggests that 'the circle [is] the central image of the African

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<sup>252</sup> Sandra E. Greene, 'Developing the Arts for Development: Perspectives on Ghana', *Africa Notes* (1998) [http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing\\_the\\_Arts\\_for\\_Development.pdf](http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/files/content/848/Developing_the_Arts_for_Development.pdf) accessed August 24 2010

<sup>253</sup> James Gibbs interview, conducted 29 July 2010

<sup>254</sup> Gibbs interview

<sup>255</sup> Robert July, *An African Voice: the role of the humanities in African independence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 76.

aesthetic',<sup>256</sup> and Sutherland had gone to great lengths with the Drama Studio to create a performance space in the round that reflected the traditional village story telling experience. The building of the proscenium arch theatre therefore, symbolically removed Sutherland's influence, replacing the traditional performative experience with a new, modern one, that realigned the function of Ghanaian theatre to reflect Rawlings' internationalist outlook. From the outside, the building is shaped like sails being caught in the wind and it represents a modern, grand home for a vibrant and assured theatre industry. The theatre itself is a proscenium arch with an auditorium that seats 1492 people, a number that seems incongruous to facilitating the intimate actor/audience relationship inherent in *Anansegoro* and *Abibigoro*. As a result it seems to have struggled to relate to the theatre that had grown and developed since independence. This is underlined by the National Commission on Culture's 2004 Cultural Policy document, which states that '[t]he design of theatres should be based on African indigenous architecture as well as African concepts and traditions of performance'.<sup>257</sup> Suggesting that just ten years into the National Theatre's existence, the Commission acknowledged the challenges that the building represents to the production of Ghanaian theatre.

The National Theatre immediately became home to three national companies: the National Dance Ensemble, the National Symphony Orchestra and *Abibigromma*, which had been brought from the University. The 1992 PNDC law 259 outlined the major objectives of the National Theatre to include,

the promotion and development of the performing arts in Ghana; the development and promotion of a strongly integrated national culture and the formulation of an effective export promotion programme of works.<sup>258</sup>

These policy points, reminiscent of Nkrumah's speech at the opening of the Drama Studio in 1961, mark the high point of what the Rawlings administration felt that theatre could accomplish and illustrate the place of theatre within the government's wider political agenda. The emphasis on the development and promotion of a 'national culture' and an 'export programme of work', suggests that by this point the government saw Ghanaian theatre as a codified national brand.

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<sup>256</sup>Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 116

<sup>257</sup>The National Commission on Culture, "The Cultural Policy of Ghana", 2004. <http://s158663955.websitehome.co.uk/ghanaculture/privatecontent/File/CULTURAL.%20POLICY%20-%20FINAL.pdf> 32 accessed 22 September 2010.

<sup>258</sup>National Theatre of Ghana website. <http://www.nationaltheatre.com.gh> accessed 12 December 2010.

Though the Drama Studio was rebuilt at the University of Ghana in accordance with ben-Abdallah's wishes, and even named the Efua T. Sutherland Drama Studio, Sutherland never visited it, nor did she step foot in the National Theatre. Her place in the narrative had been displaced. In her final interview conducted by Femi Osofisan in 1995 Sutherland made her stance on the National Theatre very clear:

that's not a place for experimentation [...] I can't do *The Marriage of Anansewa* in that theatre, as we could in the Drama Studio very beautifully [...] But they didn't think of that at all [...] Somebody came along and said I'll give you a loan to build a big theatre [...] this one won't allow developmental thinking [...] it's a monument.<sup>259</sup>

Others joined Sutherland in her sense of betrayal. Ama Ata Aidoo wrote the following poem, which concisely illustrates the relationship of the National Theatre with the defunct National Theatre Movement.

But the Drama Studio is gone, Robert,  
razed to the ground:  
to make way for someone's notion of  
the kind of theatre  
I  
Should want<sup>260</sup>

This episode in Ghanaian theatre history saw the establishment of a new single, dominant aesthetic that became enshrined in law and housed in a new symbol of Ghanaian international diplomacy. In many ways ben-Abdallah was even more successful than Sutherland in creating a theatrical trope that defined, through active, personal political allying, a single, defined genre of Ghanaian theatre. The 1985 Copyright Act, and its subsequent amendments, crystallised and commodified the concept of Ghanaian theatre, taking it from being an experimental, inquisitive expression of nationalism to being a brand, capable of raising revenue. Symbolically, the law ossified the folk heritage that had been key to the development of Ghanaian theatre, and created a definite point at which folk culture ended and commercial culture began. The law placed folklore into the stewardship of the government, and later, the president in perpetuity. Through disconnecting new artists from their folk heritage, subsequent theatrical development, contingent

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<sup>259</sup> Femi Osofisan "‘There's a Lot of Strength in Our People': Efua Sutherland's Last Interview," *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism* eds. Anne Adams and, Esi Sutherland-Addy (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2007) 206.

