

# **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: Towards the Search for an Authentic Ghanaian Theatre**

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Abstract



The idea of a particular society or region creating a kind of theatre, which would be seen as authentic cannot be underestimated. There is the need to seek expressions which have the capacity of conveying our peculiar experiences as an African nation in our performances (drama), while relieving us from the somewhat burden of entrenched Eurocentric classics drama impositions. This paper firstly attempts to justify the need for the search for an authentic Ghanaian theatre, secondly, bringing to the fore how creative writers can view as well as tap into indigenous knowledge, thus, the rich cultural heritage, history and totality of the people's experience as a source material for theatre/ drama which may qualify as an authentic Ghanaian theatre. Postcolonial theatrical discourse is the framework in which this paper is situated.

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## **Introduction**

The constitution of an authentic Ghanaian theatre can be as diverse as the Ghanaian society itself. This can be so due to variations in idea, belief, religion as well as ethnic backgrounds. These notwithstanding, attempts and efforts have been made by some sons and daughters of the land through the plays they write to augment the charting of the course of developing an authentic Ghanaian theatre.

In this paper, I will attempt a justification of the need for the search for an authentic Ghanaian theatre, and also bring to the fore how indigenous knowledge should be seen

as a depository, within which creative writers can view and tap into as potent source material.

First of all let me give a brief recent historical background of the commencement of contemporary Ghanaian theatre.

## **The Beginning of Contemporary Ghanaian Theatre**

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The gaining of political independence by many African countries boomed in the late 1950's through the 1960's. Ghana, the pioneer in the sub region, had to grapple with the negative attitudes to the values of the arts of Ghana that were perceived as fetishistic by local Ghanaians, resulting from colonial cultural disorientation. A draft cultural policy of Ghana document states:

*Colonialism, consisted of the total denial of our history, the denigration of our system of values and the replacement of our essential religious, social, political and economic structures, carefully fashioned to ensure the perpetration of the subjugation of our people. The nurturing and enhancement of an inferiority complex in our personality and the continual servicing of both the ego and the material well-being of the colonial metropolis by the colonial structures were so established (1989, p.2).*

Nevertheless, the post-independence 'new Ghanaian', took up the challenge to rewrite Ghana's history and theater. This is an indication that, most of the already existing written plays, by Ghanaians were viewed as having colonial traits. The most important fact, to be considered here is the new Ghanaian's will to correct the wrongs engineered by the colonialist.

Kofi Agovi, amplifies this view when he says:

*On the eve of decolonization and after, African scholars, researchers, creative artists and writers, caught up in the new wave of African nationalism took up the challenge of refuting colonial assertions (1988, p.3)*

This challenge, which the Africans took upon themselves to correct according to Agovi, resulted in the various literary works including theatre because, theatre, among other things, is viewed as an institutional response to the search for abiding values. This suggests the enormous role theatre plays in the decolonizing of minds. After gaining independence, the overwhelming sense of assertions and nationalism (amongst people) did abound. So that theatre which took its source from local traditions can be

seen as a tool to solidify and entrench potent Ghanaian traditions. The effectiveness of theatre in this regard cannot be underestimated since theatre was used to uphold the society's highest ideals . It was used to stabilize society.

In 1955, a committee was set up by the then Education Ministry, to examine how best a national theatre movement could be developed. The work of this committee resulted in the formation of an interim committee for an Arts Council, whose mandate was to come up with ideas, which could be used as a basis for a practical policy towards the creation of a National Theatre movement. It was through this, that in 1958, an Arts council of Ghana was formally constituted by an Act of Parliament.

When the National Theatre Movement commenced, it developed a national policy document or a blueprint, which aimed at suggesting more concrete steps and well laid down procedure to augment the development of theatre in Ghana. According to Albert Hammond (1977) the national theatre policy document was, to bring into existence a theatre movement that will derive its vitality and authenticity from the roots firmly planted in the true traditions of the people. Thus, Ghanaian theatre, at independence, received immediate high profile attention.

