

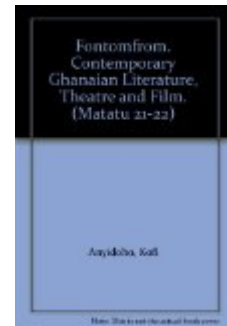
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kofi Anyidoho, James Gibb, eds. *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000. 383 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-420-1273-8.

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## Royal Drums for Ghana's Arts

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The appearance of this volume of *Matatu*, with special focus on Ghana, fills an empty space that existed in the study of African literatures. The subtle slide of Ghana's status in the literary developments from the 1980s seemed to be caused deliberately by the little critical attention given it. This was the country that first opened the floodgate of political independence movement in Africa that was to lead to the now popular "post-colonial" theory. It was the home of Kwame Nkrumah and Pan-Africanism, which has continued to survive in various shades, without commensurate focus on its nursery bed. This is the country that gave us J.E. Casely-Hayford, J.B. Danquah, Joe de Graft, R.E.G. Armattoo, Efua Sutherland, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Kwesi Brew, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mohammed Ben Abdallah and the list is endless. It also continues its pioneering role in Africanism with the introduction in the last decade of PANAFEST.

As if to underline this missing link, the work was dedicated to the memory of Efua Sutherland who died since 1996. But it is a fitting tribute to the pioneering and inventive person who, probably more than any other person, defined and shaped what is known to be Ghanaian theatre today. Writing in 1990, Albert Gerard noted that Ghanaian "literary history on a national scale can only be carried out by a team of Ghanaian scholars, capable of providing a well-informed and co-related account of all

creative writing..."[1] This work seems to have answered that challenge directly and perhaps even surpassed it.

This edition of *Matatu* collects some forty-one assorted materials ranging from academic articles, interviews, bibliographic references to creative writings by indigenous and visiting academics as well as practitioners in the field. It covers various aspects of arts such as playwriting, theatre, short story, dance, poetry, video film and music. The thrust of these, of which only a sample of the variety can be given here, can be surmised in Kofi Anyidoho's words in the "introduction": "the popularity of the best among our contemporary artists may have a great deal to do with their success in the management of the inevitable tension we find between our past achievements and/or failures, our current anxieties, and our dreams of a better future as a people" (p. 10).

This introduction also sets the tone for the collection by outlining the dominant cultural symbols that have characterised modern Ghanaian literary arts. One is the Akan royal drum, *Fontomfrom*, which in addition to accompanying dances, is used to recount "the epics and sagas of the people" (p. 12). It is the appropriate metaphor then to roll out this drum to celebrate the strides of Ghanaian arts in the half century since it gave Africa a forceful entrance in the world cultural scene.

Kwado Opoku-Agyemang takes a philosophical look at the history of the famous Cape Coast Castle as he plays the descriptive tour-guide round the edifice. His real in-

tent is to provoke thoughts and question the silence of the perpetrator but mostly of the victim of slavery. The continued existence of the castle not only reprimands humanity, it calls for a closure to the activities of the past five hundred years, from slavery to colonialism. As he puts it, “a castle is both a sign of triumph of others over us and of our seemingly rootless grief: rootless because we are so silent. But the world does not listen to silence” (p. 27). This historical preface serves as the backdrop on which the developments in the arts can be better appreciated. It also gives legitimacy to Nkrumah’s post independence politics of promoting the African Heritage in Ghana and across the continent. Janet Hess corroborates elsewhere that the official cultural policy at the time was to seek to use arts for cultural preservation and unification.[2] In tune with this political trend of the early days of independence from 1957, the arts showed the promise of negotiating the new world with the armour of enduring legacies from traditional societies.