<sup>260</sup> James Gibbs, "Introduction" *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, ed. James Gibbs (Amsterdam: Editions Rodolphi, 2009) xxii

on adopting the legitimating codes of *Anansegoro and Abibigoro*, was hindered. Through adopting and developing the modes of Ghanaian theatre and expanding the iconographic nature of Ghanaian theatre into a legalistic sphere, ben-Abdallah further restricted the legitimating parameters of Ghanaian theatre for following generations. The post-independent trend to promote a mono-theatrical expression, reclaimed and compounded by ben-Abdallah and Rawlings, left new artists with a shallow well from which to draw.



### Playwriting and Democracy, 1993 - 2007.

In this final chapter I trace the changing relationship between playwriting and politics in the years following the re-establishment of democracy in 1993 with specific reference to Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (2006).<sup>261</sup> The play, like ben-Abdallah's *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, demonstrates how the established modes of Ghanaian theatre could be adopted and developed to articulate an insurgent voice which directly questioned Ghana's political direction. However, the monopolistic system of artistic production, by this time firmly established in Ghanaian theatre and enshrined in the working practices of the National Theatre, continued to hinder a diverse theatre industry. This situation was highlighted by a lack of new, important plays being published in this period and underlined by the 2004 Cultural Policy document, produced by the National Commission on Culture, which defined the function of theatre in Ghana within the broader cultural landscape.

At the beginning of the 1990s a new crop of playwrights, inspired by the success of Sutherland and ben-Abdallah, emerged from the School of Performing Arts. This emergence was greeted with optimism in *African and Caribbean Theatre*, which stated that 'Efo Kodjo Mawugbe and other young playwrights give evidence of a new resurgence in Ghanaian theatre'.<sup>262</sup> However, that evidence was slightly misrepresentative as, two generations after independence, theatre in Ghana had become very specific in its form, content and training. Dzifa Glikpoe, then an actor with *Abibigromma* now its Director, states that new writers simply adopted the performative codes of *Anansegoro*. 'Young people began to copy the style [...] the elements you find in the Ananse story telling technique [...] you find the same running through, the music, it's just the subject matter [that changes]'.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Yaw Asare, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (Legon: StudyGhana Foundation, 2006).

<sup>262</sup> Bahnam, Martin, Erroll Hill and George Woodyard, eds., *Africa and Caribbean Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) 40.

<sup>263</sup> Glikpoe interview.

As discussed in previous chapters, one of the key elements in both *Anansegoro* and *Abibigoro* is the way in which song and dance are used to further the story. Glikpoe recalls that ‘in Efo [Mawugbe]’s first play [...] the dancing was slapped on to the thing’.<sup>264</sup> Glikpoe’s contextualisation of this remark gives revealing insights into the expectation placed on playwrights to replicate the codified form of Ghanaian theatre:

if you go to Abdallah’s plays [...] you cannot take out the music and dance and get the play to stand up, you cannot, but there were some who slapped music and dance onto the play, and you can take out the music and the dance and the play will run, it won’t suffer any defect at all, and that’s the difference.<sup>265</sup>

Therefore, by the 1990s part of the skill of the playwright in Ghana is in successfully replicating the established and identifiable performative elements of *Anansegoro*. Furthermore, it was the use of these specific performative elements that cited the play, and so the playwright, within the canon of Ghanaian theatre.

Asare, one time lecturer at the University’s School of Performing Arts, joined the National Theatre as Director of *Abibigromma* in 1994,<sup>266</sup> and stayed in post for five years.<sup>267</sup> Glikpoe recalls that ‘Asare was very prolific’<sup>268</sup> and that whilst he was Director ‘we were doing his plays more and more’.<sup>269</sup> Therefore, at both the School of Performing Arts and the National Theatre, the Director of *Abibigromma* was also in many cases the main playwright. As Glikpoe explains:

[ben] Abdallah was one of the key people who saw to the formation of this company and he was a theatre person we were doing a lot of his plays, more of his plays than other plays from outside. So at that time he was very popular, people started complaining that we were doing only [ben] Abdallah plays.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>264</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>265</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>266</sup>The first play performed at the National Theatre was Yaw Asare’s *The Leopard’s Story*, which featured members of the newly formed resident National Theatre players, *Abibigromma*.

