

**A STUDY OF SOME MAJOR INFLUENCES IN EFO KODJO**

**MAWUGBE'S PLAYS**

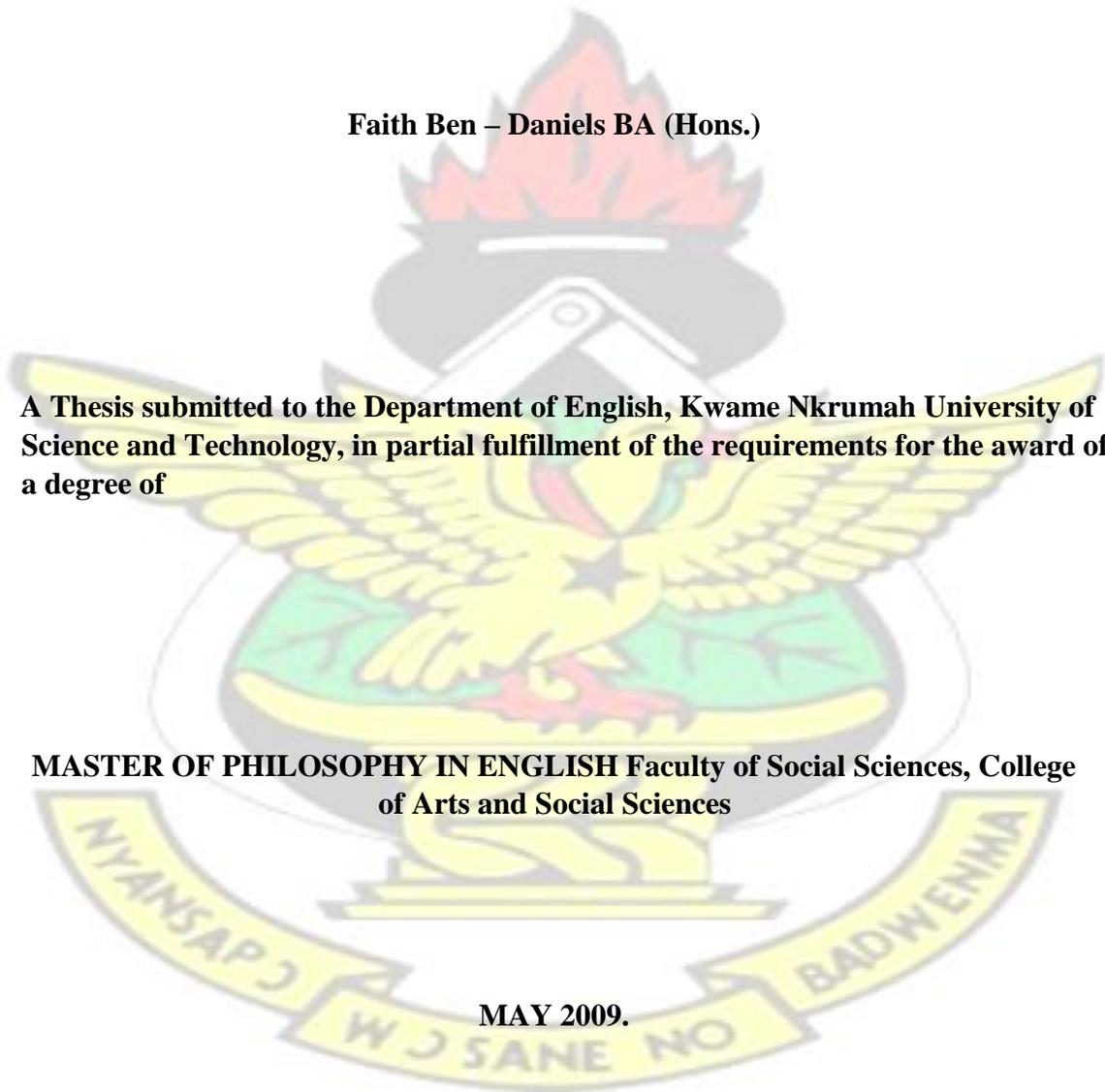
by  
**KNUST**

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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH Faculty of Social Sciences, College of Arts and Social Sciences**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work towards the Mphil and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material previously published by another person nor material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree by the University, except where due acknowledgment has been made in the text.

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## ABSTRACT

This study sets out to outdoor Efo Kodjo Mawugbe as a Ghanaian playwright who has contributed to the development of literature and theatre in Ghana. It examines how he adapts the *Theatre of the Absurd* and the *Theatre of Cruelty* in the creation of his plays. It also examines his interest in Efua Theodora Sutherland's *Anansegoro*, an innovative Ghanaian theatrical genre which is aimed at preserving our story-telling tradition, *Anansesem*.

The study takes a critical look at some of Mawugbe's plays: *The G-Yard People*, *Upstairs And Down-stairs*, *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* and *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*, and concludes that he adapts Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* and Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* in creating his *African Theatre of the Absurd*, which is aimed at telling the African story from an African perspective. It is concluded that the unique quality of the theatrical genres he adapts are best appreciated through the performances of his plays.

Mawugbe's plays are evidence of the theatre's power to create a social occasion and speak directly to many people. It also concludes that he is attracted to *Anansegoro* and writes his play, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*, in that tradition, because he believes that Ananse's role as a parody of society can never be over emphasized. Ananse as a folktale character does not expire with time. His character and role can be enhanced to suit the Ghanaian contemporary audience. One way to achieve this is by introducing contemporary characters within the society that the audience can easily recognize, and Mawugbe explores this avenue to the fullest.

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To all who helped in diverse ways, I say, God bless you!

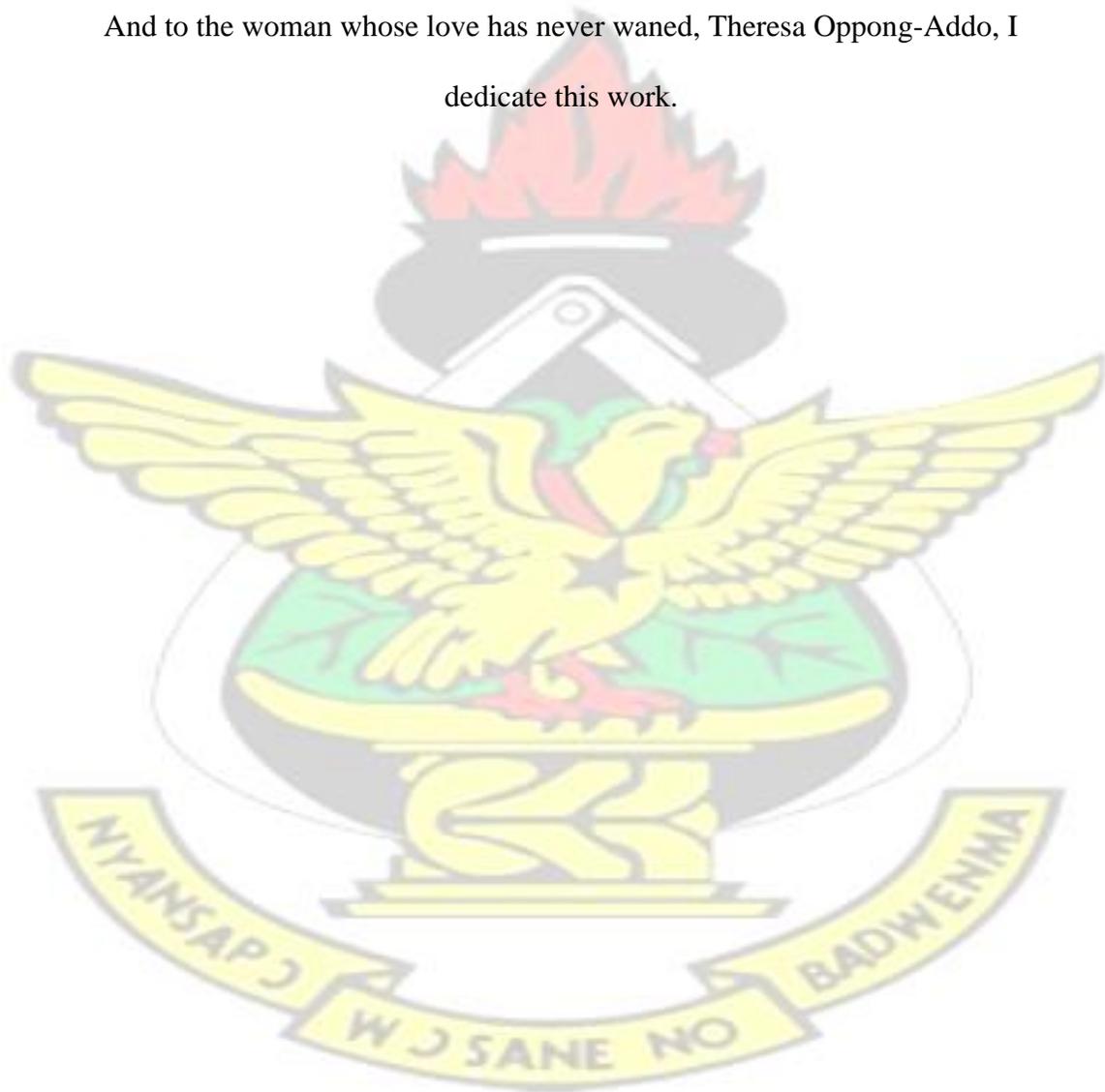
## DEDICATION

To God who granted me the strength to complete this work;

To my supervisor who supported and encouraged me even when everyone else thought it was impossible to finish in two years;

To Efo Kodjo Mawugbe who told me he would do anything to ensure that I pulled this off;

And to the woman whose love has never waned, Theresa Oppong-Addo, I dedicate this work.



# KNUST



## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to introduce the Ghanaian playwright, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, as a dramatist who has contributed immensely to the development of Ghanaian drama and theatre in particular, and African drama and theatre in general, through his work with the theatre in Ghana. This researcher believes that as a playwright, teacher, actor and administrator, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe merits the spotlight that this research focuses on him. His works manifest a unique blend of Western and African influences.

This study begins by exploring the background of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe in the light of his work at the National Theatre, his lectureship, and his works of drama for the B.B.C.

It also explores his adaptation of the Theatre of the Absurd to an African setting, by using the concept and style in his own plays. The following plays by Mawugbe: *The Grave Yard People*, *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome*, and *Upstairs and Downstairs* are the references used in discussing his adaptation of the Theatre of the Absurd. His personal views vis-à-vis the inspiration for his plays are also discussed.

Furthermore, Mawugbe's adaptation of the Theatre of Cruelty is discussed in order to explore how it complements his adaptation of the concept of the Theatre of the Absurd, and how this complementarity enhances his message to contemporary theatre audiences. Other aspects of Mawugbe's plays such as his interest in and contribution to *Anansegoro*, a traditional theatrical concept created by Efua Sutherland are discussed. This discussion is achieved by reference to his play *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*. Reference is also made to

Efua Sutherland's play, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Yaw Asare's *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots* and Martin Owusu's *The Story Ananse Told*. In essence, this discussion highlights the salient features and major preoccupations of the bulk of the performed plays of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe was born on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1954, in Kumasi to Madam Comfort Tulasi, who worked as a cook at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology's Africa Hall, and Michael Ayivi Mawugbe who worked in the laundry department of the same University. Mawugbe had his primary and middle school education at Weweso Local Authority School; and later attended Mawuli School where he obtained his General Certificate of Education, (GCE), Ordinary and Advanced levels. He continued his formal education at the University of Ghana where he studied Theatre Arts and majored in Playwriting from 1975 to 1978.

Later in 1991, Mawugbe did a certificate course in Senior Management Development at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). He also studied at the Banff Centre for Management, Calgary, Canada, in 1995, and went to the E. T. A Chicago, USA, on a USIS sponsored attachment programme in Theatre and Events Organization. Mawugbe pursued further studies at the British Council in Glasgow and London where he did a certificate programme in Theatre Management and Audience Development. He returned to the School of Performing Arts of the University of Ghana to study for a Master of Fine Arts Degree, (Playwrighting) in 2006.

Due to his work as a teacher in a number of Secondary Schools and Universities, Mawugbe has a great deal of experience in the teaching of English Literature. Between 1977 and 1978

he was a part-time tutor at the Ghana Empire Secondary School where he taught English Language and literature. From 1979 to 1984, he served as a Senior Research Assistant – African Theatre – at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology’s Centre for Cultural Studies where he helped students in the development and production of plays. Mawugbe also taught English Language and Literature (Drama) at the Technology Secondary School, KNUST, Kumasi, on part-time basis.

Between 2001 and 2002, Mawugbe was a Graduate Assistant for Playwriting at the Theatre Arts Department of the University of Ghana. He also supervised final year Playwriting students of the same University. In 2004, he was a part-time lecturer of African Theatre (Theory and Practice) at the Department of English, University of Education, Winneba.

Mawugbe also served his country in the field of the creative arts through diverse means other than teaching. He was the first Director of the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST Project), from June 1991 to January 1992. He was responsible for the planning, execution and management of the PANAFEST event in Ghana, and thereby laid a solid foundation for the continuous celebration of the event. Mawugbe was appointed Acting Executive Director for the W. E. B DuBois Centre for Pan African Culture, Accra, in October 1990. He served at the centre till June 1991. He also served as the Regional Director of Art and Culture, Centre for National Culture, for the Central Region and worked for the Arts Council of Ghana, Eastern Region.

Between 2001 and 2006, Mawugbe served as the Regional Director of Arts and Culture for the Western Region. He was also the Director for Research, Information and Public Education of the National Commission on Culture from 2001 to 2002. As the Director of Programmes and International Relations at the National Commission on Culture, he was responsible for planning, monitoring, co-coordinating and evaluating national cultural programmes for all the regional centers for culture. He was also in charge of the Committee that reviewed cultural agreements between Ghana and other countries or international bodies. He carried out all protocol duties involving foreign dignitaries and cultural delegations to Ghana; and also acted as the interface between the Commission on Culture and international agencies in Ghana, among other duties.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's outstanding contribution to theatre in Ghana and Africa as a whole has not gone unnoticed. He has won for himself fellowships, honors and awards. These include VALCO Literary Awards in 1979, Playwright of the year (ACRAG Award) in 1984, and Japan Foundation Award - Eminent Cultural Personalities from Africa - Short-Term Visit, in 1990.

He has served as a member of some professional organizations that deal with the performing arts and artists. He was the Organizing Secretary of the I.T.I (International Theatre Institute); and a board member of the I.T.I Playwright Committee from 1991 to 1995. Mawugbe was an executive member of the Ghana Association of Writers from 1979 to 1986. He was also the Artistic Director for Kozi-Kozi Theatre, Accra, from 1992 to 1993,

and a Board Member of the National Drama Company, National Theatre from 1997 to 2000.

Currently, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe is the Deputy Executive Director (Artistic) of the National Theatre of Ghana. He is also a permanent member of the judges for TV3's annual reality show, *Ghana's Most Beautiful*. Mawugbe is also a part-time lecturer at the Africa University College of Communication. He is married with three boys and three girls.

Mawugbe's achievements, as recounted above, had their genesis in a childhood experience. He developed interest in literature from age ten. As the son of a worker at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, he often visited the University Library for children. Unfortunately, a patron of the library who was a Senior Staff of the University stopped Mawugbe from using the library when she saw him there on one occasion. The woman took Mawugbe's membership card and tore it in his presence and sent him home: his father's social status within the university community, to this lady, did not allow young Mawugbe to use the library. Mawugbe, who was deeply hurt by the woman's actions, went home in tears and reported the incident to his father. His father later took him to the Ashanti Regional Library in Kumasi where he continued his reading habit until he entered secondary school. During his days as a student in Mawuli School his father again managed through a colleague who worked at the main University Library to have access to the facility. As a result of his father's relentless support Mawugbe's love for books was kept alive. The unfortunate experience left a scar in the young boy's heart but it

also nurtured in him a love for books which set him on the path towards literature, particularly, drama.

