

Defining the African Writer's Duties—Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's Grave Yard People

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Abstract

Over the years, the duty of the African writer has clearly been a cause of many debates. Whereas one school of thought believes that the writer has whatever duty he or she creates or chooses, another school of thought believes that even the tag, 'African writer,' should not even be used as a form of identification in any platform. However, this paper does not seek to debunk or argue out any of these reasons. It rather highlights how the works of writers map out certain duties that they as writers perform consciously or unconsciously within their creative works. In order to achieve this, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's play, *Grave Yard People*, is used as the main reference point to identify and discuss the roles of the African writer as a historian, grass-root activist and entertainer. In order to prove that this assertion is not only identifiable with Mawugbe's work, other writers within and outside Africa whose works showcase these varied duties are also discussed. In the conclusion of this paper, it is proven that the duties of African writers are not static but metamorphose with trends and developments of emerging societies. The words—African writers and storytellers are used interchangeably to refer to African writers.

Keywords: African writers, Storytellers, Duty of African writers, Grass-root activist, Historian, Entertainer

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Introduction

In the stories we tell, we recount our lives, our struggles and our history and culture as a people. It could be fiction, at times, yes, but in there, in those stories are a little of the real us. And this is what makes writing in general, and specifically, African writing, not just entertainment, but a storehouse of history as well. As such, the African writer is a historian.

Djimo Kouyate, a Senegalese *griot*, in his essay, "The Role of the Senegalese Griot", featured in the 1989 compilation of African-American Storytelling by Linda Gross & Co.; explains that: "one of the roles the griot in African societies had before the Europeans came was maintaining a cultural and historical past with that of the present... the *griot* was the oral historian and educator in any given society." (p.179) For instance, the Sundiata Epic illustrates what Kouyate means when he says that the *griot* is an oral historian; because when the *griot* recounts the Sundiata Epic, he does not only recount history but he also educates and entertains his audience. Contemporary African writers have not superseded the *griot*, but rather they have emerged out of these ancient customs.

Similarly, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe presents the African writer as a historian in his play, *Grave Yard People*. When the play opens, Bodza, the protagonist, is writing a play and he is contemplating how to make a character in the play sound authentic. This character is an *Okyeame* that is the king's spokesman. The king's spokesman is an important official in the royal courts of traditional rulers in Ghana. As such, in the creation and telling of a story that involves this character, his role must be authentically presented. By so doing, the writer is not only telling a story, but is also recounting cultural practises that have historical relevance. This is because in displaying African cultures in writings, Africa's diverse history is told. And in telling Africa's history, African cultures are recounted and authenticated for future generations.

It is for this reason that Mawugbe ensures that his protagonist, Bodza, explains to his fiancée, Ayishetu, how he desires to accurately present the character of an *Okyeame* in the play he is writing:

BODZA: I intend making him a great linguist of a powerful king whose kingdom stretches from sunrise to sunset... And it means his linguist ought to be well versed in the oral tradition and customs of his people... His verbal brickmanship must be faultless and superb. (p.5)

Bodza's determination to present cultural accuracy in his script as he explains in the above lines re-echoes the importance of the African writer as a historian. The *Okyeame* in the Akan palace is not only a spokesman of kings but an oral historian as well because he is privy to every transaction and event of the palace and he passes it on to future spokesmen. His role as oral historian places him in the same stead as the storyteller. It becomes logical to conclude that the *Okyeame* is a storyteller who plays the role of a historian. Efu Theodora Sutherland also re-echoes this role in her play, *The Marriage of Anansewa*. She features the *Okyeame* as a storyteller. After Ananse's first appearance, the *Okyeame* comes on stage and says: "I was there when it all happened." This statement by the *Okyeame* shows that he claims ownership of the story and by this affirms his duty as both storyteller and oral historian.

Also, in 1987, Chinua Achebe dedicates a whole chapter, which he subtitles, *Views of Struggle*; to re-echo the importance of the storyteller in his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*:

To some of us the Owner of the World has apportioned the gift to tell their fellows that the time to get up has finally come. To others He gives the eagerness to rise when they hear the call; to rise with racing blood and put on their garbs of war and go to the boundary of their town to engage the invading enemy boldly in battle. And then there are those others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story. The sounding of the battle drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards... But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle feather I will say boldly: the story... why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. (Achebe, 1987, p.123-124)

This statement also establishes the African writer as not merely a storyteller, but a historian. Achebe affirms the utmost significance of the story (history), in offering present and future generations a useful guiding principle to steer their paths from the missteps of a fractured past. Although Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, is considered a work of fiction, its use of a political setting disturbed by military coups is in no way fictitious because there is empirical as well as historical evidence to prove that for west African nations such as Ghana, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, the political periods of the 60s all through to the late 90s were fraught with military coups. And this clearly has affected the political, social, as well as economic developments of our nations.

Similarly, Binwell Sinyangwe, in his novel, *A Cowrie of Hope*, continuously uses the phrase: "these were the nineties. The late nineties." Binwell Sinyangwe uses this phrase in his recount of an economically difficult period in Zambia. He explains that "the rains were bad and so the crops and harvest were bad too." (p.14) He also uses the phrase when referring to the period when HIV/AIDS was still a scary disease many feared to mention by name. Both accounts can be proven as documented historical events.