<sup>267</sup>In January 1993 the Fourth Republic was inaugurated and in the same month the National Theatre opened its doors. On 3 November 1992 Presidential elections were held in Ghana for the first time since 1979. The recently retired Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings stood as a civilian candidate and won a strongly contested election. The opposition parties boycotted the following parliamentary elections thereby enabling the National Democratic Council (NDC) to record a large majority. The NDC remained in power until December 2001 when a another strongly contested election was won by the National Patriotic Party (NPP).

<sup>268</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>269</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>270</sup>Glikpoe interview.

The result of this creative monopoly was that only a small amount of plays were produced by the company. The statement also underlines the now established trend in Ghanaian theatre of the periodic dominance of a single writer. As Glikpoe states, ‘if we were doing [ben] Abdallah’s plays it was [ben] Abdallah’s name that was going [becoming famous]. When Asare came it was his name that was going’.<sup>271</sup> This model of production perpetuated the creative process established by Sutherland thirty years previously, and was compounded by the monopoly that *Abibigromma* enjoyed as ‘the only professional theatre company’.<sup>272</sup>

However, within the strict parameters of Ghanaian theatre, Asare used his position as the main writer for *Abibigromma* to test the boundaries of *Anansegoro* and *Abibigoro*. His most famous play *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, politicises *Anansegoro* and uses the familiarity of the conventions to shock and question his audience. The play is a piece of magical realism, set in the fictional Land of Idiots, it contains a chorus and the action moves easily between song, direct address and dialogue. The play begins with the character of Kweku Ananse addressing the audience; he acknowledges the playwright, criticising Asare’s choice of title, but nods to ‘the discretion of the playwright’.<sup>273</sup> By so doing Asare immediately implements Sutherland’s ‘hoaxing’ technique which, as Gibbs defines it, is ‘the fully conscious enjoyment of the willing suspension of disbelief’.<sup>274</sup> By acknowledging the fiction of the play Asare enables a conspiratorial relationship to develop between the character and the audience as the familiar antihero narrative of Ananse develops.

Asare uses the conventions of *Anansegoro* to present a familiar character whom he then profoundly subverts in order to present a highly political message. Whereas ben-Abdallah redefined *Anansegoro* to fit a pan-Africanist politics that supported Rawlings’ early revolutionary agenda, Asare worked within the confines of Ghanaian theatrical convention to present an insurgent and politically oppositional message. Asare draws his audience in further to the familiarity of the performative experience, even acknowledging Sutherland in Ananse’s opening address. Ananse thanks Sutherland for her previous stories about him, saying ‘I puff my

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<sup>271</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>272</sup> Glikpoe interview.

<sup>273</sup>Yaw Asare, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (Legon: StudyGhana Foundation, 2006) 1.

<sup>274</sup>Asare, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, xiv.

pipe to that thoughtful daughter of the land',<sup>275</sup> however, unlike Sutherland, Asare's Ananse is not harmless. As Awo Asiedu, Director of the School of Performing Arts, states, 'his Ananse is more ruthless and cruel [...], the trickster character in folk tales does not cause real harm [...] but Asare's does [...] he does take that mould but he goes further'.<sup>276</sup>

Asare's Ananse is not representative of the aspirational masses who comically try to get ahead, only to be brought back down. Rather, he represents the ruling elite and uses his trickery to take advantage of honest people. Towards the end of the play Ananse fools his guard into drinking glue so that he will be unable to tell of Ananse's trickery. This shocking passage directly reflects the contemporary socio-political landscape which had lost the revolutionary ideology of Rawlings early administration and had moved towards a more western model of government 'committed to the logic of capitalist accumulation'.<sup>277</sup> In the programme notes to the play's 1994 remount, Asare writes that the play 'is meant above all, to sensitize African and other exploited peoples of the world on the inherent lusts, perversions and attitudes which have facilitated the process of their entanglement, dislocation and dispossession'.<sup>278</sup> In this way Asare articulates the political urgency of his work, and echoes of Joe de Graft are evident. Whereas de Graft sites the action of *Through a Film Darkly* firmly within contemporary Ghana, Asare uses the metaphorical 'Dim-nyim-lira', the Land of Idiots, to demonstrate to his audience the dangers of allowing the political class to manipulate and disenfranchise them from their cultural heritage. With this play Asare begins to demonstrate how the most fundamental element of Sutherland's *Anansegoro*, Ananse himself, can be used to make political, insurgent work.