This scar served as the inspiration Mawugbe needed to begin his work as a playwright. After the incident he vowed that if due to a person's low social status he would be refused entry into a library, then he would write for all persons irrespective of their social status in order that everyone would have the opportunity to read. He began writing short stories during his time as a student in Mawuli School. He succeeded in writing a play for his house, Lincoln House, at Mawuli School, which won the school prize for drama. He has ever since pursued his dream of studying and producing works of literature.

At present, Mawugbe has to his credit 20 plays. These include, *A Calabash of Blood* (Radio Drama, GBC 1978); *Aluta Continua*, a drama produced for radio, stage and television, and distributed in Africa by URTNA (1979); and in 1980, *The Unbending Branch* (Radio Drama, GBC). Other plays include, *In The Chest Of A Woman*, a play produced for the stage (1984); *Constable No Rank*, a play produced for BBC, London Africa Service and for the stage (1986); and *You Play Me, I Play You*, (1989), a comedy for Radio. His other works are *Take Me to the Altar* (1990). This play is on society's responsibility to keep marriage sacred. *Tata Amu* (1991) is a play on the biography of Dr Ephraim Amu; *The Royals* (1992), a play produced by Talents Theatre Company for NAFAC 1992; *G-Yard People* (1994), a play on the appalling conditions under which black people work to sustain the economy of their nations; and in 1995, Mawugbe came out with *The R.S.M aka Check Point Charlie*, a radio sitcom.

The very recent plays by Mawugbe include, *Dear Baba and Mma*, a play written for the BBC; *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* (2002); *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* (2004); *Sister* (2006), *Upstairs and Downstairs* (2001), *Free Jubilee Juice* (2006); and *A Fractured Democracy* (2008).

As a playwright with plays that have been performed on radio, TV and the stage, Mawugbe believes in the freedom of artistic expression. He is of the opinion that playwrights must not be bound by man-made inhibitions that are termed “artistic conventions.” During an interview in his office at the National Theatre on 10<sup>th</sup> August of 2008, this researcher asked if he believed that African playwrights must adopt conventional styles in their plays in order to produce plays that teach moral lessons: “NO! A BIG NO! Each writer must feel free to choose a style that best suits his or her own ideas.” It is this belief that defines his plays.

Every play by Mawugbe is unique with regard to the dramatic style. Little emphasis is placed on the theatrical genre that the play must fit into. However, a great deal of consideration is given to the main ideas that he, as a playwright, seeks to express. All of his plays are artistic and forthright expressions of contemporary issues in Ghana and Africa. In some of these plays, such as *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* (2002), and *The G-Yard People* (1994), the issue of neocolonialism and labour, respectively, are expressed with humour. His play, *You Play Me, I Play You* (1989), talks about transECOWAS relations, with Nigeria and Ghana as the focal point. The play expatiates on how relationships between African nations can be improved positively if all parties

involved would learn to trust each other. This is achieved against the backdrop of humour. Mawugbe's play, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* (2004), is a play that is fashioned along Sutherland's concept of *Anansegoro*. The play puts Ananse on trial to defend himself on all "his deeds" in *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro*. *Free Jubilee Juice* (2006) is a play Mawugbe wrote on request by the BBC to commemorate 50 years of Ghana's sociopolitical development after independence.

Mawugbe is not only interested in writing plays that have a great deal of dark humour. For instance, his play *In The Chest Of A Woman*, which is published by Isaac Books & Stationery Services, deals with the issue of leadership and cultural values with serious undertones. The play lacks the "dark humour" that is usually associated with his plays; it focuses on the theme of good leadership, that is not based on gender. The most recent of Mawugbe's plays is *A Fractured Democracy* (2008). This play deals with the political instability that arises in African nations during political elections. Ghana is once again the focal point in the play. This play has serious undertones as well and seeks to preach the message of peace in Ghana's then impending elections.

Mawugbe's plays have been performed either in Ghana or abroad. It is these performances that bring his plays and style to light. Some of his plays have been broadcast as radio drama by the BBC and GBC. Mawugbe has contributed and still contributes to the development of African theatre in very practical ways. Art in Africa, more often than not, shows commitment to the continent's most challenging issues. This research is therefore meant to

explore how Mawugbe's plays reflect this commitment, and serve as "delightful instruction" for theatre lovers all over the globe.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Research for this thesis focuses on the bulk of performed plays by Mawugbe and his adaptation of the Theatres of the Absurd and Cruelty, as well as his contribution to the development of Anansegoro.

This researcher has read all the selected plays by Mawugbe for this paper. Live stage performances of all the selected plays for this paper have also been watched. This researcher conducted an interview with Efo Kodjo Mawugbe. In exploring Mawugbe's varied style as a playwright, this researcher drew references from other African and European playwrights.

## **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter 1 delves into some of the major influences this research uncovers in the areas of Theatre of the Absurd and Theatre of Cruelty. Chapter 2 extensively discusses Mawugbe's creation of an African Theatre of the Absurd because most of his plays show extensive adaptation of the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd and Theatre of Cruelty. Chapter 2 focuses on how he merges both theatrical genres to create his African Theatre of the Absurd. The chapter discusses a selection of his plays, and how they contribute to the creation of an African Theatre of the Absurd in structure, the symbolical use of setting, and the role Theatre of Cruelty plays in the themes and characterization. The

selected plays for this chapter are: *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome*, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, and *G-Yard People*. Chapter 3 focuses on Mawugbe's interest in *Anansegoro*. This discussion delves into the emergence of *Anansegoro* through Efua Theodora Sutherland and how it is effectively portrayed through her play *The Marriage of Anansewa* as an introduction to Mawugbe's contribution to this Ghanaian genre. The conclusion of the paper highlights the contribution of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe to the growth of the theatre in Ghana, and to the literature that serves it.

This thesis is the first of its kind with regard to the plays of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe. His plays are worth studying because they portray certain unique elements of drama that are relevant to the development of Ghanaian and African literature. This thesis explores a few of these elements. It is hoped that this research will serve as a stepping stone for other researchers studying the plays of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe as a means of contributing to knowledge about the development of Ghanaian and African drama.

## **Chapter One: The European Theatre of the Absurd And The Theatre of Cruelty**

As stated in the introduction, even though Mawugbe makes it clear that he has no interest in being categorised under any particular artistic genre, he does not dispute the fact that

most of his plays identify with certain theories that have their roots in Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd. He was asked why this is so:

I must say that I intentionally made them so as an expression of my rejection of the old ways of always trying to write and sound like someone else. This is my own way of expressing my uniqueness. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

The Theatre of the Absurd is unique in the sense that "absurdist" playwrights exhibit a freedom to express their artistic creativity in any way they desire without the fear of being criticized by theatre critics or the general public for producing cheap imitations.

Although the Theatre of the Absurd is often traced back to avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, its roots date back to the classical Greek times. Absurd elements first made their appearance shortly after the rise of Greek drama in the wild humour and buffoonery of Old Comedy, and the plays of Aristophanes, particularly, *The Clouds*. They were further developed in the late classical period by Lucian, Petronius and Apuleius, in Menippean satire, a tradition of carnivalistic literature depicting "a world upside down." The morality plays of the middle ages may also be considered precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd, depicting everyman-type characters dealing with allegorical and sometimes existential problems. This tradition dovetailed into the Baroque allegorical drama of Elizabethan times, when dramatists such as John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Jakob Biederman and Calderon depicted the world in mythological archetypes.

During the nineteenth century, absurd elements were noted in certain plays by Ibsen and Strindberg; but the acknowledged predecessor of what was called the Theatre of the Absurd was Alfred Jarry's "monstrous puppet-play" *Ubu Roi* (1896) which presented a mythical, grotesque figure, set amidst a world of archetypal images. *Ubu Roi* was a caricature, a

terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. In the 1920s and 1930s, the surrealists explored further Jarry's experiments, basing much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious mind which they acknowledged as a great, positive healing force. Their intention was to do away with art as a mere imitation of surface reality, instead demanding that it should be more real than reality, and deal with essences rather than appearances. The Theatre of the Absurd was also anticipated in the dream novels of James Joyce and Franz Kafka who created archetypes by delving into their own subconscious and exploring the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. Silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in the early sound films of Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, and the Marx Brothers also contributed to the development of the Theatre of the Absurd as did the verbal "nonsense" of François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Christian Morgenstern. However, it took the catastrophic events of World War II to finally bring the Theatre of the Absurd to life.

The global nature of this conflict and the resulting trauma of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life. Suddenly, one did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity. The experience of absurdity became part of the average person's daily existence. During this period, a "prophet" of the absurd appeared in the person of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Artaud rejected realism in the theatre, calling for a return to myth and magic, and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. Artaud demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes and create a modern mythology. It was no

longer possible, Artaud insisted, to keep using traditional art forms and standards that had lost their validity. Although Artaud did not live to see its development, the Theatre of the Absurd is precisely the new theatre that he was dreaming of. It openly rebelled against conventional theatre. It was an anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, and also without conflict or plot. The dialogue was usually unprogressive and this was because when the characters raised a topic for discussion, the discussion never reached a conclusive end, and then they moved on to talk about other issues. And, not surprisingly, the public's first reaction to this new theatre was incomprehension and rejection.

Although not an organized movement, it was called 'Theatre of the Absurd' by the critic Martin Esslin. Esslin is best known for his book, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962), which coins the phrase that defines the work of such playwrights as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, and Harold Pinter. In the introduction to his book, *Absurd Drama* (1965) Esslin writes:

The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation. (p.11)

Esslin's introduction leads the reader into the major features by which he identifies absurdist drama and theatre. Esslin explains that absurdist playwrights present human

existence and human language as futile or nonsensical. In order to reinforce this theme, absurdist playwrights use seemingly illogical dramatic techniques. The plots of absurdist plays have neither conventional climactic structure nor episodic structure. This means that frequently nothing seems to happen, the plot moves in a circle, concluding in the same way it began. The characters are not realistic, the settings are sometimes strange and unrecognizable. The language is often telegraphic and sparse; the characters fail to communicate. However, there is a fine line between the careful and artful use of chaos and non-realistic elements and true, meaningless chaos. While many of the plays described by this title seem to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, an underlying structure and meaning is usually found in the midst of the chaos.

The most famous and most controversial absurdist play is probably Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The characters of the play are strange caricatures who have difficulty communicating the simplest of concepts to one another as they bide their time awaiting the arrival of Godot, a man they believe has the answer to all their problems. The language they use is often ludicrous; and following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in precisely the same condition it began, with no real change having occurred, because Godot never arrives. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as "the play where nothing happens."

*Waiting for Godot* does not have a conventionally acceptable plot. At the beginning of the play, the audience encounters Estragon and Vladimir. Both men begin a dialogue. However, the dialogue is not definite or straightforward. This is because Estragon begins by talking about where he slept and soon Vladimir interrupts with the burden of his boots

which he is having difficulty taking off his feet. As soon as Vladimir succeeds in taking off his boots, the conversation drifts into religion. The audience is not fully informed of where Estragon spent the night, because both characters forget about the issue. The dialogue on religion also does not come to a definite end. This is because Estragon looks around him with admiration and the following exchange begins:

ESTRAGON: Charming spot. (*He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.*) Inspiring prospects. (*He turns to Vladimir*) Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't  
ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot. (Act I)

Even though they admire the spot where they are waiting for Godot's arrival, they do not take advantage of the spot in anyway to help make their wait more interesting. Vladimir and Estragon do not leave the spot, and they also do not inform the audience as to exactly when they began waiting for Godot. Then Lucky and his master Pozo appear on stage. Lucky and Pozo seem to be embarking on a journey. However, the audience is not informed of their definite destination when both men leave the stage. Then a little boy appears on stage to inform Estragon and Vladimir: "Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow." (Act I)

Whereas Estragon and Vladimir believe that they have previously met the boy, the boy informs them that it is his first time of meeting them. There is confusion in their conversation with the boy. The boy is not sure whether he is happy or sad working for Godot. The scene ends without any definite conclusion as to what decision Estragon and

Vladimir intend to take. The second act of the play follows the same pattern. Lucky and Pozo come on stage. The difference, however, is that Pozo is blind. Pozo and Lucky go off stage, while Estragon and Vladimir continue to wait for Godot. The little boy comes to inform them that Godot will not be coming but promises to come the next day. The play ends with Estragon and Vladimir still waiting:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. (Act II)

However, both men do not move and the curtains are drawn. The play ends without a major event occurring in the plot.

Plot is the sequence in action. However, there is no sequence in action in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. This is because Godot never comes to see Vladimir and Estragon. When Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, they never leave. The two acts of the play are the same in structure. However, setting with regard to time differs; the first act is one day, and the second act is another day. The two acts of the play have similitude because both men go through the same routine. The dramatic action in the first act is similar to that of the second act. They talk about nothing in particular and they get no where with Pozo and Lucky. The audience cannot be certain as to where both men spent the night or if they ever left. The only certainty in the plot is that both men are waiting for a man they call Godot. Plot, with regard to *Waiting for Godot*, never develops. This is as a result of the role of the characters in the play.

It is conventional to be able to define the characters in a play. A character must be considered as round or flat. A character must either be a villain or a hero. Characters must portray certain qualities that make their personality easily defined. Moreover, a character must have certain flaws and must also develop with the plot. Estragon and Vladimir do not develop with the plot. In the beginning, they are waiting for Godot. The play ends with both men still waiting for Godot. The men do not make a definite decision as to the direction they want to steer their lives. They represent life as the playwright sees and defines it. The playwright believes that nothing about life can be fully defined. In other words, human existence and human toil do not make sense. Beckett believes that life is topsy-turvy and it is this topsy-turvy nature that the audience sees in the characters of Estragon and Vladimir.

*Waiting for Godot* is embedded in a religious theme. Estragon and Vladimir keep talking about the Bible and the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. Their insistence on waiting for Godot is synonymous with the religious expectation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Beckett is disillusioned over the role Christianity plays in the lives of people.

Christians place their hope in Christ and it seems as if Christ is taking forever to reappear. Beckett believes that the wait is futile and the faith people place in Christ is misplaced. This is why he laments through Vladimir: "Hope deferred maketh the something sick, who said that?" (Act I)

The hope Beckett refers to is the belief in the second coming of Christ. This belief, to him, is gradually waning and is therefore senseless. However, no matter how senseless this wait is, people keep on waiting because they still believe. Beckett lambasts those who still wait through Estragon: "People are bloody ignorant apes." (Act I)

*Waiting for Godot* is a true example of Absurd drama. Estragon and Vladimir fail to communicate in the play. The plot structure is neither episodic nor climactic. Beckett's critics count this as a flaw, and often are irritated when drawing out on its inadequacies. Some consider the play a prank on the audience disguised as a play. The play's supporters, on the other hand, describe it as an accurate parable on the human condition in which the more things change, the more they are the same. Change, the supporters argue, is only an illusion.

The Theatre of the Absurd thrives on this illusion by making the audience realize how unfathomable their world is. Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims at creating a ritual-like, mythological, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why are we alive, why do we have to die, why is there injustice and suffering in our world? As long as man cannot find answers to these questions, it is imperative that the confusion that man feels within should be illustrated in the same manner on stage. This is what the Theatre of the Absurd represents, an uninhibited expression of the confusion and frustration of man.

The South African playwrights, Fugard et al, adapt ideas from the Theatre of the Absurd in order to tell the apartheid experience. As African playwrights with a purpose, they acknowledge the role of absurdist ideas in narrating man's frustrations brought about by

living under the harsh conditions of apartheid in South Africa. Their play, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*, is a classic example of the adaptation of absurdist ideas from the Theatre of the Absurd. The plot in *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is logical and thereby at variance with absurdist plot structure. This is evident in the fact that when Bansi comes to Styles Photographic Studio he identifies himself as Robert Zwelinzima. Robert was not the name given to him at birth. Bansi narrates to Styles the circumstances that led to his change of name. This narration follows a logical plot structure that vividly illustrates why he is now called Robert Zwelinzima.

