

Efua Theodora Morgue Sutherland

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Efua Theodora Morgue Sutherland, the grande dame of <sup>the</sup> Ghanaian drama and theatrical world, was born on 27 June 1924. An Akan by birth, she was trained in the folkways <sup>of her people</sup> and was formally educated in schools in Ghana and at the University of London. This education has stood her in good stead for her writing. In her plays she utilizes local myths, folktales and traditions to comment on the present, showing that human nature has not changed; she is, however, determined to change the inhuman situation in Ghana and, by extension, the African world. Sutherland has three children of her own, a fact that has aroused her interest in writing and producing plays for educating children. She believes in engaging the young and the not-so-young for revolutionizing the country.

Versatile, indefatigable, and a visionary, <sup>she has produced</sup> her works in different genres--<sup>and</sup> drama (performed both in Ghana and abroad), poetry, the short story, <sup>Her pioneering work in Ghanaian theater has</sup> and ~~numerous interviews and her tenacious hold on Ghanaian theatre, have helped to create a strong tradition in Ghana. She has~~ undoubtedly affected a whole generation of Ghanaian dramatists working and producing material in Akan and English. She helped to create a conducive atmosphere in which dramatists like Ama Ata Aidoo, Patience

Henaku Addo, <sup>and</sup> Joe de Graft thrived. The impact of her work is demonstrable by the fact that she is a household name in Ghana and <sup>her plays</sup> ~~she~~ <sup>are</sup> studied in African universities. She has had some hostile reception, <sup>particularly from</sup> ~~as with~~ Ayi Kwei Armah, who lampooned her in his novel Fragments through a character named Aunt Efua.

She generated interest in the theatre <sup>by</sup> in 1958 when she founded the Ghana Experimental Theatre. Her approach was radical; ~~as~~ she wanted to take the theatre <sup>to</sup> to the urban and rural worlds. This experiment lasted till 1961. With funds from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Arts Council of Ghana, the ambitious Sutherland, in 1960, founded the Ghana Drama Studio to try out plays <sup>that might</sup> ~~to~~ rouse people from their apathy at a time when Nkrumaism was energizing the populace and driving them ideologically towards socialism. <sup>In 1963</sup> ~~The Studio soon~~ <sup>became</sup> part of the University of Ghana, ~~in 1963 with its establishment~~ <sup>in</sup> housed ~~at~~ the Institute of African Studies. She had thus moved from performing plays experimentally in the streets of Ghana to the ivory tower of the Ghanaian academy.

In her productions, she shows an interest in the nature of human power <sup>and</sup> a dedication to <sup>g</sup> ~~roots for~~ change, <sup>emphasizing</sup> ~~as she emphasizes~~ the indispensable role of women in effecting the revolution. She has generated some moral awareness by using the oral traditional repertoire because of its familiarity <sup>to</sup> ~~to~~ her audience.

She is widely acclaimed for her three major plays--Foriwa (1967), Edufa (1967), and The Marriage of Anansewa: A Storytelling Drama (1975).

She also has <sup>published</sup> some children plays, notably Two Rhythm Plays (1968), incorporating "Vulture! Vulture!" and "Tahinta." She has written short stories and some poetry, though she is not distinguished for these.

Foriwa had a long gestation period. It first appeared as a short story, "New Life at Kyerefaso" in 1960 in Langston Hughes's An African Treasury. As if bothered by the limited impact that a short story could have in an analphabetic population, Sutherland changed the form and expanded the work into a three-act play titled Foriwa. The core of the play emanated from Sutherland's experimental theatre, the Kodzidan, taking place in the village Atwia, in an attempt to inject a fresh spirit into the community.

An autobiographical strain is discernible in Foriwa if we consider the Queen Mother as an alter ego for Sutherland, while Foriwa might represent Sutherland's eldest daughter, Esi Sutherland-Addy, who has followed <sup>in</sup> her mother's footsteps somewhat by working in the Institute of African Studies, and by being recently chosen to help in nation building <sup>by</sup> with the Rawlings government. The mother-daughter bonding is well developed in Foriwa with its emphasis on female and communal solidarity.

