

Research article

# THEATRE AND SOCIAL CHANGE: REASSERTING TRADITIONAL VALUES THROUGH THEATRE: THE ROLE OF KOBINA SEKYI

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## Abstract

The culture of a people is supposed to identify them as a unique group of people and therefore needs to be regarded and protected with all the people's might, will as well as resources and everything they have. This paper explores how Africans (Ghanaians) always revere and hold in the highest esteem that which is from the colonizer (Western World) as opposed to theirs. Through the spectrum of the playwright, Kobina Sekyi, one of Ghana's premiere writers, an attempt is made to analyse and interpret his play *The Blinkards* as a base look at this phenomenon of "Africaness Basterdisation" as a choice as opposed to heeding to call for National Self Assertion. A case will be made to back tress the point that Theatre/Drama has the potency to positively affect Social Change. **Copyright © AJSSAL, all rights reserved.**

**Keywords:** culture, Kobina Sekyi, African, colonialism, independence, *Blinkards*, Basterdisation

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## Introduction

During the era of Colonialism, the colonial masters made every effort for the Africans to believe that everything about them was evil. This made the Africans, especially the elites, portray the foreign “components” (dressing, eating, talking, accent etc) as that would define and determine the status of a human being. Kobina Sekyi described in certain quarters as a doyen of Ghanaian theatre, emerged in the era of asserting nationalism through his plays, demystifying this bastardization and delineating the search for cultural identity and nationalistic spirit. This article discusses culture, the development of drama in Ghana and then takes an analytical look at “The Blinkards” – a play by Kobina Sekyi, that addresses the effect of drama on social change.

## Culture in View

The issue of culture has always been an area of interest to many scholars. In sociology economics, literature, anthropology, politics and anthropology. Examining the various definitions by most scholars in the field of academia, culture is seen as the basis of man’s life in any society. Ironically, this aspect of African life in general and Ghanaian society in particular is what colonial masters have successfully rubbished for his economic gain. The result of this is the hybridization process that subverts traditional cultural values for foreign practices.

Geertz (1973), in defining culture says much about its important place in the life of a people. He defines it as:

*“A system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitude towards life”.*

Culture determines so many things, our outlook about life, our views about virtues and vices, how we see ourselves and how other people see us and most importantly how we develop our knowledge about life. Therefore, our life depends on culture. This explains the reason why there is always psychic disruption in the life of a people when any changes occur in their culture. This is because the ideology of the people, that is act” (*“any set of shared assumptions and beliefs seen in some sense, governing how people think and act* (Milner, 1996) would have been altered. This according to Said (1974) is what happened in nations under colonial rule. He argues that the west has used this ploy to rubbish the culture of others, a feat they achieved through western education and religious teaching. Most scholars see colonialism as a deadly virus that has destroyed many traditional values and has violently disrupted indigenous African ways of life. The result of socio-cultural changes among these nations is psychic disruption of those nations that experienced colonialism.

According to Amponsah (2008),

*“Colonialism fractured our culture and arts. Africans were made to see their cultural practices as fetish, uncivilized and damaging”.*

This was reaffirmed by Mohammed Abdallah in a draft cultural policy of Ghana document, when he states,

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

The Ghanaian theatre began when a foreign Cultural impact began to assert its dominant role on the Traditional African Values system by Africans who by their claim of education should not have accepted the foreign culture becoming the main conduit for the propagation of the new and foreign lifestyle.

For the purposes of the paper, I will group the periods of the development of drama into different stages thus: The period of protest drama, the period of local plays’, the National Theatre Movement.

## The Period of Protest Drama

Protest Drama began during the era of the Gold Coast’s Colonial experience. The main playwrights of this era are Kobina Sekyi whose great influence on this area of reasserting traditional values through theatre is the concern of

this paper. We also have the likes of Kwasi Fiawoo and J.B. Danquah. Fiawoo wrote *The Fifth Landing Stage* in 1925 and Danquah also wrote a philosophical play, *The Third Woman* in 1939 and published it in 1943.