Regardless of this logical plot structure, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* takes an illogical turn at the end because the conflicts that arise in the play are not resolved. Although Bansi has a passbook that permits him to work in Port Elizabeth, his future is still bleak, and this is as a result of the fact that the challenges he faces living as a Blackman in South Africa are still outside the four walls of Style's Photographic Studio, and awaiting his return. The characters are Styles, Buntu and Bansi; however, Styles takes on the role of Buntu and all three characters represent ordinary people in South Africa under the apartheid regime. The subject matter, apartheid, is relevant to the authors' South African audience. It also serves as an eye-opener to audiences outside South Africa.

*Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* is an apt interpretation from an African perspective of what a Theatre of the Absurd within the African contest exhibits. Although the play is identified within the theatrical context of the Theatre of the Oppressed, due to the fact that it presents a theatrical platform that represents oppressed people by giving them a voice and acting

presence on stage, the playwrights adapt the uninhibited artistic freedom that the Theatre of the Absurd provides in order to properly present their oppressed people.

As far as the Theatre of the Absurd is concerned, playwrights have the right to express in their own unique manner how they perceive the confusion and frustration of man's existence. Here at home in Ghana, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe identifies with the Theatre of the Absurd because it offers him the freedom of self-expression. Mawugbe comments on this aspect of dramatic expression:

The Theatre of the Absurd is a free canvas on which an artist can freely express his innermost feelings without inhibitions of manmade rules, traditions and some archaic principles. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

It can be inferred from Mawugbe's statement that he regards the Theatre of the Absurd as an artistic outlet that does not bind an artist to outlined artistic conventions. He is not concerned with the theories that Esslin identifies with absurdist playwrights per se; it is the freedom associated with this theatrical genre that attracts his attention. This is why he refers to it as a "free canvas." Artists are free to express themselves in anyway they desire.

Mawugbe takes advantage of the freedom that the Theatre of the Absurd offers him in many ways. For instance, his absurdist plays have a great deal of humour. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, on the other hand, lacks the dark humour that is found in Mawugbe's plays. Mawugbe was asked if he agreed with the fact that his plays are a crucible of humour and absurdist theories:

Absurdism by its form carries with it some degree of inherent humour. What I think the sharp writer does is to take advantage of these situations as and when they occur. It's like using a surfing

board. You need to have an eye for the right wave or series of waves that can combine effectively to carry you safely for a long distance. Since Absurdism is a non-conformist approach to theatre, little drops of humour here and there from time to time relax the audience. But if you are a smart writer you can make sure even the humour carries a serious message as much as other aspects of the drama. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

In the above statement Mawugbe expatiates on the importance of the use of humour in his plays. His absurdist plays thrive on humour to put across his opinion on societal issues that hitherto were not discussed openly or were ignored. The audience is presented with truth in its original form in a humorous way. The Theatre of the Absurd does not aim at redefining the truth of life or man's existence to suit the audience's ego. It is interested in illustrating the absurdity of life and living it in its original state as much as possible and also depicting nothing less than the truth of man's existence.

In connection with the truth of life and man's existence being presented on stage, the Theatre of the Absurd evolved from an earlier theatrical concept known as the Theatre of Cruelty, originally associated with Antonin Artaud who wrote a series of essays and manifestos on the genre in the 1930s. Lee Jamieson, in his book, *Antonin Artaud: from Theory to Practice*, describes Artaud's purpose for creating the Theatre of Cruelty:

Artaud sought to remove aesthetic distance, bringing the audience into direct contact with the dangers of life. By turning theatre into a place where the spectator is exposed rather than protected, Artaud was committing an act of cruelty upon them. (p.23)

Jamieson's statement highlights the fact that Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty places emphasis on the effect a performance must have on its audience. A play's performance must highlight certain facts of human life that are banned or overlooked from theatre performances. According to Jamieson, Artaud believes that Western theatre needs a total transformation;

that its literary tradition which emphasizes language is antithetical to its ritualistic origins; and that Western theatre artists should study the stylized Asian theatres. Artaud renounces literary tradition by asserting that there are no masterpieces. By this he means that classics should be produced not for the sake of their historical significance but only if they are still relevant to contemporary audiences. Furthermore, he does not believe that the text is sacred; he feels that the script can be reworked in order to highlight its relevance to the contemporary audience.

Artaud believes that the theatre is not a literary event but a sensory experience. In his essay, *The Theatre of Cruelty, In the Theory of the Modern Stage*, Artaud explains:

The Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theatre a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is this sense of violent rigour and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood. This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (p.66)

Artaud's explanation does not use cruelty to mean that theatre artists should literally maul or assault their audience. He means that the viewer's senses should be bombarded with various stage images as well as the message the playwright seeks to put across. The playwright's message must carry within itself a moral obligation to the audience. His emphasis on the sensory is what characterizes the Theatre of Cruelty.

He also calls for a restructuring of the theatrical event. He wants, for example, to reorganize the theatre space to make the audience the centre of attention. He argues that productions should be staged in 'found spaces.' By 'found spaces' Artaud means any space available

for use, and not originally intended for theatre. As far as he is concerned, spaces such as warehouses or even airplane hangars can be used for theatre performances. He believes that humanity's natural inclination towards violence and aggression, manifested in Europe in the mid 1930s by the rise of fascism and Stalinism, can be purged in the Theatre of Cruelty. For Artaud, theatre can act as a cleansing agent, cleansing modern society of all that is ugly.

Although Artaud's concept for the Theatre of Cruelty did not emerge as a movement in his life time, his concept lives on in later theatrical theories such as the Theatre of the Absurd. For instance, Theatre of the Absurd agrees with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty for the need to bombard the audience's senses. In Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, the audience is presented with a lifeless tree on a country road, and the boots of Estragon. This is the image on stage from the beginning of the play right to the end. The lifeless tree and country road represent the unproductive nature of man's existence, which sums up human existence as a futile journey, as interpreted by absurdist playwrights. Man's toil in life is futile. This stage image is geared towards confronting the audience with the stark truth about life and man's existence. This visual is also aimed at shocking the audience's sense of vision. It is also aimed at purging the audience of their 'makebelieve' existence through the presentation on stage of the absurdity of man's existence.

Mawugbe adopts the concept of the Theatre of Cruelty which believes that the play must have relevance to the contemporary audience. He strongly believes that the audience must identify with the subject matter and themes in the play. To him:

One of the key elements in every theatre production is the audience, without whom the playwright has no business writing a play. If the issues discussed in the play do not have any relevance to the audience you can be sure the shelf-life of the play would be longer than its stage-life. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

Mawugbe's statement proves that he considers the audience an instrumental component to the actualization of any performance in the theatre. In this regard, he also identifies with the theory of the Theatre of Cruelty that places the audience at the centre of any theatrical performance.

The Theatre of the Absurd has a link with the Theatre of Cruelty. The link between the two theatres is that both seek to present to the audience the true state of affairs with regard to man's existence. The world man lives in is fraught with challenges of all kinds, and man struggles to make meaning out of all the challenges he faces. Nevertheless, it is not always that man has at his disposal all the answers to life. At certain times, certain aspects of human existence make no sense or cannot be explained, but man must learn to live with all these challenges. The absurdist playwright believes that the world is upside down, and seeks to present it as such. The Theatre of Cruelty treats this fact by insisting on the contemporaneous nature of issues presented on stage. Both theatrical genres believe in the presentation of the truth of man's existence.

Mawugbe merges both theatrical genres in his plays in accordance with the presentation of the truth of his time. As earlier stated, his plays seek to address present day issues of African societies. However, he does not only use the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty for the expression of pertinent issues. He also identifies with a

theatrical concept that was started by Efua Theodora Sutherland. This theatrical concept is known as *Anansegoro*.

*Anansegoro* derives its name from the Akan traditional story-telling art known as *Anansesem*. *Anansegoro* literally means “Ananse plays.” The purpose of this theatrical art form is to advance the story-telling art into performance art on stage. *Anansegoro* thrives on what Efua Sutherland calls Total African Theatre. Mawugbe becomes part of this Ghanaian theatrical genre to help advance the Akan tradition of *Anansesem* and his artistic expression. His reason for his interest in Efua Sutherland’s *Anansegoro* is to harness its satiric tenor to portray society’s ills.

One other factor worth considering is the performance of Mawugbe’s works. Performance is important to drama. Drama, like prose and poetry, can be published as a book. However, it can only be considered fully published when it has been performed on stage before a live audience.

A lot is involved in order to achieve the “performance” that drama thrives on. There is the co-operation of all the elements of the theatre at work. There is light for special aesthetic effect. There are sound, props, stage hands, prompters, make-up artists, wardrobe managers, among many others. Then there is the cast who appear on stage and can be seen by the audience. The audience, actors and actresses, and all other theatre workers come together and share the same experience within the same period of time, in close contact with each other. This is what constitutes a performance, and it is a well defined process that is aimed at interpreting the playwright’s purpose. When it is effectively carried out,

then the playwright's commitment to his people as an artist can best be appreciated. It is for this reason that Mawugbe's commitment to his people as a playwright is appreciated through the strength of his "performed" plays.

It is clear that the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty share the common purpose of presenting the truth of human existence on stage. Both theatric genres are not merely interested in creating an "ordinary" theatre performance. They have a moral commitment to their audience. In this regard, they both share something in common with *Anansegoro*. *Anansegoro* thrives on its moral commitment to its audience. A moral lesson, more often than not, is learnt by the end of the performance.

The conventions associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, the Theatre of Cruelty and *Anansegoro*, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, complement each other to support Mawugbe's belief in drama as a performance.

#### Notes

1. Martin Esslin, *Absurd Drama* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, England, 1965) p.11
2. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting For Godot* (Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1968) p.10-94
3. Lee Jamieson, *Antonin Artaud: From Theory To Practice* (Greenwich Exchange, 2007) p.23
4. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre Of Cruelty, In Theory Of The Modern Stage*(ed. Eric Bentley, Penguin, London, 1968) p.66

# KNUST

## **Chapter 2: Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd – Upstairs and Downstairs, G-Yard People & Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome.**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mawugbe merges the concepts of the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty in the creation of his plays. By merging both theatrical concepts, Mawugbe creates an African Theatre of the Absurd which aims at telling the African story through performance on stage. The performance brings together all the elements of the theatre as expatiated in the concluding paragraph of chapter one. The expression of Mawugbe's theatrical style, which is the African Theatre of the Absurd, can best be described through his plays. Mawugbe's goal is to reach out to a larger audience; and so he ensures that he packages his plays in order to achieve his goal, using humour and contemporary issues that the audience can easily appreciate.

It is based on this premise that Mawugbe writes his play, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, which is an excellent example of his absurdist plays. The play is focused on three lunatics and a Light House overseer. The lunatics, Maa, Paa and Sonny find themselves taking shelter at

the base of the Light House. They are related but have no knowledge of this. The lunatics and the overseer rehearse for a conference being organized by International Donors, which is aimed at the alleviation and possible eradication of poverty and lunacy among the less fortunate people of the world. The lunatics engage the Light House overseer in a debate that addresses some pertinent issues within third world countries. The play ends with Sonny suddenly attacking and murdering Maa and Paa because they are unable to provide him with food.

*Upstairs and Downstairs* is an absurdist play, and conforms to some concepts expatiated in Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd. The first concept Esslin describes focuses on the structure of the play. Esslin states: "The Theatre of the Absurd has no story or plot to speak of." (p.21) Absurdist plays present an illogical dramatic technique. This is because absurdist playwrights aim at presenting human existence as futile, and human language as nonsensical. *Upstairs and Downstairs* identifies with the illogical dramatic technique of absurdist plays as described by Esslin to some extent. The illogical dramatic technique adapted by Mawugbe is evident in the structure of the play.

*Upstairs and Downstairs* does not have a conventional plot structure. Mawugbe rearranges the conventional plot structure to suit his purpose for an African Theatre of the Absurd. In the first leg of the play, the point of attack can be deduced through Maa's statement: "The Light House is the source of enlightenment. We have to get there to put our case across." (p.4) It can be inferred from Maa's statement that Mawugbe's mission in the play is to put across some pertinent issues. These issues will come to light if his characters reach the Light House. Mawugbe's characters are on their way to the Light House. The rising action

in the play also creates some exposition. This is evident in the radio message that the Light House overseer receives:

R. VOICE: Update number two: Some prisoners of conscience, I mean lunatics, are reported to have escaped on a rickety bamboo raft from the psychiatric asylum on the Island. It is not likely they will survive the storm. Keep an eye on your beach and report to HQ when you spot dead bodies. You copy? (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

The above radio message explains to the audience the presence of the lunatics on the beach and also confirms Maa's information when she says that they are headed for the Light House. There is indeed a Light House on the beach. However, the plot does not have any complications with regard to its sequence or narrative. Maa, Paa and Sonny are at the Light House to present their papers for the conference. However, there is no conference going on at the Light House and the Light House overseer confirms this:

It's very possible you have missed your way. This is a lighthouse and not a conference centre." (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

The lunatics talk about poverty in Africa but none of them presents a full length speech on any particular subject. What happens is a discussion of unrelated issues. The supposedly imaginative conference is frequently interrupted by the TV news broadcast, Maa's insistence on feeding her doll which she refers to as her baby, and the ticking of the clock. This inconsistency proves that the play lacks a conventional rising action, and therefore does not build a solid climax. The sole resemblance of a climax within the plot is the symbolic ticking of the clock. By the third leg of the play, the ticking of the clock has gathered momentum. Paa asks: "What do we do? Time is running. The clock is ticking."

(2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

This is because the ticking of the clock continues to gather speed as the dramatic action unfolds. The dramatic action takes a leap when Paa and Maa use the technique of narrative flashback to inform the audience and the Light House overseer of Sonny's biological origin. Sonny, all of a sudden, begins to demand food because he is hungry.

Then Sonny murders Paa, and in the final leg murders Maa as well.

Narrative flashback is employed to tell Sonny's biological origin. However, the act of the murder Sonny commits is not indicated as either being part of the flashback or the end of the play. The play lacks a climatic and episodic structure and therefore identifies with the Theatre of the Absurd where absurdist plays lack climatic and episodic plot structure.

This illogical plot structure is symbolized in the characters being lunatics. One feature of lunatics is inconsistency in whatever they do or say. Lunatics cannot carry out a task without distractions; at times they totally abandon the task in order to move on to something else. The playwright's purpose for the play is to raise global issues affecting poor people; some of these issues are unrelated. Notwithstanding the issues all point out the disparity between "the rich" and "the poor." The issues cover many areas of social, political and economic spheres of life. In order to touch on all these areas, the playwright adopts an illogical plot structure that affords him the opportunity to cover as much ground as possible. The lunatics are the "best characters" to carry out his illogical plot structure in an "illogical manner" in order that his purpose for the play would be achieved.

The illogical plot structure in *Upstairs and Downstairs* is driven by the three lunatic characters Maa, Paa and Sonny, whose names are a representation of the human race.

Mawugbe explains:

Maa is used to refer to mothers in most parts of the world. It is the same for Paa and Sonny. A son is a son anywhere in the world. I used Maa, Paa and Sonny because they represent the world. They represent families all over the world. (August 10, 2008. National Theatre)

Maa, Paa and Sonny are presented by Mawugbe as lunatics. Esslin explains: “The Theatre of the Absurd is often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets ...” (p.21-22) Absurdist characters are not realistic. By presenting his characters as lunatics who know too much when they should, in fact, be in the dark, as is typical of lunatics, Mawugbe tows Esslin’s line of argument. The above explanation by Mawugbe goes to prove that he is creating an African Theatre of the Absurd. His characters represent the ordinary people of Africa, and have a story to tell, albeit in an unconventional way.