The female characters in the play, namely the Queen Mother and Foriwa, are independent and dynamic, traits that benefit the society. The play was first performed in Akan in 1962 and comments fearlessly on the five years of little progress after Ghanaian independence in 1957. The play accentuates the women's voice to show women (and men) what women can do to contribute to national development.

"Kyerefaso has long been asleep," (Foriwa), we are told, and so

needs a prince and a princess in the forms of Labaran and Foriwa, to wake it up. The foundation on which they are to build has already been laid by their predecessors. In the play, Sutherland proposes that all the people--men and women, old and young, the educated and the illiterate, the traditionally oriented and the technologically minded, the indigene and the stranger--should be involved in community development. This play appeals for national unity, discarding gender, ethnic, and ideological differences.

To convey the idea of the social malaise, images of decadence proliferate ~~the scene~~. There is the foundation of a building that has not been completed--the "dilapidated royal house" a symbol of the state of the country; the "camp" with its temporary nature; the "depressed condition" of the bookstore which should help to disseminate knowledge; and vultures, those "birds of death" ~~(p. 2)~~. With Kyerefaso/Ghana in this terrible state, the sensitive Queen Mother-Sutherland calls for rethinking and renewed commitment on the part of the people.

The Queen Mother's unprecedented request for a rehearsal of the festival is not fortuitous. She uses the occasion to unburden herself before the entire population, thus giving them, as mother, a new sense of direction. Her speech is a challenge to the people--the chauvinists like Sintim; the idlers like the draughts players; and the uncommitted. Foriwa rejects the marriage proposal of the "fly," Mr. Anipare, and accepts Labaran, the new man. This acceptance is indicative of the desired fusion of different parts of Ghana: Hausa and Akan, North and South--for the building of the nation. If Foriwa's friends' marriages have failed, a sign of the fragmentation of the society, Foriwa's will

cement and improve relationships needed for growth.

"The Magic of Dreams " (p. 33), the title of the old book in the bookstore, shows the dreams ~~of~~ the Queen Mother and her supporters <sup>have</sup> of transforming their world. Foriwa, the symbol of the new woman, joins her mother; so also does Labaran, the man of the future with his technology, recording present events as a catalyst for the future. The new sign over the shop is the sign of things to come. Akan rather than English is spoken since the Scholars' Union find English difficult and one's language should serve as the <sup>basis</sup> ~~medium~~ for scholarship. The Head Priest throws white powder in a ritual to cleanse the village. Thereafter the quarrelsome Sintim undergoes a change and provides the lamb that will be sacrificed to usher in a new era.

The rebellious mother <sup>and</sup> daughter thus unite on the occasion of the festival to effect a revival. Sutherland revises the ~~folktale~~ <sup>a folktale</sup> ~~source~~ of the play about a fussy girl who ends up with a horror for a husband. Foriwa, the so-called "choosy" bride, chooses propitiously by accepting Labaran with whom she can build a home on a solid foundation. Foriwa, exquisitely dressed like a butterfly, represents its productive role in cross-pollination. She dances into the future, following in the statewoman's footsteps. The punctuation of the play with songs shows that Sutherland still believes in the efficacy of the oral tradition in lightening the burdens of and lighting the path to the future.

~~Sutherland would agree with Dale Spender that "Making men feel good is work which women are required to undertake in a patriarchal society" (pp. 372-3).~~

The tragedy Edufa dramatizes ~~this idea~~ with the tensions in a patriarchal society in which women are assigned subservient roles. We see

the actions of Abena (Edufa's sister), Seguwa (a female member of Edufa's household), the Chorus of women singing Edufa's praise, and most importantly, Ampoma (Edufa's wife), who "works" unto death so that Edufa might have life and that more abundantly. Sutherland depicts the gender inequalities in ~~the~~<sup>a</sup> sexist Ghanaian society where women serve man for a pittance.

Instead of the female bonding in Foriwa, Sutherland portrays an estranged father-son relationship where the old father stands for uprightness and the son for self-centeredness and greed in Edufa. The strain in their relationship marks the divisiveness in society. Through the portrait of Edufa, Sutherland develops the theme of materialism with its amorality. The westernised<sup>z</sup> Edufa uses people, particularly women, for his own selfish ends rather than for the edification of society.