## **The Period of Local Plays**

The period between 1935 to the early days of Ghana's Independence saw the emergence of a number of local language plays. The market potential of these local language plays encouraged a host of playwrights to also write in other local languages. The mission schools provided ready market. Most mission schools before Ghana's Independence prescribed these plays as essential text books. Ironically, it was the post Independence Educational System that encouraged the use of these plays, while at the same time, Government invested heavily in the Bureau of Ghana Languages with the mandate to encourage publications of literature in the local languages. The age of the local language plays was terminated by the era of Nationalistic atmosphere of the late 1950's until the overthrow of the first republic in 1966. The theatre and plays during the three periods show first that, Theatre has been the most singular and very important Art that has been used over the period in the Country's search for a cultural identity. Plays during the three periods by their content either rejected foreign cultural imposition, or sought to favorably compare the local culture with the foreign culture. Secondly, the use of local languages again established the clear wealth and advantage of the local medium over foreign language at the same time as it rejected foreign culture by affirming the wealth of local languages. Local language plays by nature projected the richness of the local language to neutralize the advantage that the former has. Thirdly, while pre-Independence Theatre used the medium of local language; post- Independence theatre attacked and rejected foreign cultural imposition by seeking to discover new forms of theatre that may define African Theatre. Theatre was thus identified as a potent tool for the asserting of the African Identity. Theatre in its application is therefore not just an Art for social diversion; it definitely is justified by its social, cultural and political role. The advantage that theater has over the print media is its powerful visual powers. The advocates of the post- Independence Ghanaian Theatre did not restrict their definition of the theatre concept to the written plays or literary drama only; a theatre house or building most suitable to dramatize the question of Ghanaian authenticity was even more pressing. It was to address itself to the question of Ghanaian authenticity both in plays and theatre houses that the "Ghana Theatre Movement came into being".

## **The National Theatre Movement**

The Ghana theatre movement sometimes called the National Theatre Movement was a ghost movement from the beginning. It never had any office space and did not employ a staff. Its social role was never defined. The administrative bodies charged to project the movement namely; the Arts Council of Ghana, The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana, all followed different and uncoordinated directions. The Mass Media, thus, Radio, T.V and Ghana Film Corporation were supposed to disseminate the research findings of the movement to the general public. But not a single one of these agencies welcomed the movement and its agents or brand of artists.

Personalities emerged from the movement but some of these were either quasi-artists or elite conservative type who were fighting their own identity crisis and were therefore calling for wholesale restoration of things African from their comfortable bungalows in Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. It may be argued that, by their colonial education, these personalities had acquired western conservative tastes. Their call for the restoration of Africanness was therefore hardly radical. It marked only a shift from ones western conservative tastes. These personalities who were to guide the course of the modern Ghanaian Theatre became custodians of the Ghanaian Theatre overnight and even went ahead to prescribe guidelines for theatrical circles in the country. That, play and theatre performances should reflect Ghanaian Authenticity. That, the theatre house should reflect the concept of Ghanaian traditional architecture must be noted that, some of the dreams of the movement in theory were sound but in practice created theatrical production problems for the original dramatists. It must also be said however that, the blend of cultural nationalism with the insistence on thematic relevance to the society formed part of the long established traditions of the modern Ghanaian theatre whose founders date back to Kobina Sekyi (1892-1956) and J.B Danquah (1895-1964). The social and emotional tension of the writers that laid the foundation of modern Ghanaian Theatre had their beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The major British cultural influence may have begun on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1844 when a number of Fante chiefs in the Bond of 1844 signed a protective accord for British protection against the Ashantes. This resulted in the first major

concentration of all sponsored educational and commercial activities around the Central and Western region of the Gold Coast. This resulted in Fantes especially those in Cape Coast by education, becoming the most anglicized Africans. The Anglo-Fante was content with this pattern of life in the Gold Coast until he visited England. There, he found himself an unwelcome visitor in the aristocratic and sophisticated circles and at the same time was unable to identify with the British working class culture. Back home from many years in English Universities, the Anglo-Fante, even with the University degree also found himself politically powerless because the British indirect rule had concentrated power in the hands of the traditional authorities whom the missionaries had taught the educated African to despise. It was against this background of contradictions and searches for identity that the Anglo-Fante, who had earlier accepted the British indoctrination, turned an instant violent political-cultural nationalist. Kobina Sekyi was one such Anglo-Fante.