It is for this reason that Maa, Paa and Sonny inform the audience that they are presenting papers at a conference. It is absurd that lunatics should be given the chance to present papers at a conference. Herein lies the absurdity that this theatric genre seeks to propagate. The lunatics would be distracted during the conference and lose focus due to their mental instability. They exhibit this lunatic quality of inconsistency and chaos due to their lack of focus. For instance, in the first leg of the play when they are headed for the Light House, Sonny complains that he is tired. Maa tells him:

You got to be always on the move. We are almost at the conference centre where we can take a rest. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

Then the same Maa suddenly becomes hysterical over her baby which is in fact, a doll:

This is madness! Madness! Madness! Everyone is gone crazy!  
Crazy! Who has taken my baby's feeding bottle? Who has my  
baby's feeding bottle? Where is the feeding bottle? (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

Irrespective of Maa's lack of focus, she tells her story and the audience identifies with it and is drawn to it. The audience feels Maa's pain and is confronted with the shocking truth of Maa's past that has, in fact, driven her insane. The audience sees a mad woman on stage and is affected by this image. Paa and Sonny explain why Maa carries a doll:

SONNY: [She] withdrew every nickel and dime in her savings ...  
Swept her accounts clean with a broom, and gave everything...  
PAA: To support the academic ambitions of a prospective husband.  
PAA: You see it was later discovered that she was pregnant. And for  
fear that she might re-produce her mental kind, the family suggested  
the termination of the foetus... Upon medical advice however, she  
was asked to keep the pregnancy. Nine months later she went into  
labour and was delivered of a baby boy ... Who was immediately  
taken away by the relatives. That was when she was offered that doll  
... which she has kept for the past 28 years. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Mawugbe is relentless in his absurdist presentation of these personalities. All three characters are not realistic in their presentation of the news. Maa plays the role of the news reader and gets behind a box to read the news. Maa is not a news reader, she is a lunatic. Paa and Sonny keep interfering as Maa reads the news. Maa also plays along and sticks her head out of the box periodically to join in the conversation. This situation in itself is unrealistic and conforms to the features highlighted by Esslin's definition of the Theatre of the Absurd. However, Mawugbe presents his character in this dramatic action for a reason. As Maa reads the news she tells the story of Africa. In effect, Mawugbe succeeds in fusing

the Theatre of Cruelty with the Theatre of the Absurd to enhance his own way of presenting the absurdities of the human condition.

Mawugbe adapts the concept of the Theatre of the Absurd, which thrives on the use of unrealistic characters to propagate his theme: the gap between the poor and the rich must be bridged in order to successfully develop society. Unlike Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd which aims at presenting the world in an upside down manner, Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd aims at telling the African story from an African perspective through "effective performance" by which light, set, and sound are synchronized with characterization and performance to bring out the playwright's purpose. This is in line with what John Russell Brown says in his book, *What is Theatre? An Introduction and Exploration*, inter alia:

The power of the theatre to be lifelike is easier to understand, even if it is commonly misunderstood. What happens on stage can look so very like what happens outside the theatre, in the ordinary lives of all of us ... (p.8)

This "understanding" is as a result of the performance. Whatever the artist has to say in a theatre is enacted. The audience can see tears, hear laughter, and even touch the actors.

As a result of this, the audience has a better understanding of the playwright's purpose.

Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd serves as a spring board for grass-root activism that is geared towards positive change in Africa. His works, therefore, appeal to the contemporary African audience. A majority of Africans are faced with poverty. In expressing this African crisis, Mawugbe further adapts Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty which

argues that the issues in a theatre performance must be contemporary thereby making the audience the focal point in the theatre.

*Upstairs and Downstairs* presents poverty in its true form through its adaptation of the Theatre of Cruelty. Mawugbe believes poverty can make a person go mad, and this is another reason why his characters are presented as lunatics. The Theatre of Cruelty insists the audience must be confronted with the truth of whatever issue a play tackles. Poverty cannot be polished in order to look pleasant. Mawugbe is worried about all the poverty alleviation strategies that African governments, in collaboration with foreign donors, map out to eradicate or alleviate poverty from among the people. These strategies, he has observed, do not work out. Therefore, he expresses his opinion through Maa and Paa:

MAA: Eradicating poverty should mean more than the expansion of material wealth.

PAA: It should mean, enhancing people's sense of their own wellbeing ... using to the maximum the best of whatever is available to them. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Mawugbe believes that the solution to poverty eradication does not lie solely in the abundance of financial wealth. Financial wealth is only a part of the solution. Individuals should be motivated through positive social values as explained by Sonny: "Generating Hope, Love and Faith for the future!" (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Individuals must be taught to believe in themselves. When people begin to believe in themselves they would be able to take responsibility for their actions and thereby direct the course of their own lives. It is for this reason that the audience listening to Maa, Paa and Sonny should be able to identify with the issue of poverty. This is what the Theatre of

Cruelty stands for; it strives to present real life situations without diplomacy, aimed directly at the audience present. It must identify with the problem raised in the performance. This is why the audience in a Theatre of Cruelty remains the centre of attention during the performance. The message must touch their hearts and stir up positive change, and this is achieved through “effective performance” that adequately presents this theatrical concept. In line with this, William A. Hefferman, in his book, *Literature Art and Artifact*, states: “The electric quality of a performance is an experience we achieve only as members of an audience.” (p.966) It is this “electric quality” of the performance that *Upstairs and Downstairs* aims at achieving. The “electric quality” of the performance is felt as the audience, in collaboration with Maa, Paa and Sonny, and the backstage crew in the theatre come together to share the theatre experience, whereby, one group interprets the playwright’s message, and the other group, understands this message as intended by the playwright. It becomes safe to conclude that an “effective performance” has been achieved.

Mawugbe employs words that stir up the emotions of the audience; this is an element of the Theatre of Cruelty. He does this in order that he would achieve his African Theatre of the Absurd. This is why his characters always use strong and uncompromising words when they describe the impoverished situations of the less fortunate in society. He also believes that the eradication of poverty will only be effective if the appropriate authorities find new and better avenues that will ensure that the required aid reaches the right people. By the right people, he means the ordinary man and woman in the streets, hamlets and towns. His strong words are demonstrated in the following exchange:

SONNY: Why has the 5% G.D.P growth not reflected in the quality of life of the people Downstairs?

MAA: It rather went into the pockets of a few rich people, from where it was siphoned into laundries Upstairs for dry-cleaning and safe keeping. PAA: That's possible.

MAA: Or (*undertone conspiratorially*) could it have been used to meet the fat foreign rated salaries, and the operational costs of the fully air conditioned four wheeled drives CD vehicles, of the angels of the gods, who came to dwell, among men and to, as it were make the growth possible? PAA: How do you mean? (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

The above exchange by the lunatics explains Brown's statement: "Words are a vital and powerful element of the theatre." (p.13) The "words" are spoken by the actors on stage who couple them with action in order to induce a reaction of some sort from the audience.

One avenue Mawugbe believes will help make aid reach the ordinary people and thereby bridge the gap between the rich and poor is by making the voices of the poor heard in these conferences that are supposedly held on their behalf to discuss their plight. At times, those who have never felt poverty, make the decisions on how to eradicate poverty for those who live with it. This is why the lunatics have a problem with the credentials of the resource persons who will speak at the conference:

SONNY: Which of those Resource Persons ever stood toe-to-toe neck-to-neck with poverty? ... Or ever got degraded or humiliated by poverty?

MAA: Tell me this, which of them has ever drunk from guineaworm and bilharzias-infested stagnant pool that serves as our village's main source of drinking water?

MAA: Or ever worn a school uniform sewn out of food aid flour sack, combined with jute bag, with the inscription 'IN GOD WE TRUST, NOT FOR SALE' boldly appearing on the back of the shirt?

SONNY: Or walked ten kilometers at dawn to the farm, to carry a ton of cocoa on the head ...

PAA: Trot to a buying centre located ... another fifteen kilometers from the farm

MAA: Before running to a school located another fifteen kilometers from home...

SONNY: To sit as part of seventy noisy children in an apology of a classroom, that has for a ceiling the branches of a tree ...

SONNY: If any of your folks up there has experienced half of what we have just described, then he or she can address the conference.

(3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

The above illustration by the lunatics establishes Mawugbe's argument that one really needs to experience poverty in order to appreciate what the poor go through on daily basis.

The Theatre of Cruelty serves the purpose of confronting the audience with a theatrical vision of poverty through the above statement by the lunatics.

Africa needs to, as much as possible, bridge the gap between the rich and the poor because, the continuous polarization of these two groups that make up African communities have the possibility of leading Africa into chaos. The poor might one day wake up and attack the rich. This is seen in Sonny's attack on Maa and Paa, because he is hungry and they are unable to provide him with food. Sonny is thrown into a frenzy and screams:

SONNY: I must eat ... I am hungry ... I need food ... I say I want food.

MAA: Please, son, don't do it please.

L/MAN: Are you attacking your own mother?

SONNY: Will you shut up! I say give me food!

**FX:** *Noise as of cooking utensils being randomly thrown about*

PAA: (*Rushing in*) What is going on here?

SONNY: (*Angrily*) Get the hell out of here, you unemployed, redeployed, IMF-retrenched, poverty stricken personification of absolute uselessness. Do you have food to give? (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Sonny's act confronts the audience with the adverse effect of poverty which breeds violence. The act of murder by Sonny is gory. However unpleasant the situation Maa and Paa find themselves in the hands of Sonny, it remains the true consequence of poverty and this is what interests the Theatre of Cruelty. The audience must see the act of murder being

committed through “effective performance.” Mawugbe’s theme is clearly expatiated through his adaptation of the Theatre of Cruelty, and he explains:

I am looking at the unjust global system of the world. The IMF response to the needs of under developed countries. The World Bank Programs. I am looking into debt relief by the ‘powers that be.’ And I’m looking at all these issues semantically. (National Theatre. August 10, 2008)

The above response by Mawugbe explains why he creates the mock conference through his characters. The world needs to have new insights into handling the poverty situation in Third World countries. Mawugbe believes a lot can be done to change the lives of poor people the world over. All stake holders need to meet on a common ground, and there is no better place to achieve this than in the Light House, a place of enlightenment. This is why Mawugbe creates his setting as a Light House, and thereby, enhances his creation of an African Theatre of the Absurd. Mawugbe was asked why he chose a Light House as his setting in *Upstairs and Downstairs*:

I chose the Light House because the Light House is a Place of enlightenment. Light creates discovery and fresh knowledge. We all need Light Houses to find our bearing in the turbulent waters of life. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

A Light House provides light to ships at sea, directing their navigation through rocky areas and bringing them safely to shore. Every ship at night needs a Light House to reach home safely. Mawugbe uses setting in a symbolic sense in *Upstairs and Downstairs*. The Light House is the symbol of enlightenment in the play. This is why Paa says: “That Light House is the source of enlightenment.” (1<sup>st</sup> leg) Every Light House has light and light helps one to see even in the dark. When a person has light, he or she is in a better position of preventing himself or herself from falling in the dark. Light can also throw insight into

issues of life that were hitherto hazy or unknown to a particular sect or group. Mawugbe employs the Light House and its light to throw more light onto the situation of poverty that confronts Africa as a whole. He beckons to the audience's sense of imagination to see, with the help of the light provided by the Light House, the suffering of the ordinary man in Africa, and to help find practical solutions to save him from poverty. Sonny encourages the Light House overseer: "Allow some of the light you project into the ocean to affect your imagination." (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

Maa, Paa and Sonny use the symbol of the light from the Light House, aided by their strong sense of imagination, to paint a picture of the conference. Sonny beckons to the Light House overseer: "Just imagine we are all here to attend the conference and this is the auditorium ..." (2<sup>nd</sup> leg) Then the characters throw more light into the socioeconomic situation in Africa through the issues they discuss in the play.

Mawugbe's aim for using the Light House is to create a platform of knowledge and ideas. He believes that by so doing, he can create awareness of the desperate situations of third world countries in areas such as education, health, food production, infrastructure, portable drinking water, among many others. The ideas have to do with the new ways and means to help salvage the situation before the time bomb of chaos explodes, and the poor majorities attack the rich minorities. Mawugbe believes that enough light has not been shed onto the issue. *Upstairs and Downstairs* uses the symbol of the Light House to shed more light onto the aforementioned problems.

In Africa, moral lessons are learnt at the end of a story-telling art or performance. The moral lesson in *Upstairs and Downstairs* is that all stakeholders in the African situation must come together and help turn things around positively before chaos arises due to hunger and frustration. This is why Sonny symbolically attacks Maa and Paa at the end of the play. The role moral lessons play in Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd is synonymous to the Akan art of story-telling, *Anansesem*. Moral lessons are important to the story-telling tradition, and *Anansegoro*, which is a story-telling performance art on stage, weaves this all important convention in its performance. This reinforces the role of art in Africa as delightful instruction.

Mawugbe does not create an African Theatre of the Absurd only in his play *Upstairs and Downstairs*. He also creates an African Theatre of the Absurd in his play *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome (APTS)*. It is a play that showcases the lives of four prisoners, Chaka, Gomido, Abutu and BasaBasa, who have just been granted presidential pardon. As free men they contemplate how they will use their newly acquired freedom. Each of the ex-convicts gives a personal rendition of how he will use his freedom. As they talk about their various hopes and aspirations, they take an in-depth look at Africa's social, political, and economic situation. At the end of the play, three of the ex-convicts are convinced that they cannot make it on their own as free men so they return to prison, where they believe they will get everything free of charge. Abutu is the only ex-convict determined not to return to prison. He dreams of making a fortune as a coffin maker.

*Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* can be considered as an absurdist play because it bears resemblance to the typical illogical plot structure that Esslin talks about. Mawugbe adopts absurdist illogical plot structure to suit his dramatic style for his African Theatre of the Absurd. It is for this reason that the play, although absurdist, begins with a point of attack identified in the Prison Officer's announcement:

P. OFFICER: The following inmates have been granted presidential amnesty and are therefore to be released unconditionally. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

The Prison Officer's declaration indicates the plot's point of attack. The audience becomes aware that some prisoners have been granted amnesty and immediately begin to look forward to what these prisoners will do with their newly found freedom. The audience's interest in knowing what is to happen next creates suspense in the plot. The establishment of suspense in the plot's point of attack should spearhead the play into its rising action.

However, the play ignores creating a rising action and moves straight into the exposition. The exposition in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* tackles Mawugbe's intention as will be discussed subsequently in the section on theme.

Although a complication is not created in the plot, Mawugbe succeeds in presenting to us a complete absurdist play that serves his purpose as a playwright. Irrespective of the well treated exposition, the play does not reach a conventional climax, and thereby further exhibits the concept of Theatre of the Absurd. However, the play creates its own climax to suit the playwright's purpose. This climax begins when the ex-convicts suddenly realize that they have spent their first day out of prison discussing Africa's social, political and

economic challenges. Abutu is the first to realize this and suggests that they get on the move: “Folks, we have to hurry and get out of here. The weather is changing.” (4<sup>th</sup> leg)

The others agree with him. Basa even complains of hunger. However, the big question is: where do they go? This generates an argument, and Chaka, being the leader, takes control of the situation:

We are in a democracy. Let us put it to vote. Those in favour of going back to the **Palace Reserved for Important Sons of the Nation**, say ‘Aye!’ ... Those out of favour say ‘Nay!’ ... One abstention that is I. A two-to-one decision. I think the Ayes have it. (4<sup>th</sup> leg)

The above statement indicates that, the ex-convicts have chosen to return to prison because they believe that the prison will offer them free comforts. Gomido expresses this opinion clearly:

Yes it is far better in there than out here in the cold, where we could catch pneumonia in a society that practices Cash and Carry medical system without a human face. Let’s go. (4<sup>th</sup> leg)

This sudden decision by the ex-convicts, after talking at length about Africa’s issues is the climax Mawugbe intends to create. The ex-convicts shock the audience by their decision. This shock brings to the fore the main proponent of the Theatre of Cruelty. The audience should be confronted with the horrible truth of their society. It is in line with this, that Brown states: “What happens on stage can look so very like what happens outside the theatre, in the ordinary lives of all of us ...” (p.8) As far as the Theatre of Cruelty is concerned, the audience must experience on stage the challenges they face as ordinary people, in uncompromising terms.

In Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd, the audience is expectant that after watching the ex-convicts' performance through which African issues are raised, they will show the way forward. However, this does not happen due to the fact that this theatre is aimed at confronting the audience and bombarding their senses with the truth. Indirectly, the performance tells you: "This is who you are. Do you like what you see or not? If you do not like what you see, then do something about it." The onus is on the audience to react positively. Africans must confront their problems, and find solutions to them. This is the angle from which Mawugbe adapts the Theatre of Cruelty. The audience must be moved by the truth of the performance. The truth lies in the fact that the play deals with contemporary issues in Africa.

Mawugbe is not interested in merely adopting the concepts of Theatre of the Absurd and Theatre of Cruelty. He adopts these concepts to discuss broadly the challenges Africans face on the continent. He does not need a 'conventional' denouement or resolution in his plot. The resolution should come from the audience whose senses have just been bombarded with dramatic visions from a Theatre of Cruelty, after the curtain call, and each member of the audience is headed back home. Every person must resolve to change his or her attitude positively, within his or her own small environment.

It is evident from the above discourse that Mawugbe's plot structure which, to some extent, shares similar features with the plot structure of absurdist plays, mingled with his personal style as a playwright with a purpose, is what enables him to create an African Theatre of the Absurd. This style is manifested in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome*, by using his

characters as commentators commenting on social, political and economic issues. They present the issues of Africa as pertains in our social, political and economic lives. Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd creates characters in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* that are realistic and represent the different human character traits in Africa.

Chaka is Mawugbe's lead character. His name and character are an historical allusion to the powerful and influential leader of the Zulus, Shaka. Shaka commanded an army of about 40,000 soldiers, and expanded the area under the control of the state of Mthethwa in Natal. Under the leadership of Shaka, the Zulus successfully challenged Dutch expansion in South Africa, until they were defeated at the Battle of Blood River in December 1838.

Mawugbe's Chaka is in command of the group of ex-convicts and this is evident from the very beginning. When Gomido exhibits hostility to the Chaplain, and goes to the extent of insulting him by pulling down his pants and showing his buttocks to the Chaplain, it is Chaka who firmly steps in. He screams at Gomido: "Stop it I say!" (2<sup>nd</sup> leg) He is the loudest speaking voice in the play. Mawugbe expresses his viewpoint on the social, political and economic situation existing within the African continent through Chaka.

Another interesting character is Abutu; he is intelligent. Unlike Gomido and Basa, he matches up with Chaka. Throughout the play Abutu makes it obvious that he is his own master. Although he falls in line with the rest of his colleagues by allowing Chaka to lead them, he does not relinquish his hold on his personal convictions as a man of integrity.

Abutu represents the varying human conflicts that are rampant within the African subregion. This is why Abutu keeps getting into conflict with Basa.

Basa represents the vast majority of illiterate Africans found on the continent. These groups of people live either on the poverty line, or below it, in every African state. They make up the vulnerable in the society. They are easily manipulated by unscrupulous leaders. This is why Basa is the one Abutu believes is fit to be a Boxer he can manage and make money out of. Abutu tells Basa that he belongs to his “stable.” As a Boxer he owns him, just like owning a donkey. Men like Basa, due to their illiteracy, are naïve and this makes it easy for them to be misled and manipulated by their leaders. This is why when Chaka, the leader, decides that they should return to the “Palace Reserved for Important Sons of the Nation” Basa readily agrees. He is hungry, tired and in need of shelter. This makes him desperate and ready to agree to whatever decision is made by his leader, Chaka, as long as it will provide his immediate basic needs.

Mawugbe creates in Chaka one who is a replica of the African political leader who leads his independent people back into dependency on external donors. He creates in Abutu the African who is unable to live peacefully with his neighbor although he is intelligent and can fend for himself; one who is determined to remain independent. Then in Basa he creates the majority of Africans who are illiterate and are constantly at the mercy of the decisions made by their political leaders.

For Mawugbe, it is these different human behaviours that keep pushing us into neocolonialism. It is for this reason that he focuses on discussing the theme of the concept

of freedom and the adverse effect of neocolonialism on our freedom as Ghanaians, and as Africans as a whole. The freedom Mawugbe talks about in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* is freedom after years of colonial rule. However, this freedom is interrupted by neocolonialism, a situation he believes is worse than colonialism. He explains:

I wanted to talk about neocolonialism. This exists in our African societies. Africans can't seem to do anything without consultation with the West. The West still has a great deal of influence on our governments. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

By expressing the desire to talk about neocolonialism, which is a pertinent situation in Africa today, Mawugbe again adopts the concept of the Theatre of Cruelty which believes in presenting issues relevant to the contemporary audience, and also make the audience the focal point within the theatre. By adopting this theatrical concept, Mawugbe expatiates on his theme: the concept of freedom and the adverse effect of neocolonialism on our freedom as Ghanaians and Africans.

Mawugbe believes that African nations have a right to freedom. They have a right to manage their own affairs without external influence or colonial masters. This explains why the play begins with the release of prisoners from within a prison. He makes us aware of the severity of captivity by describing the situation of the prisoners:

Suddenly the voice of Prison Officers issuing out all manner of commands and insults co-mingled with the sound of whips cracking on bare backs accompanied by agonizing screams and unheeded pleas for mercy, fill the air (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

This description is intended to make his audience bear in mind the need to appreciate the freedom that they have. He achieves this by presenting his audience with the stark reality of brutality meted out to prisoners. His audience witnesses the pain and sorrow of the

prisoners and it affects their mood, thereby tapping from the concept of the Theatre of Cruelty that the audience's vision must be bombarded with the naked truth of life. In Africa's political history, there are those who fought and sacrificed a lot in order that African states would be free from colonial oppression. Mawugbe has a lot of admiration for African leaders who fought for the independence of their states. He admires them through his character, Gomido:

Like Nelson Mandela [Sings] Free Nelson Mandela, walking side by side with Winnie Mandela on the crowded narrow streets of SOWETO. (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

Freedom is vital to human growth and development. Every man must be free. However, freedom in the wrong hands or given in the wrong manner could be easily abused, thereby making it dangerous. Mawugbe is worried about African political leaders who, after others have fought to gain independence from colonial masters, lead their people back into a more degrading form of colonialism known as neocolonialism. Neocolonialism has had adverse effects on our freedom as Africans. It is due to neocolonialism that Africa still remains socially, economically and politically undeveloped. The adaptation of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty confronts the audience with this truth.

The setting in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* is symbolic. This is because the backdrop, which is in fact, the prison wall, is a constant reminder that freedom is important. The opportunity to be free must be appreciated. The Prison walls also represent the oppressors. It serves as a constant reminder that although freedom has been granted, the oppressor is still near. This is why African leaders easily return to neocolonialist tendencies. The colonial masters still loom over their colonies through economic and

political policies. It is for this reason that Abutu tells his colleagues he does not “feel too comfortable” remaining just outside the prison walls. He wants to pack up and move on to begin enjoying his freedom. He wants to take advantage of his freedom and start a new life.

*Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* serves Mawugbe’s purpose of creating an African Theatre of the Absurd because the issues of freedom and neocolonialism are issues the African continent identifies with. The play is not just an attempt to create a new theatrical genre as in the case of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. African playwrights discuss challenges their societies face in their plays with the aim of seeking lasting solutions to these challenges. Art in Africa is not merely for art sake. It is for this same reason that Mawugbe further develops his African Theatre of the Absurd in his play, *The G-Yard People*, another good example of the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty in his large portfolio of plays.

*The G-Yard People* presents Bodza–Lumor, a playwright who is in the process of writing a script. However, he is not content with the way certain characters in the story turn out. For instance, Bodza wants his linguist in the story to speak with flamboyance as pertains in the palaces of great African chiefs, but finds it difficult to achieve this flamboyance. Bodza decides, after a conversation with his fiancée Ayishetu, to relax for a while, and then wake up later to continue his script. It is during Bodza’s sleep that he dreams about his characters who want him to write a story that will draw a vivid picture of the sufferings of ordinary working people. His characters accuse him of not telling their story although he promised to do that some years ago. The characters that appear in the form of ghosts put

Bodza on trial and find him guilty of not keeping his promise. Bodza wakes up to realize that it had all been a dream.

*The G-Yard People* creates an African Theatre of the Absurd right from the beginning in its plot structure. As already stated, Mawugbe is not interested in recreating Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd with an illogical plot structure just for art sake. He adopts this illogical plot structure in order to create his own plot structure that is not conventionally bound, in order to tell his story. The play begins with a point of attack when the ghosts Nyembi and Anahg enter Bodza's living room. This is because it comes as a surprise to the audience when these ghosts arrive; and also as a surprise to Bodza who is supposed to be having an uninterrupted nap. Bodza, who is frightened out of his wits, demands to know who they are, and they tell him: "We'll tell you who we are but, first tell your wife to see to it that your baby keeps quiet." (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

This statement creates a rising action. The audience begins to wonder how come Bodza has a child with a ragged looking woman like Nyembi. Why is Nyembi looking so ragged, and is Nyembi's baby really Bodza's? Bodza is also agitated by the reply.

After building the audience's curiosity Mawugbe plunges straight into his story. This is why the plot enters into the exposition by further creating complications. Bodza is confused when they inform him he is the father of Nyembi's baby, and seeks further explanation from Nyembi. However, Nyembi complicates the issue with her reply:

I am your wife. And this is your baby. Our baby, Itai. Your blood. My blood. Our blood. The blue seminal fluid of your pen. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

With the exposition, certain things begin to come out clearly. These people are not ordinary ghosts. They are “ghosts” from the playwright’s imagination. Bodza promised to write a script on their plight as workers but failed to keep the promise. He has forgotten his promise and is now concentrating on writing scripts that are flamboyant and will boost his ego as a playwright, and now his conscience is plagued by the promise. The ghosts have come to remind him of his broken promises to them:

NYEMBI: You promised putting me on celluloid for the whole world to see, didn’t you Bodza?...

JOE: You assured me of an enviable place on the national TV Screen. You said I shall be a role model and the toast for children, didn’t you Bodza? ...

JACK: You said you were going to clothe me beautifully in wellbound paperback and hard cover laminated kente and Adinkra designs. Didn’t you Bodza? (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

Nyembi and her colleagues narrate their stories to the audience. The audience is horrified by their narration. This is because the ghosts give vivid verbal narrations of their plight. This is a feature right out of the Theatre of Cruelty. The audience is bombarded with horrific narrations that draw pictures of unpleasant truths. The play ends abruptly with the ghosts’ sudden disappearance, and Bodza waking up to eat his meal as if nothing had happened.

It is obvious that the play does not have a conventional resolution because all conflicts are not resolved at the end of the play. For this reason, the play bears resemblance to the characteristic features of Esslin’s Theatre of the Absurd. However, *The G-Yard People* does not need a conventional resolution. Mawugbe presents important issues within society through his play; it is up to the audience to understand these issues and deal with them accordingly. The forthrightness with which the issues are raised enhances the elements of

the Theatre of Cruelty, and creates within the audience awareness for positive change. The onus is on the audience who represent society to begin the positive change. The audience must solve the conflicts that arise in the play in their lives. This is the African Theatre of the Absurd that Mawugbe creates with regard to the plot structure.

The Theatre of the Absurd creates unrealistic characters. Mawugbe's characters are ghosts; their appearance as ghosts makes them unrealistic as far as Esslin's absurdist theatre is concerned. Nevertheless, the characters are vividly realistic. This is why Nyembi explains:

We were flesh and blood, wrapped in the bubble of ideas floating through your mind like the foetus in an amniotic fluid. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

This statement by Nyembi explains the fact that although they come as ghosts they are very much alive. It is the life within them that enables them to come to Bodza and tell their story. They existed as characters in one of Bodza's scripts that never saw the light of day. And they finally show up to tell their own story since Bodza has refused to tell it on their behalf. They have a right to be heard and attended to by society. They come to press charges against Bodza for not performing his duties as a writer:

NYEMBI: You said to me I shouldn't worry and that you would make me in the image of Edufa and Ampomah of the Sutherland cartel...

JOE: Or Brother Jero and Chume of the Soyinka cartel ...

ANAHG: Or Sizwe Bansi and Styles of the Fugard cartel (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

The accusations by the ghosts highlight the fact that they had hoped Bodza would publish their stories and thereby give them the audience that characters like Styles and Sizwe Bansi of Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* had, in order to tell the stories of their sufferings under apartheid regime in South Africa.

Unfortunately, their dreams are not fulfilled, and as a result, they continue to exist only as figments of Bodza's imagination. Jack realizes that all the promises made by Bodza are empty promises:

Now we know they were all empty promises. More than forty years after Madam Anahg's first marriage, our lives are still in this miserable unedited form. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

Like the characters in Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* who represent the suffering people of South Africa under the apartheid government, Nyembi and her colleagues represent the suffering workers of Ghana. Nyembi, a nurse, represents the workers in the health sector who work under very harsh conditions that do not favor them and their patients. Nyembi describes her plight as a nurse:

NYEMBI: You made me work as a scrub nurse, with a sick health delivery system that ran hospitals and yet had not the slightest aptitude for hospitality towards its nurses, doctors and other paramedics...

BODZA: How do you mean?

NYEMBI: The tools to work with were just not there. No theatre gloves, no theatre mask, no wash basin, no dressing packs, no disinfectants, very miserable salary. There was no job-satisfaction. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

And it is due to these harsh working conditions that Nyembi loses her life as well as that of her baby's to AIDS. Jack has also lived through the same fate working as a lumber man. After years of working as a lumber man, Jack dies in the course of felling a tree, and his family is not given his entitlements:

My four children never received the scholarship as promised. They were often sent home for non-payment of school fees... I stood at the entrance of the cemetery and silently watched them pass by on their way home for school fees that in actual fact weren't there. My

wife... I mean my ex-wife, couldn't cope... I stood at the cemetery gate and helplessly watched all my three children drop out of school.  
(1<sup>st</sup> leg)

All of Jack's efforts during his life time come to naught when he passes away; and to add insult to injury, Jack's corpse is laid in a straw coffin and not one of the many trees he fell is used for his coffin. Joe and Madam Anahg's stories are no different. Their lives also end abruptly and in tragedy with very little to show for all their years of hard work and dedication to their motherland.

Madam Anahg represents the country Ghana. She represents all the suffering masses in Ghana. Her name Anahg is in fact, Ghana spelt backwards; in other words, it is an anagram. Mawugbe was asked why he called this character Anahg and if it is true that her name really is Ghana spelt backwards:

It is true. It is Ghana spelt backwards. The play is a little political. And I wrote it during the PNDC era. One had to be careful due to the political intolerance at the time. So I wrote the play ensuring that certain issues remain hidden, and open solely to the discerning theatre audience. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

All four characters can be identified within the Ghanaian and African working classes.

Their life stories, as narrated by them, are a depiction of the story of the ordinary Ghanaian or African worker. Since the issues presented in the performance are contemporary, they are likely to attract the attention of the audience; and this is where the Theatre of Cruelty contributes further to the development of Mawugbe's African Theatre of the Absurd. The voices of these workers need to be heard. And they can only be heard if men like Bodza tell their stories in their books or plays. The problems faced by these four characters are not fictitious. They are real life situations. Writers like Bodza know these stories and the

onus is upon them to see to it that the world gets to know about these stories too, by reading their novels or watching their plays on stage.

Bodza's excuses for not fulfilling his duty as a writer illustrates society's lack of commitment to help champion the course of supporting its working class to build a strong voice that will let others and the world at large know about their plight and come to their aid. They can build a strong voice by setting up Workers Unions. These unions will advocate better working conditions for workers. Unlike Bodza who wakes up and, instead of tackling the issues that arose in his dream, rushes straight to take his meal as though nothing happened, writers must always put down whatever comes into their minds. It is a duty they cannot shirk for any reason.

A writer's creative work begins in the mind. It is nourished and brought to life by the power of human imagination and commitment. It is for this reason that the original setting of the play is in the mind of Bodza although the audience literally sees the ghosts in Bodza's living room.