Once again an atmosphere of malaise predominates with Ampoma's illness: the "near insanity" of a "doting woman," the victim of love. Her death serves as a warning to women about the dangers of loving ~~our~~<sup>their</sup> neighbor more than ~~ourselves~~<sup>themselves</sup>. In marriage ~~a~~<sup>a</sup> woman sacrifices her life for man's progress. Kankam, Edufa's father, is the voice of sanity upholding womanhood, and upbraiding man's greed and destruction of ~~the~~ woman. He acknowledges Ampoma as the catalyst that brings about Edufa's fortune which she will not live to enjoy.

Sutherland Africanizes Euripides' Alcestis myth (~~Okafor 168~~) while retaining the tragic gloom ~~as she~~<sup>by</sup> introduces ~~es~~<sup>ing</sup> an owl, ominous and frightening. The use of African magic with its local color accentuates the aura of evil and uncertainty. The terror is occasionally relieved with local songs that involve the community. Edufa's dilemma on endangering his wife represents the degree of anomie in Africa. When the charm harms

the charming wife, tragedy ensues; the house or nation is divided against itself on gender lines and woman is the victim.

Where Kankam's voice warns the young generation about overreaching itself, Ampoma's faint voice remains almost unheard as she sacrifices herself. The men, ~~the~~ represented by the amoral Edufa and the carefree, womanising Senchi, are too selfish for the communal good. <sup>z</sup> Through ~~Between~~ Edufa and Senchi, his friend, the one weighed down by his acquisitive nature, the other travelling light, Sutherland highlights the tragedy of the future.

Building on the folktale repertoire Anansesem<sup>ε</sup>, Sutherland in the comedy, The Marriage of Anansewa, uses the Anansegoro, a "system of traditional theatre" in which she can almost indefinitely keep weaving materials around Ananse, the trickster in Ghanaian folklore. <sup>↑</sup> He is <sup>a figure</sup> Everyman with ~~the~~ didactic implications. According to Sutherland, The plot becomes steadily complicated as Sutherland brings in more subplots to make up a three-act play. She modernises <sup>z</sup> Ananse's trickster image, generating laughter as the play tackles the problems of marriage and the exploitative culture surrounding it. The ultimate victim is the young bride who becomes enslaved to the bridegroom and his family through bonds effected during negotiations carried out by the males.

The play is experimental in adapting the Anansesem<sup>ε</sup> for the modern stage while retaining the omniscient Storyteller to act as coordinator for the sub-plots. Sutherland skilfully uses the Mboguo or "musical performances" as a curtain raiser and for demarcative purposes. She thus combines the demands of modern theatre <sup>DA</sup> with the traditional need for communal participation. She employs a "participating audience"

besides the regular audience to capture the idea of a traditional storytelling session.

Sutherland attacks the mercenary culture in which the courtship and betrothal of a young woman become a nightmarish affair where the bride-to-be's father exploits and deceives his daughter's suitor(s). Instead of one suitor, Ananse secures four, and we watch the trickster as he weaves webs to entangle everybody. We soon realize that the daughter will go to the highest bidder, though the four bidders remain unseen. The vocabulary is that of a business transaction with Anansewaa feebly rejecting the idea of being sold<sup>all</sup> with its repercussions.

Ananse represents every modern African man who exploits women and cultural traditions for his own ends by using the advantages of a Western education. Typically, Anansewaa, his daughter, is studying to be a secretary-typist, a profession in which woman is controlled and dictated to while her contribution goes unacknowledged. ~~The~~<sup>The</sup> scene where Ananse dictates letters to Anansewaa for the suitors and ~~she~~<sup>she</sup> ignorant<sup>ly</sup> ~~Anansewaa~~ types the letters that will bind her to the four men is significant. It underscores the hazards of the life of the female secretary with its dependence on the male. Furthermore, Anansewaa's financial dependence on her father is indeed the source of her trouble, since she uses the proceeds of his sale of her for her tuition in secretarial studies. <sup>Since she is</sup> Used and sold with her unwitting cooperation, it does not come as a surprise when she is announced dead; she is indeed one of ~~the~~ living dead, powerless like most women. Lying down as though dead and gazed upon by all, Anansewaa becomes an object for pity and mourning. When she wakes up at her father's bidding, she exchanges one male

dominating figure--her father--for another--her husband, The Chief-Who-Is-Chief. It is noteworthy that he wants her put in a glass coffin, to become an object to be displayed for viewing; like father, like husband.