In “The Narrative art of Drama in Ghana,” John K. Djitsenu looks at the oral narrative tradition and how writers have appropriated this heritage. Drawing from Sutherland through Aidoo, Yirekyi, Owusu to Ben Abdallah, the diverse use of narrative techniques has engendered various ways of presenting and understanding the contexts of modern drama. Particularly outstanding in this is the intricacies of modernizing the spider Ananse, which Isidore Okpewho had singled out as the “key aspect of the contemporary appeal” in Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa*. [3] Issues of policy and arts management are taken up in Sutherland’s important 1965 article reproduced in this volume. She laid bare the potentials and promise of the Ghanaian theatre as she saw it then and with which subsequent developments can now be compared. This document was no doubt used to fashion the national theatre movement and it still breathes with relevant data on the formative years of Ghanaian theatre. There are also two interviews with contemporary playwrights, Mohammed Ben Abdallah and Bill Marshall. These interviews, rather unlike many, do not dwell mainly on the personality of the writers. Tips on the defining aspects of African playwriting are given from a personal practice perspective and would definitely be a useful material for any course on the introduction to playwriting in Ghana, if not Africa. Sample: “Authentic African drama doesn’t have to be people dressed in raffia skirts, or themes drawn from ancient African history, and so on. It has to have meaning for the people for whom you write” (p. 64).

Three short articles on the dance theatre in Ghana by

two foremost practitioners illustrate what appears to be a conscious effort to provide general information and simultaneously give personal perspectives and stir up discourse. W. Ofotsu Adinku gives a historical development of the establishment of the famous Ghana Dance Ensemble and later ambitiously canvasses for copyright protection for choreographic creations like those of Prof. Opoku. This, he argues, will prevent the distortions of original creativity and generate royalty for their owners, but does copyright protection really guarantee payment of royalties in Ghana? We will have to ask published writers before we hasten to apply for copyrights of choreographic compositions, which were themselves created from other compositions. This does not however underplay his contribution on the need to document dances as artistic works and for these works to generate income for its producers. F. Nii-Yartey’s piece on the process of transforming religious and traditional dances to contemporary artistic pieces provides information on the hybridity involved in modern choreography. These will enrich the scanty materials presently available and should inspire more writings on African dance arts.

The phenomenal video feature film is also documented in Esi Sutherland-Addy’s survey of themes in some Ghanaian video films. She follows this up with a listing of some 86 of the films produced between 1987 and 1993. Africanus Aveh gives a more detailed bibliography of 100 Ghanaian video films complete with names of the directors, writers, producers, lead actors and actresses and useful synopses. These will be valuable to any study of contemporary popular culture in West Africa and especially in comparison with the similar commercial interests and video film boom in Nigeria.

Other equally interesting contributors to this volume, in ten different critical essays, give divergent and fresh perspectives to the works of Kojo Laing, Armah, Anyidoho and Aidoo. The variety is completed with the publication of Sutherland’s hitherto unpublished play, “Children of the Man-made Lake” as well as a short story by Ama Aidoo which futuristically has a woman as Africa’s president come the year 2026. There are also the poetry of Awoonor, Acquah, Kwesi Brew, Abena Busia, Opoku-Agyeman and Atukwei Okai. No other collection can be more “Ghanaian” in character and representation, and no tribute more fitting to Efiua Sutherland’s life and times. A prose poem by Anyidoho honours her in an elegy that seems to be justified by Gibb’s bibliographic materials, all provided in the journal. Like the Theatre that the African American, Scott Kennedy experienced in Ghana in the 1960s, this volume speaks of the “dynamic, communica-

tive, and expressive force, a total eruption of the art forms which pricks man's innermost experience and provokes the totality of his sensory perception." [4]

Matatu 21-22 gives that intense, on-the ground material if you always wanted to know about the arts in Ghana, but this volume does not satiate you entirely. Unfortunately, any document that collates such historical and epic documents in Ghanaian literary development would surely suffer the fault noticed here of brevity in most articles. They point to the need for in-depth study and research in these and other silent areas such as the roles of Tema: Ghana publishing Corporation, Literary works in Ghanaian languages, children's literatures and indeed the works of individuals like J.H.K. Nketia. Each may itself cram a volume of Matatu, but not necessarily. This journal has done enough to identify the yawning gap

in aspects of African studies. The array of contributors gives confidence that this gap can be bridged.

#### Notes

[1]. Albert Gerard, *Contexts Of African Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 87.

[2]. Janet Hess, "Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary and 'National' Art in the Nkrumah Era", *African Studies Review*, vol. 44, No. 1, ASA, New Brunswick, NJ, April 2001, 63.

[3]. Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 312.

[4]. Scott Kennedy, *In Search of African Theatre*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 231.

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