This was timely, since there were numerous challenges in relation to the arts which really needed such attention. There was the desire to write the kind of plays that would not just satisfy the need for literature but most importantly create theatre.

Furthermore, this theatre should inform, structure, language and aesthetics attract little or no debates when touted as Ghanaian theatre.

## **Is there a Need for Authentic Ghanaian Theatre?**

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It is important to acknowledge the fact that the Ghanaian writer in general in recent decades have moved away from "writing to suit the colonialists" to writing to reflect her society. It is the realization or somewhat rediscovery that have resulted in the challenge, African Scholars have taken upon themselves to produce works which according to Kofi Agovi;

*Emphasize the unity of African peoples, the common elements in the cultural, ideas, values and practices, the common historical experiences, values and practices (1988, p.71)*

This implies that if the playwright does not reflect his or her society or people, he or she may not be charting the course of the creation of an authentic theatre of his or her people. The prestigious and coveted international Nobel Prize for Literature, went to a black writer for the first time in 1986, (Wole Soyinka), and in 1992, the same award went to another black poet-playwright, Derek Walcott. What is important about this piece of information is summed up by W. Branch,

*Soyinka writes.... With themes that are less impressive for their universality than for their Africanness" and "Walcot's work mimes the rich multicultural heritage of this region (1999)*

The basic commonality existing between these two great writers from different societies is that, both write to reflect their societies. Their interest lay in the fact that, they prefer to showcase to the rest of the world what pertain in their environment. They are interested in showcasing their rich indigenous knowledge, the local knowledge that is unique to their culture or society.

Ephraim Amu and J.H.Nketia, two of Ghana's finest musicians/composers derive the source for their compositions from the local traditional genres. They spend time and energy to study and research and inquire into the local music forms, as the basis to compose authentic music pieces accepted by all and sundry.

Maware Opoku, one of Ghana's foremost dance choreographers of all time, the one credited with over 90% of all traditional Ghana dance on Ghanaian stages today, also studied and picked from the already existing local genre.

It is important to point out that, the creation of an authentic theatre may either be for a larger a continent, such as Africa or limited relatively smaller societies such as Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya or South Africa. The latter, which falls within the preview of my paper, seem more attainable than the former, due to the enormous challenges that may accompanying it. This is because, the larger the setting, the more difficult its attainability.

For some time now, Mohammed Ben Abdallah's effort is an example one of Ghana's prime playwrights alive has been trying to create a kind of theatre for all Africans that can be seen as authentic. This he christens "Abibigro". According to him, he is searching for a theatre that would reflect the whole of Africa and even Africans in the Diaspora. But the big question is, how successful has this grand venture been? Limiting the Search to a relatively smaller society like Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa etc. may be more attainable within the shortest possible period. One major merit in the need

to develop an authentic and indigenous theatre of a people is identity fostering. So that even though, contemporary African theatre practitioners need to be aware of the need to develop an authentic African theatre, it should be a theatre which would be relevant to the whole community, so as to be part of the people's lives. I would therefore agree with Abdallah (1987) when he argues that it is time, African playwrights set their own standards richly and the totality of their own experience. By implication, an authentic theatre of a particular society should include the rituals, music and folklore of the people encompassing their traditional drumming, dances and proverbs, among others. Another merit in the need to develop an authentic Ghanaian theatre is that it will help in the development, growth and sustenance of theatre in Ghana. This point/merit shouldn't be underestimated because; it has the potency of not only placing the theatre pieces on the world stage but the writers or practitioners as well. This is possible because, specific writers who may be charting the course may attract high level scholarly work. As critics begin to do a critique of their work, academic researchers may also be tickled to do inquisition into their work and personality, which will in turn open their being recognized.