The setting in *The G-Yard People* adopts the concept of setting in the Theatre of the Absurd. Setting in the Theatre of the Absurd is not easily recognizable. In the *G-Yard People* setting is peculiar. On one level the audience find themselves listening and watching a performance in Bodza's living room. On another level the audience find themselves watching ghosts in human form. These ghosts are only real in Bodza's mind. He conceives

them during a visit to the beach to relax. He pretends to have forgotten, so, they refresh his memory:

ANAHG: That afternoon of August 15. . . You sat at the beach  
...alone, beneath the coconut trees enjoying the cool sea breeze...  
JOE: And gazing far into the sea. . .watching the local fishermen  
row in their bumper catch amidst singing and merry making...  
NYEMBI: You even joined in the music.  
JACK: And you couldn't resist the temptation to smile at the way  
they expressed their joy...  
ANAHG: Yes, and at that very moment, your beautiful smile  
became an open gateway along which the four of us floated through  
the bare corridors of your mind. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

This is the “evolution theory” behind Bodza’s characters. It is also a clear indication that an activity a writer observes or participates in, could help trigger his power of imagination, in order to create a story. Bodza’s characters are born out of a visit to the beach. However, he does not give his characters life by writing about them. They remain a figment of his imagination. This is why Mawugbe projects the working of Bodza’s mind into a physical set in a living room. By so doing, the ghosts appear and take their human form in order to tell their story.

The audience is a witness to the power of dreams. Dreams can create reality; this is why the physical setting which is the living room is used to enhance the abstract setting which is Bodza’s mind; and this setting is further enhanced through the performance of the cast on stage. The audience can reach out and touch the living room, and at the same time they can also see Bodza’s mind at work in the form of his dream, once again by virtue of performance. This effect bombards the audience’s visual sense. The appearance of the ghosts frightens the audience; and at the same time, it excites them. At this juncture, the audience becomes part of the theatre experience.

It is in line with this theatre experience that Brown states: “The progressive experience of theatre is not easy to understand at first, and the cumulative effect in anyone play is hard to grasp until one has actually seen it performed.” (p.12) For instance, this experience is achieved in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The two characters who have been on stage alone, almost throughout the play, say to each other:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes let’s go. (II)

The stage direction after these lines is that they are not to move, and then, the curtains are drawn to signify the end of the play. At the end of the play, neither character has achieved a new ability to understand and speak of their situation; it is the audience’s awareness that has progressed. Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* was performed before a group of prisoners in the San Quentin penitentiary in California, USA, in 1957. Edwin Wilson et al, reports on the audience and performers combined experience in their book, *Theater, The Lively Art*:

The performers today are nervous, not only because they are performing in a penitentiary, but also because of the play itself. *Waiting for Godot* is a drama without much action, and is filled with literary and religious references... With these difficulties in mind, the performers from the Actor’s Workshop begin their presentation. To the surprise of the performers, the audience sits in rapt attention. After the performance is over, it is clear that the prisoners have understood much of what they have seen- perhaps than other audiences might understand. These prisoners, waiting out their sentences in boredom and frustration, have intuitively connected with the men on stage who wait for the unknown Godot, who never comes. (p.347)

It is plausible that each prisoner returns to his cell, bearing in mind that they have just witnessed their own lives in performance on stage. They are condemned men awaiting their

fate. This illustration exhibits how the audience's awareness can progress irrespective of the lack of progression by the performers. A reporter from the San Quentin News who was present reported on what a teacher at the prison said after the play: "They know what is meant by waiting ... and they knew if Godot finally came, he would only be a disappointment." (p.4)

It is this same effect that the ghosts in *G-Yard People* leave on their audience. The ghosts only come in to tell their story. Bodza's mind serves as their medium of communication with their audience. He wakes up after the ghosts have left and is ready to take his next meal. It is as though nothing has happened. And the audience is shocked by this. However, it dawns on them that the problems discussed by the ghosts are problems that have always been present. We talk about it, but we do little to turn the negative situations around. Mawugbe's intent is to reach out to his audience. The awareness for change must come from his audience, and this is achieved before the play reaches the curtain call.

The setting which is Bodza's mind is symbolic. This is because it informs the audience of the natural setting from which every writer operates. All concepts are first developed in the mind of the writer, and then they are given flesh through its presentation in print or performance with regard to drama.

Mawugbe creates an African Theatre of the Absurd in his plays *Upstairs and Downstairs*, *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome*, and *The G-Yard People* in order to tell the African story. He achieves his theatre by adopting two complementary theatrical concepts; the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty. With absurd theatre, Mawugbe adopts

its plot, setting, and character presentation as and when necessary in each play. He adopts the Theatre of Cruelty to discuss his themes in all three plays.

Mawugbe also believes in the symbolic use of setting. This explains why his settings in all three plays carry so much weight. His unique creation of an African Theatre of the Absurd is brought to life completely through performance. His adaptations from the absurdist and cruelty theatres in creating his African Theatre of the Absurd gather its strength from performances. The plays are designed to affect the audience, and the audience can be motivated towards achieving positive change in their various societies.

His ingenuity does not end with his creative adaptation of western dramatic conventions.

Mawugbe adapts a completely different theatrical concept that is solidly grounded in Ghanaian culture. It is a theatrical genre created and nurtured by Efua Theodora

Sutherland, and known as *Anansegoro*. A discussion of this important branch of his career as a playwright is the focus of the discussion in the next chapter.

#### Notes

1. John Russell Brown, *What Is Theatre? An Introduction And Exploration* (Focal Press, Heinemann, 1977) p.8 – 13
2. William A. Heffernan & co, *Literature Art And Artifact* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. 1987) p.966
3. Edwin Wilson et al, *Theatre, The Lively Art*, (McGraw Hill Company, 2000) p.347
4. *San Quentin News*, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1957.

# KNUST

## **Chapter 3: *Anansegoro*: Ananse – Kwaku – Ananse**

In chapter one the conventions of Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd, aptly illustrated by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, were discussed. Chapter two discussed Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's skillful adaptation of these conventions in creating an African Theatre of the Absurd which is aimed at telling the African story from an African perspective. This chapter will discuss another major influence of this playwright's career, an influence that is derived from a very unique Ghanaian cultural art form known as *Anansegoro*.

In our rural communities, *Anansesem* is organized as an evening pastime. The young as well as the old come together to tell stories that revolve around Ananse. This story-telling

art by the Akan people is unique in the fact that it thrives on total participation of the audience. There is always singing during the story-telling process by the audience. The songs the audience raises may not always have something to do directly with the present situation in the story, but are entertaining nonetheless. This ensures that the art of storytelling is not monotonous. And as far as Mawugbe is concerned:

*Anansesem* always has music. The music creates the mood, gives it a rhythmic pace, summarizes the thorny issues in the story and also rekindles interest in the story. Music or *mboguo* is not an appendage. In fact, it is an integral part of the story. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

*Anansesem* also involves dance during the musical interlude. Traditional dances are performed as part of the *mboguo*, and this further enhances the story-telling performance. *Anansesem* also creates room for a member of the audience to step forward and tell the story if the story-teller is not doing a good job of narrating the story. It is through Efua Sutherland's pioneering research into Ghanaian oral traditions that she introduced on to the stage the unique dramatic form of *Anansegoro*, which derives its name from the Akan traditional story-telling art known as *Anansesem*. *Anansegoro* literally means "Ananse plays."

*Anansegoro* is the performance art of *Anansesem* on stage. *Anansegoro* is achieved through the dramatization of *Anansesem* in collaboration with all the other elements of theatre. *Anansegoro* focuses on projecting the story-telling tradition on to a stage with the use of light, sound and props. A body of actors, technically referred to in *Anansegoro* as players form a body of chorus who interject with music and dance as the dramatic performance

unfolds. *Anansegoro* thrives on performance. This performance involves what Efua Sutherland calls a Total African Theatre. Total African Theatre involves the fusion of dance, music and drama in stage performance. *Anansegoro* blends these three areas of theatre during performance. The dominance of the concept of drama as performance in *Anansegoro* synchronizes perfectly with Mawugbe's own interest in performance as seen in his adaptation of the Theatre of Cruelty discussed in the preceding chapters, to express contemporary issues.

In the concept of a Total African Theatre, the audience as well as the actors on stage come together to create the total *Anansegoro* theatre experience. With *Anansegoro* there is the concept of a theatre in the round. This concept is copied from the traditional Akan house structure whereby rooms are built in a semi-circle with doors and windows facing a particular direction. Usually the direction the doors and windows face is the centre of the compound. At one end of the centre is a raised verandah. Family meetings are usually held in the centre of the compound. This centre is where Efua Sutherland sets *Anansegoro*. Ananse remains at the centre which is also referred to as theatre in the round. Behind him is usually a web and his accompanying players who perform as the playing audience, and also double as singers who perform the *mboguo*, that is, the singing interludes during *Anansesem*. The players may sit with the theatre audience or up-stage. This group of players in European theatre is referred to as the chorus. In classical Greek mythology the chorus is distinguished from the main body of actors. For instance, in Euripides's *Medea*, the chorus is identified as the women of Corinth who witness the events the play unfolds, but are not allowed to actively get involved in the dramatic action.

The “chorus” in *Anansegoro* performs various functions that distinguish them from their European counterparts. For instance, they are allowed to halt a dramatic action in order to be part of it, or take over completely from the players on stage if they feel the dramatic action at a particular point in the play lacks artistic flair. They are even allowed to draw attention to themselves, and create a scene that is not part of the original dramatic action. They double-up as stage hands or even as prompters when a player misses his lines. They constitute the body of players and the immediate audience that the story-teller directly interacts with during the performance.

In *Anansesem*, there is a story-teller. The story-teller claims ownership of the story and knows the whole story. In *Anansegoro* the story-teller is retained. The story-teller plays the role of a narrator on stage. He claims ownership of the story and witness to the events being recounted as well. The story-teller has a right to be present as the action unfolds on stage. The story-teller also gets the audience involved in the narration and makes them believe that they are part of a performance. This feature is adapted from *Anansesem* where listeners can contribute by passing comments during the story-telling process, or sing. This is where the concept of a Total African Theatre in *Anansegoro* also picks its inspiration. In order to authenticate the presence of the story-teller on stage, he is given a staff just like the linguist in Akan palaces. The linguist, or the *Okyeame* as he is called in Akan, is the official spokesman of the chief. In *Anansegoro* the story-teller is the linguist who is in essence an omnipotent narrator with a large variety of roles. Efua Sutherland explains the role of the story-teller:

The story-teller in *Anansesem* tells the whole story himself. *The Marriage Of Anansewa* tells how this role has been adapted in *Anansegoro*. Here the narrator is still seen as the owner of the story with a conventional right to know everything, to have a right to be personally involved in the action and to be capable of inducing his audience to believe that they are there with him and similarly involved. (p.4)

The story-teller does not bore his audience with lengthy narratives. He allows the dramatic action to unfold and then comes in intermittently to discuss the issues raised by the performance with the body of players and the audience. This is quite different from the role of the story-teller in *Anansesem* where he narrates the whole story with some interruption from the audience.

Musical performance in *Anansesem* is called *mboguo*. Usually, the *mboguo* is part of the stories told and is performed in context, led by the story-teller. However, it is a convention for *mboguo* to be contributed by other people present. They are permitted to halt the narration and come up with a song. The song can be inspired by the narrative situation. In the traditional sense, *Anansesem* will begin with a series of *mboguo*, led by a specialist group. On some occasions, the *mboguo* group can choose to include libation pouring in a playful but serious manner. The story-teller begins his performance after the *mboguo*'s display; and from then on, musical interludes are allowed to complement the story. The singing of *mboguo* songs is usually accompanied by hand clapping, the use of castanets and a gong instrument to provide rhythmic control. Efua Sutherland includes *mboguo* in her theatrical concept, *Anansegoro*, to help develop characterization, to provide background information, and to acquaint the audience with shifts in time and place. Efua Sutherland's play, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, clearly illustrates her *Anansegoro*.

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, there is *mboguo* from when the play begins till the end as is typical of *Anansesem*. *Mboguo* in *Anansegoro* creates musical theatre, which further enhances the performance art. For instance, Ananse comes on stage with a song when he makes his initial appearance, and the chorus immediately picks up the song:

PLAYERS: Oh life is a struggle,  
Oh life is a pain;  
Oh life is a pain  
In this world. (I, p.9)

*Mboguo* performances continue to the end of the play when Anansewa finally ‘resurrects’ from the ‘dead.’

*Mboguo* rekindles the audience’s interest in the performance. It also serves as a performance interlude in order to make scene changes without dragging out the whole performance. For instance, in Mawugbe’s play, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*; when the play reaches the final leg, and Ananse is about to meet the others competing for his title, *mboguo* is used by the players as an effective means of changing the set without halting the performance. *Anansegoro* allows individual playwright’s innovation. As a result, Efua Sutherland manages scene changes in her *Anansegoro* by keeping on stage a Property man who manages props, and helps scene changes artistically. Mawugbe, on the other hand, employs *mboguo* to help scene changes as part of the performance. This artistic freedom displayed in *Anansegoro* shares its unique quality with the Theatre of the Absurd, where the playwright is allowed absolute freedom to be innovative irrespective of already laid down dramatic conventions.

Efua Sutherland prescribes in her *Anansegoro* the need for props to be on stage. In *The Marriage of Anansewa* the props manager is seen on stage and is called property man. The property man never leaves the stage even during performance. In fact, the property man offers his help at certain points in the dramatic action. For instance, when Ananse feels hot and needs to cool down, it is the property man who brings a fan and manually turns the turbans to provide Ananse with some cool air. It is also the property man who fans the ‘supposed corpse’ of Anansewa when she feigns death. The presence of the property man on stage reminds the audience that they are still part of an *Anansem* section.

*Anansegoro*, as manifested in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, moves successfully to the end by adapting the traditional conventions of *Anansem*, and staying within these conventions as earlier stated. The success of *The Marriage of Anansewa* authenticates Efua Sutherland’s innovative idea of *Anansegoro*. *Anansegoro*’s success lies in the fact that she keeps in mind the concept of Total Theatre. She achieves Total Theatre by ensuring that the players consistently back Ananse with *mboguo*, which is a fusion of musical theatre, and dance theatre. *Anansegoro* also requires that the dramatic action should be performed in a theatre in the round, a structure that facilitates total audience participation. However, this convention is not rigid. This is why Mawugbe freely stages his *Anansegoro* on a proscenium. Yaw Asare, in his play, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, uses a proscenium as well.

*Anansegoro*, like most innovative literary creations, has not been allowed to wither. Other Ghanaian scholars and playwrights have developed it to suit their own literary purposes.

Alphonse Yaw Asare, Mohammed Ben Abdallah, Martin Owusu, are among the playwrights who have developed adaptations of Efua Sutherland's *Anansegoro*.

Yaw Asare, in his play, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, presents *Anansegoro* and Ananse as a parody of society. Asare believes that Ananse must be acknowledged for his role in shaping society positively. As far as he is concerned, Ananse must not be considered the villain. He builds his argument through Ananse:

Your world misunderstands me! No one accords me my proper place as the prime custodian of ethical, moral and philosophical norms. You say my methods are crude and sly. Hmm! (1<sup>st</sup> movement, p.3)

This statement by Ananse clearly explains Asare's interest in *Anansegoro*. Asare considers *Anansegoro* as a cultural outlet that serves the purpose of preserving the art of story-telling through performance art on stage. He also looks beyond the mere preservation of this art form. His pre-occupation is to preserve *Anansegoro* as a parody, and *Anansesem* as satires mirroring society's strengths and weaknesses.

Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, is in line with this vision when Hamlet instructs his players:

The purpose of playing ..., to hold as 'twere a mirror up to nature to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (III,ii)

Hamlet expects that the "mirror" of the stage would reveal to the audience their own lives. The audience would see on stage the truth about their existence; irrespective of whose ego it bruises. Certainly, Hamlet has good reasons for wanting the reflection of the stage to achieve this moral purpose. It is in a similar light that Yaw Asare considers it his moral obligation, as an African playwright, to give "delightful instruction" in his *Anansegoro*,

*Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*. He considers Ananse the ideal parody through which his purpose of mirroring society's ills can be achieved.