However, the play also inadvertently highlights the diminishing importance of theatre within Ghanaian culture. Whereas the publication and dissemination of plays had been a key reason for the development of playwriting in Ghana in the decade following independence, none of Asare's plays were published in his lifetime.<sup>279</sup> Glikpoe recalls that 'after he was dead one lecturer decided to publish *Ananse In the Land of Idiots*'.<sup>280</sup> That the most famous play of the Director of

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<sup>275</sup>Yaw Asare, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (Legon: StudyGhana Foundation, 2006) 3.

<sup>276</sup> Dr Awo Asiedu interview, conducted 22 September 2009.

<sup>277</sup> Paul Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (London: Pinter, 1995) 273.

<sup>278</sup>Yaw Asare, *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (Legon: StudyGhana Foundation, 2006) xviii.

<sup>279</sup> Unfortunately, following the death of Efo Mawugbe, this pattern has continued up to 2011.

<sup>280</sup>Glikpoe interview.

*Abibigromma* was published posthumously underlines the fact that there was no other theatre company in Ghana who would read or perform the play and, more significantly, that as the political need for theatre diminished, there was no will to publish even the most successful and important playwrights.

The lack of political need for theatre is illustrated by the changing patterns in viewing habits in Ghana brought about by the proliferation of television and Nigerian films. By the mid 1990s audiences were turning away from theatre and traditional forms of communal entertainment as Ghana was transformed by the arrival of electricity into villages. The result, as noted by Nugent, was ‘the proliferation of television sets in rural homes’.<sup>281</sup> Equally, Ghanaians now used their televisions to look abroad to ‘programmes borrowed from CNN’.<sup>282</sup> Therefore traveling theatre troupes were now a much less desirable means of reaching people than they had been a generation before. The Nigerian film industry, ‘Nollywood’, makes and distributes up to two thousand films a year.<sup>283</sup> According to Federica Agelucci the films:

tell stories that appeal to and reflect the lives of its public: stars are local actors; plots confront the viewer with familiar situations of romance, comedy, witchcraft, bribery, prostitution. The narrative is overdramatic, deprived of happy endings, tragic. The aesthetic is loud, violent, excessive; nothing is said, everything is shouted.<sup>284</sup>

The production turnover, effective distribution and cheapness of the films means that they have superseded theatre as popular, accessible entertainment across the region. The combined impact of these new media outlets was also felt by the National Theatre. Glikpoe states that ‘people would now want to stay home and watch videos [...] going out at night to the National Theatre to watch a live show, it became burdensome’.<sup>285</sup>

The rise in alternative media also brought about a redefinition of the place of theatre in Ghana at a policy level. In response to the success of the Nigerian film industry the National Commission on Culture’s 2004 Cultural Policy notes that the state shall ‘promote the indigenisation of film

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<sup>281</sup> Paul Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana* (London: Pinter, 1995) 268.

<sup>282</sup> Nugent, *Big Men, Small Boys and Politics in Ghana*, 268.

<sup>283</sup> Colin Freeman, “[In Nollywood, 'lights, camera, action' is best case scenario](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1550776/In-Nollywood-lights-camera-action-is-best-case-scenario.html)” *The Telegraph*, May (2006) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1550776/In-Nollywood-lights-camera-action-is-best-case-scenario.html> accessed 11 June 2011.

<sup>284</sup> Peter Hugo, “Nollywood” <http://www.pieterhugo.com/nollywood/> accessed 1 July 2011.

<sup>285</sup>Glikpoe interview.

distribution, assist in the marketing of Ghanaian films and establish standards in exhibition facilities compatible with acceptable theatre usage'.<sup>286</sup> The National Commission, recognising the importance of a competitive national film industry, encouraged the sharing of theatre's limited resources. The document demonstrates how quickly and completely film had come to fulfill the historical role of theatre in Ghana, as a cost effective definer and disseminator of culture that appeals to both the educated and illiterate sections of society. Though *Abibigromma* has attempted to compete for new audiences, Glikpoe acknowledges the immediate economic dilemma of such projects, 'you get to a village [...] but how much can you charge a farmer?'.<sup>287</sup>

The 2004 Cultural Policy document is wide ranging and focuses on areas of cultural preservation and access. It largely focusses on the need to establish more museums, galleries and written materials that can be disseminated. Theatre, though noted as a useful tool, is conspicuous by the lack of emphasis placed on it. Where theatre is mentioned, it is noted that the '[d]ocumentation, preservation and presentation of written literature...shall be encouraged'.<sup>288</sup> Therefore, the political worth of theatre is now as a means of preserving an established cultural identity in published texts, rather than enabling the creation of new texts that renegotiate or redefine a changing sense of nation.