## **Creative Writers and Indigenous Knowledge.**

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Indigenous knowledge, I believe comprises the totality of a peoples local, basic way of life, practices, beliefs, ideologies and things that will either portray or reveal them as a unique people. Any group of people from a particular geographical location can only be seen and regarded as unique, when they exhibit specific traits, gaits, inflexions etc, which can be seen in or among them only. So that, when they even go to live among another group of people elsewhere outside their original locale, they can be ginged them out of the lot. Identity, I will like to stress is very important, in the struggle towards gaining recognition and exhibiting total and whole independence. Creative writing in general or plays/theatre to narrow the scope is able to carve identity. This is because theater is a slice of life put on stage. A playwright therefore is supposed to mirror his society. This is why I would want to agree with Cassady, (1995) when he says; "Theatre revolves round the culture, lifestyles and belief systems of people. It projects a society's history and norms".

Playwrights, through their plays/theatres should also reflect their era or societies they belong. Charles Darwin, in his theory of evolution propounds that, people are controlled not only by heredity but most importantly, environment. Environment here, suggests conditions pertaining to an area, conditions that are unique to a specific area. It is important to note that these theories were mostly responsible for the emergence of

what came to be known as Realist Drama, a major theatrical form. Athol Fugard, a South African playwright in his play *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*, mirrors apartheid South Africa, at a time when it was illegal for blacks to hold any kind of meeting. Femi Osofisan, a Nigerian playwright in his play, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, reveals a situation in Nigeria in the 1970s. Kobina Sekyi, a Ghanaian playwright, wrote *The Binkards* in which he portrays how “been tos” (Ghanaians who had travelled abroad and returned) behaved in the 1930s-1950s. Efua Sutherland, one of Ghana’s revered playwrights created a theatre which reflected originally local Ghanaian Akan storytelling tradition. She christened this kind of theatre Anansegoro (Spiders Story or theatre), (just to mention a few). All of these great playwrights of Africa were craving for African identity as a people. After decades of colonial infections, (as noted earlier on) there was the urge for writers to produce pieces which would bring out their people’s identity, which are worth noting. Sutherland conceded that her work towards the creation of an authentic Ghanaian theatre was as the result of a call made on Ghanaians by the maiden president of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, to the lost for Ghanaian their cultural identity and then use theatre to propagate and relive it. Louisa Aggrey (2001:30) confirms this when she writes:

*Efua Sutherland, in adherence to the call to research into our lost Ghanaian identity as a prevalent in the wake of Ghana’s attainment of independence in the late 50s and early 60s...*

It is imperative, to note from the ongoing discussions that playwrights falling on or using indigenous knowledge as raw material or ingredient or even framework and foundation of their plays or theatres is prime.

African writers should move towards charting a course to the creation of authentic theatres if not for Africa in general, at least for their specific motherland. These theatres should reflect their societies’, remote past, present for there is so much material to fall on as agree with Wilson and Goldfarb (2000) who stated:

*Early African societies had many traditional performances that were connected to ceremonies and rituals and used music, song and dance. African theatre artists in the C20th and beyond should use these traditional forms and subvert forms of popular western theatre in order to create work that reflects anti-colonial struggles.*

Resistance to an old order and identity establishment should become paramount; hence African writers should have to work more towards this direction. I must admit, efforts are being made towards this direction, but I am only reiterating or just pushing that, a lot more vibrancy, force, passion and extra determination should be put in there.

I am restating the need to develop an authentic and indigenous theatre of a people. This is to infer that being able to identify a particular group of people with a particular style or convention of writing is important. In fact, one may not be far from right to believe that it is based on this quest that Ngugi Wa Thiongo's radical mode application of "Decolonization", where he advocates a total rejection of certain western or foreign values and systems especially language. He advocates that writers use their local indigenous languages, setting the pace by writing in his mother tongue, Gikuyu.

To conclude, indigenous knowledge should be viewed playwrights as the key as well as the light or illuminator on the worthy path towards the search and subsequent establishment of authentic theatres in Ghana and the creative writers' contribution towards the greater goals of Pan Africanism.

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