Martin Owusu's interest in *Anansegoro* is unique to him. His play, *The Story Ananse Told*, relies on the myth that refers to Ananse as the custodian of folktales, and for this reason places Ananse as the story-teller. Who can narrate an *Anansesem* better than the custodian himself? Ananse tells a story of a hunter turned king; who through greed, lust and disobedience, loses everything he owns, and returns to the drudgery life of a poor, miserable hunter. In the story, the hunter follows Ananse's advice and finds himself in trouble. However, Ananse cannot be blamed for the hunter's choices. The power rests in the hunter's hands to make the right choice, but he does otherwise.

In the story, Ananse is not the one who gets into trouble due to his greed and lust. It is the hunter. The hunter represents man. *Anansesem*, although considered as entertainment, has a moral obligation as satires mirroring our society. Martin Owusu makes his audience see themselves on stage through the hunter. *Okyeame* tells the hunter: "Your greed has brought you down." (IV, 47)

Perhaps, it is to ensure that Ananse gets a breather for always being referred to as the "trickster." Ananse is not the "bad one." His *Anansesem* performs the role of a parody, and this is what Martin Owusu wants his audience to concentrate on. *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro* are about the ordinary people in society. Ananse only serves as the "wagon" that transports the moral philosophies in the stories.

Yaw Asare's *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, and Martin Owusu's *The Story Ananse Told*, illustrate the fact that although Efua Sutherland created *Anansegoro*, it has evolved into a unique theatrical and cultural art form that other playwrights have found attractive and, as a result, adapted its conventions by creating their own unique *Anansegoro*. *Anansegoro* has become an important development drama, exhibiting an important aspect of Ghanaian culture in innovative ways. It is for the above reasons that Mawugbe is attracted to it, and decides to write a play in that tradition. His *Anansegoro* is entitled *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*.

The play *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* is a trial of Ananse in two stages. When the play opens, Ananse is in the first stage of his trial with seven maidens. These seven maidens accuse Ananse of wrong doing, as they choose to call his exploits in *Anansem*, and Ananse defends himself. Then Ananse is invited by the *Torgbuiga* of Aflao, where he is asked to take part in a democratic contest that will decide as to whether he remains the custodian of folktales or not. Other characters like Koo Fori, Azuma Nelson, Ephraim Amu, Konkonsa and Ampadu step forward to contest for Ananse's position as custodian of folktales.

Koo Fori is a popular character in a local TV series, *Efie Wura* (Landlord). His character is hilarious and known to be a drunk. Azuma Nelson is a boxing legend who lifted the flag of Ghana high during the 80s and 90s. Konkonsa runs shows that deal with political and social issues, and he is very popular with the youth and adults. Ephraim Amu is a music legend. All these characters have contributed in diverse ways to the development of Ghana through the arts. Although some are no more, their legacies are with us, and guiding us. Others like

Koo Fori, Konkonsa and Azuma Nelson are still around and are contributing to help develop the youth of this country. People consider them as epitomes of our society's values.

It is in line with their aforementioned talents that a scale is brought to measure each man's achievement against that of Ananse's. In the end, Ananse and Azuma Nelson are of equal scale. However, Ananse beats Azuma by asking Azuma to tell him the size and length of the python that he presented to *Odomankoma* at the beginning of time when *Odomankoma* made him the custodian of folktales. Due to Azuma's inability to answer the question, Ananse retains his position as the custodian of folktales. Mawugbe was asked why he chose the title *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* for his play:

I want to place emphasis on the name Ananse. Ananse as a character is unique. I want to create an Ananse that will live in its elements as an enormous folktale personality. I want to push his name in the realm of 'name emphasis,' like names such as Brutus Brutus Gali and Salim Ahmed Salim. The name emphasis is to make people hear it and attach importance to it. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

Mawugbe shows keen interest in *Anansegoro* because he considers it a commendable traditional innovation worthy of preservation. He acknowledges Efua Sutherland's role in giving birth to this traditional theatrical genre. He also shows a great deal of interest in Yaw Asare's *Anansegoro*, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*. Mawugbe explains why he takes keen interest in Efua Sutherland and Yaw Asare's contribution to *Anansegoro*:

Efua Sutherland presents to us an age old story-telling tradition in a very modern way and the audience identifies with the issues of poverty and the will to break free of poverty irrespective of the means. Asare presents to us the contemporary Ghanaian society in which everything foreign is rated the best. We are losing sight of who we really are as a people. (National Theatre, August 10 2008)

When the play opens, Ananse is on stage, and through his monologue, informs his audience that he is about to take part in a contest that will determine whether he retains his title as the custodian of folktales. As the *Okyeame* later explains, it has become necessary that a contest of this nature is organized because Ananse has held the title for far too long; and to follow a “democratic tradition,” it is only fair that others are given the opportunity to vie for it. Ananse’s only worry is the fact that Ampadu, the musician who wrote lots of songs about the animal kingdom, is participating in the contest. Ananse voices his fears:

The only contestant that scares me on this list is Nana Kwame Ampadu. That man possesses worthy information to tilt the scale in his favour in the forthcoming contest. My family and I have ever played host to him. He has been a constant visitor to our family house at Anansekrom. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

However, Ananse’s pondering over Ampadu’s participation in the contest, as seen in the above statement, is rudely interrupted by seven maidens who are in high expectancy over the impending contest. The seven maidens come on stage singing and dancing thereby creating a song interlude which is recognized as *mboguo*, and this creates the total theatre effect of drama, music and dance.

The seven maidens who come in with *mboguo* represent the growing negative perception of *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro*. The negative perception has to do with our present society branding Ananse and *Anansesem* as constituting a negative impact on children, and even adults due to his “lawless tricks and antics.” Society sees Ananse as “the trickster.” For instance, in Ivan Van Sertima’s essay, *Trickster, The Revolutionary Hero*, he states:

An analysis in depth of the main elements in these African folktales will show that the animals are involved in a shadow drama of the human world. They are dream figures through which personality

traits, values, or power relations of groups – commoner and king, slave and master, the weak and the strong, the powerful and the suppressed – maybe reflected in a dreaming drama of the social world, within which dream and drama the figures are invested with a fluidity and metamorphic quality denied them in a more rigidly structured social world, so that they often seem to reverse and overturn their given social role or condition. It is this capacity of the dream figure (animal archetype) to overlap and overturn an oppressive social condition that makes the personae of the tales (rabbit, tortoise in Black America, Annancy the Spider in the Caribbean) take on a heroic cast and revolutionary figure. (p.106)

This role reversal of certain folk heroes, as expatiated by Sertima, is one main reason why folktales have an enormous appeal in the black communities of the new world, and in slave plantations. For Caribbean slave societies, “Annancy the trickster” served as an escape from the shackles of their real life as oppressed people. Through “Annancy” they could run wild in the fields, and change the social order of “slave” and “master.” “Annancy” does not need to live by the rules of the “slave master,” he is all sufficient.

Perhaps, it is this conception that has misguided today’s society into regarding “Annancy” as nothing more than a mere “trickster.” However, “Annancy’s” portrayal in this light is only a means to an end for a slave who desperately needs some “psychological freedom” if, “freedom” itself is far from his reach. The real function and meaning of “Annancy” is what playwrights like Mawugbe explore through their *Anansegoro*, and the positive role of Ananse is what today’s society must concentrate on.

This is why Mawugbe ensures that the maidens come prepared for a show down with Ananse, and begin to recount his deeds in previous *Anansegoro* and *Anansesem*. They begin by accusing Ananse of the “scandalous marriage” that he sent his daughter Anansewa into when he was a guest at Efua Sutherland’s Drama studio. Ananse defends himself:

I needed money to buy Anansewa a lap top computer for her secretarial course. The Banks wouldn't lend me money because I had no verifiable collateral apart from my faded web. The local moneylenders would not even grant me an audience for fear that I might spin money off them for free. And you stand here asking the son of man what he did to survive...I used my brains, that is all I can say for now. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

Ananse successfully acquits himself of this accusation. Ananse's reply as depicted above is proof that Mawugbe writes for today's contemporary audience, and he ensures that he presents a contemporary Ananse that will appeal to his audience. The "type writer" which was used in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* now becomes a "laptop computer" in order to suit the present technological trend. The maidens quickly put up a new case to prosecute him:

7<sup>TH</sup> VIRGIN: It is again on record that you accompanied Yaw Asare to a land located somewhere south of the Sahara not very far from where the Greenwich Meridian intersects the Equator. Yaw states that by the time you, Ananse, were ready to leave the place, all the people in the land had become, *tafrakye*, idiots. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

The above accusation, Ananse defends himself:

I did no such evil. **[Laughs]** The truth is that the folks we came across on the coast, South of the Sahara, were simpletons who were too lazy to do any serious thinking for themselves... They were a nation of people that seemed to have been pre-programmed by their educational system to love anything and everything foreign and reject anything that would project their own indigenous cultural values and identity. **[Laughs]**...Once the thing was foreign, even if it was injurious to their lifestyle, they would fall over one another for it. They were a people fastened to the treadmill of mediocrity with a frightening passion. **[Laughs]** So, I saw an opportunity to use my Kweku Ananse common sense. (1<sup>st</sup> leg)

This is a direct reference to Yaw Asare's play, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*. The above statement by Ananse goes a long way to prove that Mawugbe understands Yaw Asare's

intent as a playwright in the *Anansegoro* tradition. Asare presents a society that is overly dependent on foreign materials and influence due to its own covetousness and lack of innovation. Ananse cannot be blamed for this; society must awaken to this fact and, realize that the problem and solution lies in its hand. Mawugbe shares Asare's belief that *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro* as a parody cannot be over emphasized. Society needs to understand and appreciate Ananse's satirical role. He has a moral role to play, and this role is to guide society towards positive self actualization.

*Anansesem* and *Anansegoro* are satires, and therefore, must be considered as such.

Mawugbe believes that the onus is on the artist to make society accept *Anansegoro* and *Anansesem* as such. *Anansegoro* presents the artist with the freedom to turn *Anansesem* into a stage performance, and by so doing, make the audience see themselves and not Ananse. African playwrights like Wole Soyinka of Nigeria have written satires such as *The Trials Of Brother Jero* and *The Lion And The Jewel*. These plays are aimed at mirroring society, which is the role satires play.

*Anansesem* being traditional satire, extends *Anansegoro* on to the stage and thereby creates a performance art that parodies society. *Anansesem* is available to all playwrights to adapt from and create out of it *Anansegoro*. The satirical nature of *Anansegoro* creates some resemblance to the Theatre of the Absurd. This is because both theatrical genres share the feature of presenting life as they see it. The difference is as a result of the fact that whereas, the Theatre of the Absurd sees the world as illogical and presents the truth of its vision in an upside down manner, *Anansegoro* sees itself as the mirror of the world; and by virtue of

this, becomes a mirror reflection of the realities of life. The fact however remains, that both theatrical genres serve the purpose of a performance pulpit, advocating positive change in human nature.

Ananse finally manages to extricate himself from the unwarranted and baseless accusations of the maidens to meet with *Okyeame* and ponder over the competitors who have filed their nominations to compete for Ananse's position as 'prime custodian of folktales.' Ananse is not amused that his title is keenly being contested for, and he makes *Okyeame* aware of this:

Look Okyeame, I mean to keep this title come rain, come hell, wind and fire. [*Ananse confronts Okyeame*] Before you or anybody from your accursed generation takes this title from me, it must be in a national contest. (2<sup>nd</sup> leg)

And when the time for the contest arrives, although Ananse is not happy with the contest about to take place, he makes his appearance, and announces to *Torgbuiga* and his people:

I am standing here as a very humble custodian of your own folktales, your forebears authored them and made me the custodian of them. I have been a librarian, watching over your folklore for a couple of centuries now. I am only a humble gatekeeper of all that is best in your oral tradition. I must concede that I never wrote those folktales... I have always known this day would surely come, and I have been preparing for it. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

*Okyeame* introduces the MC for the contest, and the MC announces the rules:

OKYEAME: M.C., you may take over, *Torgbuiga* has declared the contest is officially opened.

M.C: Thank you *Okyeame*. Now the rules of the contest. Each contestant is given at least seven minutes to assemble before us his or her credentials and state why the incumbent should relinquish the title. The credentials presented shall be weighed against Ananse's credentials on the public scale of sanity over there, provided by the Anansekrom Standards Board. But where a contestant's credentials

outweigh those of Ananse, automatically Ananse loses his title and shall be stripped naked in public. (3<sup>rd</sup> leg)

Mawugbe blends Ewe and Akan vocabulary in his *Anansegoro*, and ends up producing an intricate piece of aesthetic beauty in folktales from the perspective of two ethnic groups. For instance, *Okyeame* extends *Torgbuiga*'s greetings to the chorus in Ewe: “*Wo le... Miator wo de?*” *Okyeame* himself is called *Nutifafa*. The name *Okyeame*, is Akan. The Ewe version for *Okyeame* is *Tsami*. The similarity of both names from the two ethnic groups, is an indication of the cultural similarities they both share. The contest ground is in Aflao, which is a town in Ewe land. *Okyeame*, who happens to be the story-teller uses both languages, that is, Ewe and Akan, in his narration. The use of both languages by the story-teller indicates that there is a blend of two cultures in the performance of Mawugbe's *Anansegoro*. This also portrays the flexibility of *Anansegoro*.

Mawugbe also makes use of the linguist who has his staff of authority. He plays the role of the story-teller just as Efua Sutherland herself prescribes when she compares the linguist in a chief's palace to the story-teller in *Anansem*, and states emphatically that the story-teller has the right to know everything about the story. The linguist in Mawugbe's *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* is not called a story-teller. He is the *Okyeame* of *Torgbuiga*. *Okyeame* plays the role of a story-teller because he comes to narrate events that involve Ananse and the development of the plot. The *Okyeame* also tells the story of the beginning of *Anansem* in the play. He is not directly called a story-teller by Mawugbe because he wants us, as his participating audience of *Anansegoro*, to concentrate on Ananse. After all, his *Anansegoro* puts Ananse on trial, and also in a competition to defend his title as

custodian of folktales. This is why Ananse retains his title Kweku Ananse at the end of the play.

Mawugbe's play concentrates on solidifying the undisputable fact that Ananse is vital to *Anansem* and *Anansegoro* and for this reason, his position as custodian of folktales cannot be questioned. Further more, the issue of *Anansem* as a bad influence on our society has no basis because it serves as a parody of society. *Anansem* ought to be considered as satire. Ananse's role is not meant to be usurped. Ananse is the "prime custodian of ethical, moral and philosophical norms" as Yaw Asare puts it in his play *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, and Mawugbe agrees with Asare. *Anansem* is a positive aspect of story-telling tradition in Ghana. This is what Mawugbe seeks to convey in his play *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* when he states:

Sutherland began the use of a contemporary Ananse. I wanted to be part of it because it will give me a platform to discuss contemporary issues using folktale culture. This is why I brought in characters like Konkonsa, Koo Fori, Azuma, among others. These are real people in today's Ghana and they tackle today's issues. (National Theatre, August 10, 2008)

The above statement by Mawugbe clearly defines the angle from which he creates his *Anansegoro*. As a playwright, he is interested in discussing contemporary issues. Mawugbe sees *Anansegoro's* potential with regard to its satirical nature. *Anansegoro* helps him to develop a play that deals with contemporary Ghanaian issues by using folktale tradition. In a way, he kills two birds with a stone. From one angle he presents *Anansegoro* as a parody by putting Ananse on trial for his deeds in all of *Anansem*, and ensures that Ananse acquits himself of all charges. By so doing, the playwright makes society aware of the fact

that Ananse is not the antagonist he is perceived to be. He is only mirroring the nature of man.

Mawugbe honours the unique role of people within our Ghanaian society, and how these people help build society by virtue of what they do. For instance, Ampadu's songs, till date, remain classical masterpieces. This is because his songs tell tales of Ananse, and these tales are rooted in Ghanaian cultural values. Azuma Nelson, the boxer, will forever be remembered as the only man who lifted the flag of Ghana high at a time when the African continent was so dark with civil wars and famine; by winning his boxing matches in Europe and the Americas. Ananse is still important to today's society; he serves as a bench mark of all that is right and wrong in human nature. *Anansesem* must not be allowed to wither. It must develop with the times, and this is what Mawugbe does when he presents a contemporary Ananse in his play, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*.

