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Auntie Efua

Kofi Anyidoho

WE CANNOT FORGET

ON 21 JANUARY 1996, THE African world lost one of its most remarkable daughters of the 20th century: Dr. Efua Theodora Sutherland. 'Auntie Efua' is best known for her pioneering work as a cultural visionary and activist, her impact on society at once comprehensive and enduring. Teacher, research scholar, poet, dramatist, and social worker, she devoted her life to the building of models of excellence in culture and education, and to the training of young people who would carry her vision into the far future.

Born in Cape Coast on 27 June 1924, she was named after her maternal great-grandmother Nana Ama Nyankoma. Her father, Harry Peter Morgue from the family of Chief Moore of Nsona Paado, Cape Coast, was a well-known teacher of English who once taught at Accra Academy. Her mother, Harriet Efua Maria Parker, was from the royal families of Gomua Brofo and Anomabu,



Theodora Sutherland

particularly the branch founded by Barima Ansafu at Gyegyano, Cape Coast.

Despite her royal birth, Efua had a

very humble and difficult early life; her eventual greatness may be more of a personal achievement than an inherited family fortune. Her young mother died in a lorry accident at age 18, leaving 5-month old Efua in the care of her grandmother Araba Mansa, whose personal sacrifice and example of hard work as a baker ensured Efua's survival and provided the single most important impact on her later

development into a most resourceful personality.

Theodora Olivia Morgue, as Efua

became known, began her primary education at the Government Girls School and later moved to St. Monica's, both in Cape Coast. She took the Standard Seven examination while she was still in Standard Six, and did so well she won a scholarship to the St. Monica's Training College at Ansate Manpong. St Monica's was founded and run by Anglican Sisters of the Order of the Holy Paraclete, based in Yorkshire, England. The nuns in both Cape Coast and Mampong had such significant influence on the young Efua that she seriously considered becoming a nun and would have gone to England for convent training had her grandmother not intervened.

At 18, she began teaching at senior primary level but soon joined the staff of St. Monica's Training College. In 1947, after five-and-half years of teaching, she went to England where she studied for a B.A. degree at Homerton College, Cambridge University. She spent another year at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, specialising in English linguistics, African languages, and drama. Back in Ghana in 1950, she returned to St. Monica's but later transferred to Fijai Secondary School and then to Achimota School.

In 1954, Efua married William Sutherland, an African American who had been living in Ghana and worked from 1951-57 to help found what is now Tsito Secondary School in the Volta Region. Efua spent part of the period in Tsito to help with the foundation work. Efua and Bill had three children, Esi Reiter, Ralph Gynan, and Muriel Amowi, who have since become a university research fellow, an architect, and a lawyer respectively.

It is against this family and educational background that we must assess the unusual impact of Efua Sutherland's public life as educator, creative artist, and activist social visionary. She is best known as a dramatist, but her work in this area was always informed by a compelling vision of a better society, and she chose appropriate cultural education as the best foundation on which

such society could be established. Like many others, she could have used her considerable talents and skills in the promotion of a spectacular individual career. Instead, she chose to share her gifts with society at large by investing her energies in the building of model programmes and institutions, and in the training of a future generation.

Efua Sutherland's reputation as the founder and mother figure behind the national theatre movement may best be measured by the many key institutions and programmes she was instrumental in bringing into being. She was the prime mover in the founding of the Ghana Society of Writers (1957). A year later, the Ghana Experimental Theatre Company was launched under her direction. She helped to found the Okyeame literary magazine in 1961. Through her pioneering research into Ghanaian oral traditions, she introduced onto the stage the unique dramatic form of Anansegoro, deriving its creative model from traditional story-telling drama. To provide an ideal rehearsal and performance space for the emerging national theatre movement, she mobilised funds and supervised the building of the Ghana Drama Studio, ensuring that its design was in harmony with performance demands of African theatre practice. She founded Kusum Agoromba, 'a full-time drama company based at the Drama Studio and dedicated to performing quality plays in Akan.... in towns and villages all over the country.' She provided creative leadership to the Workers' Brigade Drama Group and to the Drama Studio Players.

In May 1963, Efua Sutherland became a Research Associate of the Institute of African Studies. As part of the move, she handed over the Drama Studio to the University of Ghana to be issued as 'an extension division of the School of Music, Dance and Drama.' Through the Drama Studio Programme and the Drama Research Unit of the Institute, Efua Sutherland worked with the late Joe de Graft and others to build the foundations of what was soon to become a model programme in drama and theatre studies and practice in Africa. One of her most

frequently cited projects, the Atwia Experimental Community Theatre Project, is recognised world-wide as a pioneering model for the now popular Theatre for Development. *Araba: The Village Story* is a major documentary film done in 1967 by the American television network ABC to record the success of this unique experimental project.