## **The man Kobina Sekyi**

Kobina Sekyi came into the Gold Coast political scene as a result of his frustration and increasing disenchantment with the British Colonial system. The founding fathers of the modern Ghanaian Theatre were not originally interested in Art but the platform the Art offered to communicate didactic messages. Traditional Ghanaian art forms and theatres, such as folk storytelling, the Concert Party Theatre and Ceremonial and Ritual Drama from traditional festivals have always been taken to balance the moral intention with artistic goals. The theatre of Sekyi is removed from the traditional forms, in that they are “all moral and little art”. The theatre to them was a platform to purge their political and cultural frustrations.

It was in his attempt to provoke debate on the contradictions in the socio-political systems in the Gold Coast and the dangers to the survival of the African that Kobina Sekyi called on the visual powers of the theatre to expose the realities in the system.

William Essuman Kobina Sekyi was born in Cape Coast (the cradle of the Gold Coast Nationalism) on 1<sup>st</sup> November, 1892. Most of his upbringing and education seemed to have been undertaken from his maternal home, and he also schooled at the Mfantshipim Secondary School.

Sekyi entered the University College of London to read literature, but later switched to read philosophy. The contradiction he saw in the British social system brought home to him the ghastly realities in the culture that he had been flirting with all through his education in England. His frustration in England marked the turning point in his life. Within a matter of three years, the western conservative in Sekyi had turned a Gold Coast Nationalist as K.A.B Jones Quartey (1970) said about him, “*the more European philosophy Kobina Sekyi read, the more African he became*”.

## **His Search for Cultural Identity through “The Blinkards”.**

The Blinkards, the major extant play of Sekyi, a founder of the modern Ghanaian theatre, drew its inspiration from Sekyi’s long narrative poem “The Sojourner”; This poem sums up the heights of Kobina Sekyi’s general frustration with western civilization and marked the beginning of his search for his own cultural identity.

Aside the many issues raised by the playwright, Kobina Sekyi also used his play, *The Blinkard* to teach and educate on the need to reinforce our African values. The play tries to defend the point that, the introduction of Christianity together with civilization should not be a reason for us Africans to push our moral and cultural values to the background.

One major value expressed in *The Blinkard* is the need to respect ones cultural traditions. Culture, in simple terms can be defined as the way of life of a group of people. Culture is the one thing that defines an individual and shapes his identity. Culture stretches from food to cloths, language, belief systems among many others. Hence, one may ask; what then makes the man if he throws away his identity? “It is therefore naïve for one to push his or her cultural practices to the background and allow alien or foreign culture to appear in the foreground. In a situation like that, social cohesion and advancement stagnates, and the people seem lost” Owusu & Okyere (2009:pg62).

Throughout the play, we see a large division between the people; one group consisting of semi-educated Fantes and the uneducated traditional ones. However the former group seems to influence the later. The Fante language is

largely condemned by the cosmopolitan club. The members of which majority are illiterates, rather encourage the speaking of the English language. Suddenly, there is a crazy need to behave like a British in order to be accepted as part of the society. It is funny how Mrs. Brofosem prefers “Erimintrude” to Araba Mansah which is Miss Tsiba’s original name. Mr. Tsiba would rather be called “Aldibonontiphosphoriuiu Chhrononhonthologos” a name that cannot even be pronounced talk less understood. All of these go to show how the African identity is being disregarded and disrespected.

Also, the semi-literate in the play has succeeded in disrupting the traditional way of doing things. Marriage is a very important activity in Africa not only because it unites two individuals but also because it brings two extended families together. For this reason, the family has a major role to play in the marriage process, a role which has totally been downplayed. The responsibility placed on the family to be the first to hear from a young man and his people about his intention to marry their daughter has grown extinct. In the new order, the family is the last to know. In some extreme cases, the couple lives together and even have children before marriage intentions are made known to the family. This is exactly what the playwright frowns upon.