It is clear that Mawugbe succeeds in making his point that Ananse and *Anansesem*, as an art form are part of our culture as a people and must not be done away with. His adaptation of *Anansegoro* to achieve his intent as a playwright is successful because the play leaves in the mind of the people the importance of *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro* as a vital and positive aspect of our culture that must be preserved. Although Mawugbe's *Anansegoro* is not performed in a theatre in the round, it is still *Anansegoro* because *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* has Ananse as the main character in the play and has other characteristic features of *Anansesem*.

Mawugbe wants his audience to see themselves in Ananse and also in all the characters that encounter Ananse in the play. If this is done, then no one will feel that Ananse and *Anansesem* have a negative impact on society due to Ananse's antics. Society will not see Ananse, but will see itself, thereby understanding better the positive role Ananse plays in Ghanaian culture. *Anansegoro* is therefore a cultural and theatrical vehicle by which Ananse and *Anansesem* can be promoted. *Anansegoro* plays the role of defining our society by presenting to us who we are as a people and what values we believe in and live by. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his introduction to the book, *Talk That Talk*, he states:

The stories we tell ourselves and our children function to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and a filter through which we process each event that confronts us every day. The values that we cherish and wish to preserve, the behavior that we wish to censure, the fears and dread that we barely confess in ordinary language, the aspirations and goals that we most dearly prize – all of these things are encoded in the stories that each culture invents and preserves for the next generation, stories that, in effect, we live by and through. (p.17)

The above statement by Gates proves that he believes our traditional stories portray our values as people living within a society. The stories we tell are not merely for entertainment; within them are enshrined our hopes, dreams and aspirations. These stories serve as yardsticks by which our morality can be measured. If society can realize this “gem,” then, it is half way through guiding its positive cultural values. Mawugbe shares Gates' belief. And it is for this reason that he strives to keep *Anansesem* alive through *Anansegoro*.

*Anansegoro*'s extensive use of dance, music and drama, which constitute Total African

Theatre, makes it all the more attractive. There is the popular expression: “exterminate Ananse, and society will be ruined.” Mawugbe’s *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* supports this fact and the facts raised by Efua Sutherland, Yaw Asare and others who recognize *Anansegoro* as a positive cultural art form. This is why in the play, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*, no one is able to replace Ananse as the custodian of folktales. Taking Ananse out of the picture would be tantamount to doing away with a long standing tradition that has the aim of preserving society’s moral values.

#### Notes

1. Efua Theodora Sutherland, *The Marriage Of Anansewa And Edufa*, (Longman Group Ltd, UK, 1987) p.9
2. Yaw Asare, *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*, (Study Ghana Foundation, Ghana, 2006) p.3
3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (Geddes & Grosset, Scotland, 2006) III, ii
4. Martin Owusu, *The Story Ananse Told*, (Sedco Publishing Limited, Accra, 1999) p.47
5. Linda Gross & co, *Talk That Talk, An Anthology Of African-American Story-Telling*, (Simon and Schuster / Touchstone, New York, 1989) p.17106

#### CONCLUSION

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe has proven himself to be a versatile playwright through his ability to adapt different theatrical genres and create something unique of his own. Chapter one

discusses the Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of Cruelty and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, as example of an absurdist play. Mawugbe adapts the absurdist concept of presenting the world in an upside down manner in some of his plays. He also adapts the Theatre of Cruelty's concept of presenting contemporary issues, sharply and vividly, shocking the senses of audiences during performance. How and why he adapts these concepts is further discussed in chapter two.

Mawugbe adapts the concept of Theatre of Cruelty and the Theatre of the Absurd in order to create an African Theatre of the Absurd. Chapter 2 discusses how he creates his African Theatre of the Absurd in his plays *Upstairs and Downstairs*, *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* and *The G-Yard People*. He employs absurdist theories in the creation of his characters. It is for this reason that his plays present lunatics, ex-convicts and even ghosts as characters. However, he makes his seemingly queer characters real, and gives them a voice in his plays. His plays are well known for giving voice to those in society who have no voice. These characters efficiently carry all of Mawugbe's ideas, in all his plays, with great artistic flair. He gives lunatics a voice in *Upstairs and Downstairs*; he gives ex-convicts a voice in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* and gives ghosts a voice in *The G-Yard People*. His African Theatre of the Absurd has come about due to his ability to adapt the Theatres of the Absurd and Cruelty, and at the same time create out of his adaptation a unique dramatic form that suits his purpose as an African playwright.

Mawugbe, as a playwright, places a great deal of importance on his settings. For him, the setting is vital in the creation of his plot. He believes that the setting must by itself be able

to tell a story. He uses symbolic settings, and these settings have bearings on his themes. It is for this reason that he employs settings such as a prison wall, in *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome*, a Light House, in *Upstairs and Downstairs*, and the mind of a playwright in, *The G–Yard People*. Mawugbe believes that a set for performance ought to go beyond just being a defined acting area. The audience should be able to see the set, and be affected by it, as a result of the message the set puts across. As earlier discussed, the Theatre of Cruelty believes in bombarding the audiences' vision with images that would affect them and remain printed in their minds. It is important that there is a connection between his themes and his settings in order to effectively put across his ideas.

In all of Mawugbe's plays, he deals with contemporary issues. This is a feature of the Theatre of Cruelty. He uses his plays as a platform to discuss the challenges society faces and the way forward. He is dogmatic at times when he touches on issues that have to do with morality in his plays. This is why he is part of the cultural tradition of *Anansegoro*. Moral lessons are vital to *Anansesem*. Mawugbe makes it key in his plays as well. He sees himself as a playwright with a duty. His duty is to tell the African story from an African perspective, and in the process, hope that positive change would be achieved.

This is why in his play, *The G – Yard People*, Bodza Lumor, his protagonist, is accused of not performing his duty as a playwright. Unlike Bodza, Mawugbe would not be burdened by not telling the story. He believes he must unburden himself from the enormous task he has as a playwright. He can only unburden himself by writing.

The cultural theatrical form, *Anansegoro*, discussed in chapter 3, is one of the many concepts Mawugbe adapts in enriching his work. He presents his *Anansegoro* in contemporary terms, and by so doing, makes *Anansegoro* relevant to today's society. His purpose for *Anansegoro* is to defend the story-telling tradition as a positive aspect of our culture that ought not to be allowed to fade away. This is why when Ananse defends his title he emerges the winner. All those who compete with him are contemporary and are recognized in today's society. Each of the contestants can hold their own whenever the need arises to showcase their contribution to society. Ananse and *Anansesem* cannot be considered archaic. Ananse was relevant to society hundreds of years ago and he is still relevant to today's contemporary society. Every generation can adapt *Anansesem* and *Anansegoro* to suit their time.

Ananse is a satirical character and his stories are not aimed at presenting to society a trickster at his game. His stories are satires that mirror the lives of the audience who listen to a story-teller under the moonlight in our rural communities, or those who go to a theatre to watch an *Anansegoro* performance in our urban centers.

Mawugbe's dramaturgy has contributed a lot to Ghanaian and African drama and theatre. His plays have been performed for academic purposes at the School of Performing Arts, University of Ghana. This is because he is able to adopt new concepts, foreign and indigenous, to create a unique artistic form. The Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of Cruelty and *Anansegoro* are not the only adaptations Mawugbe has made. He has presented himself as an advocate of feminism with his play, *In The Chest Of A Woman*. This play highlights the role of women in chieftaincy and the gender imbalance of our chieftaincy institutions.

The three theatrical genres discussed in this paper buttress the fact that Mawugbe is attracted to theatrical genres that allow a playwright the room to be innovative, or better still, to have a “free canvas.” His plays deal with social, political and economic issues that face our country and continent. His stage is a pulpit from which hope for a better society is disseminated.

Mawugbe as a playwright has a lot to contribute to academia. His plays are a tremendous proof of this fact. It is hoped that this research paper will be the beginning of the attention that should be given to this prolific playwright within the circles of academia.

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### APPENDIX

#### TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH EFO KODJO MAWUGBE

VENUE: NATIONAL THEATRE TIME: 10:00AM QUESTION

DATE: 10<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2008.

What are your reasons for identifying with some theories that have their roots in Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd?

#### MAWUGBE

I must say that I intentionally made them so as an expression of my rejection of the old ways of always trying to write and sound like someone else. This is my own way of expressing my uniqueness.

#### QUESTION

How would you define the Theatre of the Absurd?

**MAWUGBE**

The Theatre of the Absurd is a free canvas on which an artist can freely express his innermost feelings without inhibitions of man made rules, traditions and some archaic principles. Even though it is absurd, it has a form to it that only the intelligent can decipher. Theatre of the Absurd is heavy drama meant for intellectuals and not just everybody.

**QUESTION**

After reading and watching some of your plays I observed that you attach humor to your absurdist ideas. Do you agree?

**MAWUGBE**

Absurdism by its form carries with it some degree of inherent humour. What I think the sharp writer does is to take advantage of these situations as and when they occur. It's like using a surfing board. You need to have an eye for the right wave or series of waves that can combine effectively to carry you safely for a long distance. Since absurdism is a nonconformist approach to theatre, little drops of humour here and there from time to time relax the audience. But if you are a smart writer you can make sure even the humour carries a serious message as much as other aspects of the drama.

**QUESTION**

After reading and watching some of your plays being staged, it became obvious that you place a high premium on the relationship your audience must have with your subject matter and themes. What is the reason for this?

**MAWUGBE**

One of the key elements in every theatre production is the audience, without whom the playwright has no business writing a play. If the issues discussed in the play do not have any relevance to the audience you can be sure the shelf-life of the play would be longer than its stage-life.

**QUESTION**

I see an element of Theatre of Cruelty with regards to your themes. This is because in the Theatre of Cruelty the audience must identify with the issues in the play. Their senses must be bombarded with the performance. However, you do not identify with this concept. Can you explain the limits of your adaptation?

**MAWUGBE**

What I have done is to use the absurd method as a way of bridging the gap between the concert party tradition and the formal textual drama that we often study in our schools, and thereby making the production easily mobile.

**QUESTION**

You have adapted Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd and out of this adaptation created something unique of your own. I call it an African Theatre of the Absurd. What is your take on this?

**MAWUGBE**

An African Theatre of the Absurd would present a lot of challenges to the ordinary uninitiated Ghanaian theatre audience. It would appeal to students of literature at the universities and a few others. But beyond that most people might look at it as another form of "Concert Party" The other challenge I foresee has to do with the medium of expression. If it is in English, then more than half of the population is out.

**QUESTION**

Let's take a look at your play *Upstairs And Downstairs*, which is a good example of an African Theatre of the Absurd. Your characters are called Maa, Paa and Sonny. Why did you not give them names?

**MAWUGBE**

Maa is used to refer to mothers in most parts of the world. It is the same for Paa and Sonny. A son is a son any where in the world. I used Maa, Paa and Sonny because they represent the world. They represent families all over the world. Families bear the brunt of poverty. It is the individual who is poor, and they make up the family unit.

**QUESTION**

*Upstairs And Downstairs* discusses the theme of poverty in third world countries and how this problem can be solved if all stakeholders will come together. What is your reason for discussing this theme?

**MAWUGBE**

I am looking at the unjust global system of the world. The IMF response to the needs of under-developed countries. The World Bank Programs. I am looking into debt relief by the 'powers that be.' And I'm looking at all these issues semantically.

**QUESTION**

What is your reason for choosing the lighthouse as your setting in *Upstairs And Downstairs*?

**MAWUGBE**

I chose the lighthouse because the lighthouse is a Place of enlightenment. Light creates discovery and fresh knowledge. We all need lighthouses to find our bearing in the turbulent waters of life.

### QUESTION

Let us take a look at your play *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* which is also another excellent example of an African Theatre of the Absurd. As a playwright what is your purpose for the play?

### MAWUGBE

I wanted to talk about neocolonialism. This exists in our African societies. Africans can't seem to do anything without consultation with the West. The West still has a great deal of influence on our governments.

### QUESTION

You wrote *The Grave Yard People*. I have watched it in performance. It is a wonderful play. What was your inspiration for the play?

### MAWUGBE

At times I feel it is not my play. I was traveling on an STC bus from Cape Coast. I remember sitting by the window, and anytime I looked out the window it was as if I could see people talking, and I could actually hear what they were saying. This happened anytime I closed my eyes and turned towards the window. So I actually closed my eyes took out a pen and paper and listened. I would listen for a while and then I would open my eyes and write. *Grave Yard People* is an eavesdrop on a conversation. I felt I should write down all I heard and I did just that.

### QUESTION

Your character Anahg, I realized it is Ghana spelt backwards. Is it just a coincidence?

### MAWUGBE

It is true. It is Ghana spelt backwards. The play is a little political. And I wrote it during the PNDC era. One had to be careful due to the political intolerance at the time. So I wrote the play ensuring that certain Issues remain hidden, and open solely to the discerning theatre audience.

### QUESTION

Aside creating an African Theatre of the Absurd you take interest in Anansesem. What is your impression of this traditional story-telling art?

### MAWUGBE

As far as I am concerned, Anansesem has always been and will continue to be codified information. You need to be able to decode Anansesem in order to get to the real meaning.

### QUESTION

Musical interludes, that is *mboguo*, is key in Anansesem. What is your take on this?

**MAWUGBE**

Anansem always has music. The music creates the mood, gives it a rhythmic pace, summarizes the thorny issues in the story and also rekindles interest in the story. Music or *mboguo* is not an appendage. In fact, it is an integral part of the story.

**QUESTION**

Efua Sutherland began Anansegoro. Others like Prof. Martin Owusu, Dr. Ben Abdallah and Joe De Graft Johnson followed in her stead. I noticed your Anansegoro, *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* identifies a great deal with Sutherland's *The Marriage Of Anansewa* and Asare's *Ananse In The Land Of Idiots*. Why is this so?

**MAWUGBE**

Efua Sutherland presents to us an age old story-telling tradition in a very modern way and the audience identify with the issues of poverty and the will to break free of poverty irrespective of the means. Asare presents to us the contemporary Ghanaian society in which everything foreign is rated the best. We are losing sight of who we really are as a people.

**QUESTION**

What is your purpose as a playwright in *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*?

**MAWUGBE**

If you read the works of Sutherland, Asare, Abdallah, Joe De Graft, and others, you will realize that Ananse is reported to have committed some atrocities against mankind. The stories are always about Ananse. It is Martin Owusu who kind of breaks away from the trend with his play, *The Story Ananse Told*. In this instance, Ananse is given the chance to tell a story. I decided to put Ananse on trial in *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse* due to his deeds in all the other Ananse stories, and to make sure Ananse is vindicated from all the unfair presentations of his motives and character.

**QUESTION**

Why did you choose the title *Ananse – Kweku – Ananse*?

**MAWUGBE**

I want to place emphasis on the name Ananse. Ananse as a character is unique. I want to create an Ananse that will live in its element as an enormous folktale personality. I want to push his name in the realm of 'name emphasis' like names such as Brutus Brutus Gali and Salim Ahmed Salim. The name emphasis is to make people hear it and attach importance to it.

**QUESTION**

Do you think that the use of *mboguo* in Anansegoro has some effect on the performance?

**MAWUGBE**

Anansem is not time bound, so *mboguo* is spontaneous and it represents the spirits of the listeners. It's not the same with Anansegoro. Anansegoro is time bound because it is a stage

performance and it loses its spontaneity. *Mboguo* is rehearsed prior to performance and come in as organized interjections.

### **QUESTION**

Why did you decide to join the renaissance culture, Anansegoro?

### **MAWUGBE**

Sutherland began the use of a contemporary Ananse. I wanted to be part of it because it will give me a platform to discuss contemporary issues using folktale culture. This is why I brought in characters like Konkonsa, Koo Fori, Azuma, among others. These are real people in today's Ghana and they tackle today's issues.