A particularly significant aspect of Efua Sutherland's work was the Children's Drama Development Project. This multi-year project focused on research into the cultural life of children in society, used the information gathered as a basis for writing, producing and publishing appropriate plays for children. Conferences, workshops and test productions organised as part of this project have left us with an important collection of plays for children, among them R.A. Cantey's *Ghana Motion*, Togbe Kwamuar's *The Perpetual Stone Mill*, Kwamena Ampah's *Hwe No Yie*, Koku Amuzu's *The New Born Child and the Maid Servant*, Joe Manu-Amponsah's *Gates to Mother*, Kofi Hiheta's *A Bench of Chances*, and Kofi Anyidoho's *Akpokplo* (Ewe and English). Regrettably, the preparation of these plays for formal publication in a major anthology is one of the many vital projects which Auntie Efua's death has left unfinished.

The 25th Anniversary Programme of the Drama Studio, the final phase of Efua Sutherland's distinguished career in the national theatre movement, coincided with her retirement from the University of Ghana in 1984. The programme opened with an impressive and symbolic Ceremony of Remembrance and moved into a major documentation project covering various forms of drama that have evolved as part of the national theatre movement. The 25th Anniversary Programme, ironically, suffered a serious set-back when the Drama Studio was demolished to make way for the construction of the National Theatre. Although Auntie Efua was deeply hurt by the demolition of the studio, she continued to work over the next two years to bring the documentation programme to a reasonable completion. It was also in the final phase of her work that she gave to

Ghana and the African world probably her grandest artistic vision for uplifting and reuniting African peoples through the arts— an original proposal for the Pan African Historical Theatre Festival, the Panafest Movement. This final gift underscores the significance she attached to connections between Africa and the Diaspora. She played a very critical role in the establishment of the W.E.B. DuBois Memorial Centre for Pan African Culture. She belonged to an extensive global network of friends, many of them eminent creative minds.

Efua Sutherland's long and distinguished career had also left an impressive corpus of creative works, making her one of Africa's best known writers. In addition to a number of essays, articles, short stories and poems, her published works include a short biography of Bob Johnson, 'the father of the concert party tradition', as well as several other books—*Playtime in Africa*, *The Roadmakers*, *Edufa*, *Foriwa*, *Odasani*, *Anansegoro: Story-Telling Drama in Ghana*, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, *You Swore an Oath*, *Vulture! Vulture!* [and *Tahinta*]: *Two Rhythm Plays*, and *The Voice in the Forest*. Her unpublished plays for children include *The Pineapple Child*, *Nyamekye*, *Tweedledum and Tweedledee*, *Ananse and the Dwarf Brigade*, *Wohye me Bo*, and *Children of the Man-Made Lake*.

As a major literary voice, she was concerned about the need for making works by African writers available through local publishing. To this end, she played a key role as founder of Afram Publications Ghana Ltd in the early Seventies and until her death maintained an active role in the editorial work of Afram. It is to her credit and to that of all who have worked with her that three of the winners of the 1995 Valco Fund Literary Awards are works published by Afram.

A concern for children is central to all of Efua Sutherland's life and work. Even after her retirement from the University of Ghana, she was to devote the final phase of her public life to foundation work in the establishment of the Ghana National

Commission on Children. She was a foundation member (1979-1983) and later chairperson of the commission (1983-1990). The work of this commission, especially through the impact of child education programmes designed around a national network of children's park-library complexes, the documentation of the situation of the Ghanaian child, and the influencing of state policy on child life, shall remain one of Efua Sutherland's most significant lasting gifts to her nation.

Efua Sutherland served on several other national and international boards and committees, including the Education Commission, the Valco Fund Board of Trustees, and the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO. Her work received recognition and sponsorship from both the state and such major agencies as the Valco Trust Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, UNICEF, and UNESCO.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the achievement of a full university status, the University of Ghana

selected Efua Sutherland as one of a small group of eminent individuals whose contribution has had a profound impact on the development of the university and of the society at large:

Efua Theodora Sutherland, for the inspiration provided to the development of the Dramatic Art, and in recognition of your efforts on behalf of children for whose benefit you have canvassed children's libraries and amusement parks, the University of Ghana is privileged to honour you with the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

We recall this citation in this moment of her passing away, words that reassure us that Efua Sutherland's legacy remains with us through her words, her many models of excellence, and above all, through the many children she has given birth to in and through the arts.

Auntie Efua, may your soul rest in lasting peace. **GR**

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