*Mr. Okado:* please sir congratulate me

*Mr. Onyimdzi:* Congratulate you? What on earth for?

*Mr. Okado:* I thought you said, in England, people who are engaged are congratulated

*Mr. Onyimdzi:* But you are not engaged, are you?

*Mr. Okado:* of course yes, sir: I am engaged to Miss Tsiba

*Mr. Onyimdzi:* What!

*Mr. Okado:* True, sir: I am engaged to Miss Tsiba

*Mr. Onyimdzi:* How did you manage it? It is rather quick work, you know

*Mr. Okado:* We are both reading the same book, sir. We read it last night, till morning. The chief woman in the book, she drops her handkerchief. The chief man picks it up, and gave it to the girl. Then they fell in love at first sight. Then they get engaged.

*Mr. Onyimdzi:* Really. I hope you are joking. People don’t get engaged in that lightening way hereabout. Her people may object- and yours for that matter.

*Mr. Okado:* But we are engaged English fashion, sir. Her father like English things and Mrs. Brofosem will be very glad and make her father consent.

What a way to get engaged? This act truly defies the morals of traditional marriage and the resultant confusion that comes up later in the play. In Africa marriage is an important institution respected between two families and not between two individuals in a corner somewhere.

One major way of identifying an African is the way he or she dresses. It has become so difficult in recent times to distinguish an African way of dressing from others; the playwright clearly expresses his concerns on the matter. In The Blinkards, Mrs. Brofosem seems to be carried away with her little experience in England which clearly reflects in her mode of dressing.

*Mrs. Brofosem:* Oh dear! It is hot! Too hot! But I have got it. I am sure he can’t able to resist my new green umbrella, my new ten- guinea hat, and my new patent boots with white top”

One could clearly judge by the above lines that, Mrs. Brofosem is very uncomfortable in what she was wearing yet she prefers them to native cloths because she wants to appear civilized. She goes on,

*Mrs. Brofosem:* I’m glad you’ve been to England: behold me spick and span in silk and patent shoes and with parasol and fun”.

It is amazing how much confusion we see in our world together with regards to what we wear. People who have travelled outside the continent come back embraced in a new mode of dressing; the tragic part however is when others struggle to copy to be and look like these people. These and many more, are the concerns expressed by the playwright in The Blinkards.

The irony of Kobina Sekyi’s new self-identification was that he sounded like a lime-light in a forest. His return to his native country in 1913, found to his utter disappointment, that most of his fellow Africans preferred to follow the European way of life.

In spite of the traumatic experience in England, Sekyi never ceased to be a conservative. For all his alienation from western cultural norms, he was hardly radical. In all his call for the institutionalization of wholesale “Africanness”, he could hardly be said to be pioneering any radical views. He was only changing from conservative Anglo Fante into conservative traditional African, for as Kwame Gyekye (2005) puts it;

*“No social movement is (however) interested in a wholesale restoration of all the things past”.*

In calling for re-instatement of almost all African traditional values, Sekyi was not moving from his formal position of a conservative; he was only changing from one cultural stand to another. The tragedy of such sudden cultural reawakening is that, it is not religious and sometimes even more sentimental. It is often backed by emotions and is hardly objective. Thus the founding fathers of the modern Ghanaian theatre like the advocates of the “Ghana Theatre Movement” were more of emotional political beings in search of their own cultural identities than national innovators.

The search for Sekyi’s own cultural identity led to his writing of numerous creative pieces. The imitation of the self-styled salt of the earth; the willingness of the African to jump and accept foreign cultures; the fact of the rich elite African ceasing to think for himself; the unnecessary tastes acquired by the educated African; these are the ideas that Kobina Sekyi addressed himself to in his play, The Blinkards. The play is interesting as a historical document and an academic piece. The playwright applied very little stretch of his imagination; situations were presented as he saw them existing and characters are identified in their gait and mannerism than their involvement in any dramatic action. Very often, the play breaks into long undramatic monologues of which, the only justification is that, it was the playwright speaking through them. Characters are introduced on stage and after long debates, they go off stage; not having been involved in any dramatic piece.