Laughing at the local custom of using the photograph as a mode of introducing a woman to the would-be husband, Sutherland ridicules ~~the~~ tradition by holding <sup>this</sup> ~~it~~ up four times as the basis of the marriage transaction. The use of the photograph, a mere image and a shadow of reality, demonstrates the way man views woman without her substance. Its flatness underscores the flatness of the female character in the view of man: Man sees woman as an object without solidity, an object that can be viewed (perhaps for entertainment) and can be easily put away.

In this most aggressively feminist of Sutherland's works, Ananse controls not only his daughter (that is, the younger generation) but also his mother and aunt (the older generation) whom he entangles in one of the <sup>g</sup> branches of this story, ~~of the Marriage of Anansewa~~ ~~(1970)~~. He brainwashes them, and makes a fool of them by lying. They are depicted <sup>as</sup> ~~in~~ the stereotype of the harebrained female, credulous and trusting. They remove themselves from the scene at a crucial time when they could establish a vital support network to save Anansewa from further humiliation.

Ironically, Christie, with her eye on marrying Ananse, rather than give support in a meaningful way to a fellow woman, directs whatever help she can give to Ananse to bind Anansewa further in order to enrich Ananse and, indirectly, herself. Christie subordinates herself to Ananse, though they are equals <sup>as tricksters.</sup> ~~in tricksterism~~. His last words to

her, "Bare helper ! Supporter, your thanks await you" ~~(81)~~ followed by a hug, show she has played her part adroitly. Ananse thus controls three generations of womenfolk besides the suitors.

Throughout this play, Sutherland shows how woman is used, in spite of herself, <sup>me</sup> against herself. <sup>Why</sup> then does she not punish Ananse for his machinations? Some critics have reservations about the amoral ending of the play; one can also flaw it on sexual political grounds.

Sutherland <sup>involvement</sup> ~~is also involved~~ with children <sup>includes</sup> and <sup>ing</sup> writes and producing plays for their edification. She uses the Chorus in "Vulture! Vulture!" and "Tahinta" as she does in her plays for adults, for comment and moral instruction. The music that accompanies these two children's plays is deliberately employed to lighten and entertain and make general participation possible.

"Vulture! Vulture!" is a short play in three parts. Vulture, played by a boy, refuses to come to eat fufu and palm-soup and roasted chicken, yet jumps at eating a rat that has been long dead. What is food for one is poison for another. Women remain in the background of the play, invisible. Mrs. Vulture as mother and wife is nurturing and long-suffering, cooking different meals until she is finally able to satisfy Vulture. The shortness of the play ensures that Sutherland does not at any point lose her juvenile audience whose attention span is limited.

"Tahinta" is <sup>a</sup> play in five parts. It is a boy's initiation into the male world, especially into the clan's fishing occupation. The boy is provided with a net and a fish trap. When the "Ghost" forcibly

takes away his prize, that is the mud fish he has caught, the boy becomes acquainted with the problems of human existence, particularly its unpredictability. In his distress, he calls his mother; as he has only just been initiated into the male world full of adventure, <sup>still</sup> he remembers woman's secure even if boring domestic sphere ~~of which he~~ <sup>remains</sup> ~~was until recently a member,~~ and so he is ~~still~~ close to his mother.

On failing to retrieve the fish, his father promptly informs him, "A ghost is a ghost": ~~and~~ in other words, some difficulties in life have to be endured. Though directed to the male world, girls also can glean the fact that life is full of nets and traps and so people must find ways to avoid them or somehow use them for survival.

In spite of the slimness of her plays, Sutherland has had a tremendous impact on Ghanaian theatre <sup>by</sup> her experiment in skilfully combining both the African and Western aspects of her heritage. Her name is indicative of this fusion. She takes from each tradition useful aspects for <sup>African</sup> progress which, in her writing, includes woman's liberation.

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Sutherland

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