Without the economic investment that theatre enjoyed during its days of political support, professional theatre in Ghana has had to adapt its remit within the wider cultural spectrum in order to survive. Glikpoe points towards the growth of theatre for development in which *Abibigromma* have recently become engaged and suggests that 'we are not only concentrated on mainstream theatre, we move to theatre for development, because [...] they are always sponsored'.<sup>289</sup> The economic aspect of these projects is crucial to *Abibigromma*, as Glikpoe explains, 'when we do [theatre for development projects] and we get some money, then we go back to our mainstream [plays]. That's how we fund ourselves'.<sup>290</sup> Therefore, the artistic

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<sup>286</sup>The National Commission on Culture, "The Cultural Policy of Ghana", 2004. <http://s158663955.websitehome.co.uk/ghanaculture/privatecontent/File/CULTURAL.%20POLICY%20-%20FINAL.pdf> 46 accessed 22 September 2010.

<sup>287</sup>Dzifa Glikpoe interview.

<sup>288</sup>The National Commission on Culture, "The Cultural Policy of Ghana", 2004. <http://s158663955.websitehome.co.uk/ghanaculture/privatecontent/File/CULTURAL.%20POLICY%20-%20FINAL.pdf> 30 accessed 22 September 2010.

<sup>289</sup> Glikpoe interview.

<sup>290</sup>Glikpoe interview.

programme of *Abibigromma* has now become reliant on its ability to engage in theatre for development projects. This scenario places significant practical restrictions on the work the company can produce, not least the length of time they are able to spend developing new work. Glikpoe recalls that:

When George Bush came here and launched his fight against malaria with our President at the time, we were asked to take up that programme and we stayed in the central region for two months working in different communities. So these ones are paid for [...] all these things we have to bring out to people just to keep us going.<sup>291</sup>

The years after 1993 represent a slow decline in the fortunes of Ghanaian theatre, and the gradual erosion of the historical relationship between playwrights and politics. The success of Sutherland and ben-Abdallah in establishing a framework of legitimating codes that dictated both the form of the play and the creative process, compounded by the iconic nature of the National Theatre, restricted the ways in which new theatre could be made. Moreover, the political agenda that had previously supported the exploration and definition of a new sense of nation, now emphasised the protection and preservation of a defined national culture. This is evident in the 2007 Ghana@50 programme which was designed to run alongside countrywide celebrations to mark fifty years since the end of British rule.<sup>292</sup> During the event the National Theatre staged one play from the Ghanaian canon every month,<sup>293</sup> of those plays not one had been written in the previous two decades. Ultimately, the importance of the event, which was the most significant staged by the National Theatre since its inception, was not the texts or the productions, but the political symbolism of Ghanaian theatre as an icon of a robust and dynamic culture.

Through researching the story of Ghanaian theatre, I initially aimed to understand why Ghanaian theatre flourished directly post independence but then faded to its present state. I felt that this was an important, unheard story that could aid an understanding of the plight of Ghana's current playwrights. To this end, the analysis has enabled an understanding of the colonial and postcolonial eras not as two distinct epochs in Ghanaian theatre history, though they were

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<sup>291</sup>Glikpoe interview.

<sup>292</sup> January: *Everyman*, adapted by Martin Owusu; February: *The Blinkards* dir. Owusu; March: *The Slaves*; April: *Co-existence*, Martin Owusu and Willie Anku; May: *The Fifth Landing Stage*; June: *The Third Woman*; July: *The Marriage of Anansewa*; August: *Dilemma of a Ghost*; September: *Offending the Corpse* Martin Owusu; October: *Sons and Daughters* Dir. Martin Owusu; *The Legend of Aku Sika*, Martin Owusu; December: *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*. Source <http://www.ghana50.go.gh>

<sup>293</sup> With the exception of April in which Profs. Owusu and Anku collaborated on a musical piece exploring 'diverse Ghanaian traditional rhythms' with 'dramatic re-enactments' from Ghanaian legend'.