The intention of the writer was not to write a well-motivated play, he seemed more interested in “lamprooning” a social class of Africans and their mannerism of imitating the European way of life. The Blinkards was written in the style of the restoration comedy of manners. In plays of this school, deeper characterization is often absent. To make up for the absence of deeper analysis, the writers employed the uses of “label names”. One key technique employed in the play is a combination of English and fanti language as part of the dialogue in the play. This technique, according to Kerr (1995)

*“Was a progressive technique which opened the play up to popular audiences”*

The Blinkards also make use of this device of personification and the key to one’s understanding of such plays is in character names. An explanation of a few names to illustrate the points will therefore be very important in the quest for reasserting traditional values through theatre.

The main characters in The Blinkards are Mr. and Mrs. BROFOSEM. Brofosem is a combination of two words: Brofo (English, European, white people, or scholars) and Sem (words, ideas, manner, behavior); Brofosem therefore means, English or European imitators or mannerism. Onyimdzi, simply means, brilliant, wise or a lawyer. Dr. Ohweyie; Ohwe is from the word whe; meaning (look, see, observe or take care of); Yie means (well, good, proper) Ohweyie therefore means careful or cautious doctor. Tsiba is made of the words tsi or ti (head, or brains and by implication, intelligence) and ba (child, small or miniature); Tsiba literary means, small brain or brainless. Okadu suggests a blind follower of fashion. Katawirwa stand for, strong willed; thick skin and consistency. (NNA) Sumpa is two words Sum (serve) and Pa (good); Sumpa here means, serviceable. Nyamekye (god given) is a popular Akan name.

These are the characters and what they stand for in Kobina Sekyi’s comedy, The Blinkards. The plot of the play itself is very simple. After some months visit to England, Mrs. Brofosem, returns to the Gold Coast an imitator of Gold Coast refinement. As ridiculous as her imitative culture, she wins the admiration of the gullible Africans in the neighbourhood. Famous among her admirers is Ms. Tsiba (brainless)

An illiterate but rich cocoa farmer, Mr. Tsiba is anxious to bring up her daughter, Miss Tsiba to be “like a European Lady” and apprentices her daughter to Mrs. Brofosem. Meanwhile, Mr. Okado, a young apprentice in service to Lawyer Onyimdzi, falls in love with Miss. Tsiba. Courtship, formal engagement and wedding between Miss. Tsiba

and Mr. Okado, follows the Christian order. But for a hitch; Miss. Tsiba had been traditionally married to another man. A case of bigamy follows in which Lawyer Onyimdzi wins by proving that, traditional African marriage is equally as legal as Christian ordinance marriage. The church gets offended; but the turning point in Mrs. Brofosem had arrived as at the end of the play, Mr. and Mrs. Brofosem comes on stage wearing traditional African dress and addresses the audience.

*“The people of the old days were wise indeed; if only we could follow  
The customs they left us a little more, and adopt the ways of other races  
A little less, we should be at least as healthy as they were”.*

It is easy to classify The Blinkards as a protest play. The intentions of the writer are to ridicule the Anglo-Fante and to propagate Africanism. The writer is much more interested in lampooning those Africans condoning with total rejection of African ways of life. Sekyi's play, The Blinkards written in 1914 and first performed in 1915 was calling on the Gold Coast African to heed his call for National Self Assertion.

## Conclusion

In the period of Globalization where nations are throwing away their culture and forcing themselves to the now known global village culture, let us now call for self awareness, it is natural to make some self criticisms. It was the attempt to 'propagandize' Africanness and hold the 20<sup>th</sup> century African up to ridicule that laid the foundation to the first founding plays which was to dictate the pace of theatre in Ghana. The modern Ghanaian theatre then was unconsciously founded by Kobina Sekyi when he wrote the play, The Blinkards. Sekyi was articulating the long Ghanaian intolerance of colonial rule. Sekyi was a political nationalist who saw potent force in the visual power of the theatre and used it as a medium for purging his political and social frustrations as well as educating the public on sensitive socio-political issues. Undoubtedly, Theatre/Drama is one of the arts that can effectively reduce cultural alienation and re-establish nationalistic identity.

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