politically manufactured to appear that way, but rather as a fluid, causal relationship. Nkrumah's response to the liminal and incoherent nature of colonial era literary theatre enabled him to recreate and define theatre as a central element in the nation building process. Therefore, through developing within Nkrumah's strict political agenda, theatre's function and aesthetics became necessarily codified as practitioners, such as Efua Sutherland, sought to compliment a greater political cause, and so benefit from the political patronage that such work secured. This led to the development of legitimating codes in Ghanaian theatre which established a trend of delegitimisation of alternative, pluralistic or oppositional voices. Moreover, having developed within defined political parameters post-independence, theatre was unable to redefine itself when the political situation changed (firstly post Nkrumah and latterly post Rawlings), as the legitimating codes of Ghanaian theatre had been so effectively established. Therefore, theatre in Ghana suffered periodic decline when it was not actively supported by a political agenda as there was no colonial or postcolonial legacy of oppositional theatre. Furthermore, the primarily political function of theatre in Ghana focussed on establishing the symbols of cultural success, investing in icons of culture rather than establishing a system for sustained and sustainable theatrical creation.

Therefore, the analysis of the plays as a collective document of Ghana's cultural history has delivered an insight into the complex interplay between politics and culture within a colonial and then postcolonial society. Addressing the question of the development of Ghanaian playwriting and the reasons behind its dramatic diminution with reference to postcolonial theory, based upon the claims of ben-Abdallah, has enabled me to explore the place of Ghana within a wider critical context. The discovery of moments of disjuncture between theory and the reality of the Ghanaian situation, have revealed a highly individual case study in which the development of Ghanaian theatre has not been linear or cohesive with postcolonial discourse, but has consistently questioned the place and function of playwriting within the cultural and political arenas in Ghana.

Additionally the question of authorship, and ultimately ownership, of culture within Ghana, as analysed through the prism of a highly codified theatrical regime which explicitly draws on folklore, has led to more questions, such as how has the copyright legislation introduced in 1985 affected the creation of new artistic works? What incentive is there in such a highly regulated and codified system for new playwrights to make work? And what role does the National



Folklore Board play in funding the development of new artists in the absence of a regulated Arts Council? Equally, they ask fundamental questions of the function of playwriting within small postcolonial nations, and the way in which the governments of such nations use moments of cultural enunciation to describe and support their political distinctiveness.

Appendix A.

Map of West Africa



Source: <http://www.anna.aero/2010/06/30/accra-attracts-more-out-of-africa-services-to-ghana/>

Map of Ghana



Source: <http://www.radar7.org/usa-news/ghana-map.html>

**Appendix B**

<b>Tenure</b>	<b>Incumbent</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Notes</b>
1957 - 1966	Kwame Nkrumah	CCP	Deposed in a military coup.
1966 - 1969	Major General Ankrah	National Liberation Council	Forced to resign
1969 - 1970	Brigadier Afrifa	National Liberation Council, subsequently Chairman of the Presidential Commission	
1970 - 1972	Edward Akufo-Addo		Deposed in a military coup.
1972 - 1978	Colonel Acheampong (subsequently General)	National Redemption Council, subsequently Supreme Military Council	Deposed in a palace coup.
1978 - 1979	Lietenant-General Akuffo	Supreme Military Council	Deposed in a military coup.
1979	Flight Lieutenant Rawlings	Armed Forces Revolutionary Council	
1979 - 1981	Dr Hilla Limann	PNP	Deposed in a military coup.
1981 - 2001	Flight Lieutenant Rawlings (subsequently President)	Provisional National Defence Council (subsequently National Democratic Council)	Stood as a civilian candidate in the 1993 Elections.
2001 - 2009	John Kufour	NPP	

## Appendix C. <sup>294</sup>

Below is a list of the plays considered in this thesis. It is not intended as an exhaustive list of Ghanaian playwriting history but as both an indicator of the types of plays that were published throughout the timeframe addressed in this thesis and a demonstration of the increasing obstacle of publication (and therefore dissemination) for playwrights in Ghana. There are notable exceptions from this list and thesis, Saka Acquaye's Ga 'folk opera' *The Lost Fisherman* and Aidoo's *Anowa*, and the plays of Martin Owusu and Bill Marshall. I am acutely aware, through researching Ghanaian theatre, that several important contributors are sidelined or wholly ignored in contemporary discourse. It is not my intention to add to this situation. My aim with this thesis is to unpick the complex relationship between playwriting and politics in Ghana as it developed and though some major works are omitted from this study they are by no means irrelevant to the story of Ghanaian theatre.

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<sup>294</sup> For an exhaustive list of Ghanaian plays and criticism see James Gibbs, *Ghanaian Theatre: a bibliography* (Llangyndir: Nolisment Publications, 1995/7).

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