Also, the playwright, Mohammed Ben Abdallah, reaffirms the role of the storyteller as a historian in his play, *The Alien King*. In this play, Abdallah borrows the *griot* who is an oral historian and storyteller in Mande culture and creates his character, Sanusi. Sanusi plays the role of the *griot* and tells the story of the war between the Hausas and the Fulanis. Although it is a play of Abdallah's own imagination, he gives it historical relevance by borrowing from cultural practises and historical events. For instance, in order for Sanusi to tell the story, he must be an observer of unfolding events in the palace. This is an original and traditional role of *griots*. They are found in the company of kings and other great individuals.

The adaptation of the *Okyeame* or linguist as a storyteller and oral historian by Mohammed Ben Abdallah has a direct similarity to Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's use of this important traditional personality found in the courts and palaces of kings.

The perspective that Mawugbe brings to this discussion is the dire consequences on society when a writer shirks his responsibility as a historian. It is for this reason that in the play, *Grave Yard People*, when Bodza, the writer, decides to sleep off his frustration of not being able to present a worthy "linguist character" for his script, he dreams that the characters from an earlier play that he left unfinished and hidden in his trunk, come to attack him. Due to the fact that he shirks his responsibilities as a writer, the characters appear in his dream as ghosts, deformed and broken. The characters are Madam Anahg, Nyembi, Joe Saggars and Jack the feller.

In the dream world, Bodza wakes up and is frightened when he sees that his room has been invaded by these ghost characters. And he demands to know why they have come. They introduce themselves and then go ahead to explain why they have invaded his dream:

NYEMBI: And you promised making sure our plight would be made known to those in power if only we granted you permission to go public with it.

Jack: You assured us you were going to move heaven and earth to put us in print. (p.24)

The above accusations by the ghosts further introduces them as characters of Bodza's imagination. They are characters that he began developing a while back, but left unfinished. Bodza's aim for designing these characters is to tell their individual stories. And by telling their individual stories, he tells the different stories of the problems faced in the Ghanaian society, and to a large extent, the African society.

Unfortunately, these characters have come out as ghosts to tell their own individual stories because Bodza whose duty it is to tell the story, has failed to tell it. This action by the ghosts further stresses on the writer's duty to tell the story. The action of the ghost characters stresses on the fact that the writer also has the duty of a historian. Although one might argue that there are historians whose duty it is to recount and record history, the writer still has a role as a historian. This is because the writer's work is never completely fictitious. A work of fiction could still be interspersed with historical as well as contemporary issues. As such, the reader or audience continually identifies with issues raised in the work.

In fact, the African writer or storyteller is important because he does not only play the role of a historian through his writings, but he also plays the role of a grass-root activist towards social, political and economic progress. In the *Grave Yard People*, Mawugbe creates characters who are representations of the larger Ghanaian

society. Madam Anahg's name is an anagram of Ghana. Anahg thus represents Ghana.

Jack the feller also represents Ghanaian workers. He recounts his job as a tree feller for the government and how he one day decides to go on voluntary retirement. But then, Bodza, who represents the government pleads with him not to because Jack still needs to contribute his quota since: "the economic destiny of this country lies in our hands" (p.29). And Jack listens and continues felling trees for the government. Jack explains that:

JACK: I gave up the idea of going on retirement, picked up my lean axe and chain saw machine. And to the forest I made my way. To contribute my quota to the destruction of the ecosystem, which you euphemistically referred to as an Economic Recovery Programme. (p.29)

And unfortunately, Jack loses his life in the process of felling a tree which he explains is a "juju tree," that housed the "soul and spirit of the ancestors and the people of Jankama." (p.33) He recounts that as he:

JACK: Put the blade at the buttress of the giant tree. A cool wind blew. From where I couldn't tell. I felt a chill run up my spine. An owl flew out of the trees... the moment I pushed the gear lever and the machine went wheeeeeeeez, whheeeeeeezzz! (p.34)

And Nyembi adds that: "then there was an explosion... That was when the machine exploded and sent some flying metal into your skull." (p.34)

The saddest part is that Jack's corpse is placed in a straw coffin. The retirement package that he is promised is not transferred to the family he leaves behind. He explains that:

JACK: My four children never received the scholarship as promised. They were often sent home for non-payment of school fees... **(Sob)** I stood at the entrance of the cemetery and silently watched them pass by on their way home for school fees... **(Sob)** that in actual fact wasn't there. My wife... I mean my ex-wife, couldn't cope... **(Sob)** I stood at the cemetery gate and helplessly watched all my three children drop out of school. (p.35)

Jack the Feller's story is a reflection of an unjust labour system that exists in Ghana. The play reveals the inequalities in the Ghanaian labour force or work space. This inequality in labour force and social spaces does not exist only in Ghana. In fact, it is an old problem; and George Orwell's novel, *Animal Farm*, discusses this. The horse, Boxer, works with all his might and strength to get a second windmill going after the collapse of the first. But when Boxer collapses while working, Napoleon sells the devoted horse to the pound. And Squealer has the audacity to lie to the other animals that he was sent to the veterinary for treatment. In effect, Boxer's labour is not duly rewarded.

Similarly, in Athol Fugard and Co's play, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Styles, the proprietor of Styles Photographic Studio, recounts his working days with Ford Motors. Styles narrates in detail his work routine at Ford. The work takes all his time. Styles tells himself that: "your life doesn't belong to you. You've sold it. For what, Styles? Gold wrist-watch in twenty-five years' time when they sign you off because you are too old for anything anymore?" (p.9) In these lines, the audience is informed that his labour will not be duly rewarded after his long service with Ford Motors. All his twenty-five years of labour for a company that has made so much profit out of his services would be worth nothing more than a gold wristwatch.

Also, in Bill Marshall's novel, *Bukom*, Ataa Kojo, the main character, goes home with a gold tie-pin after working for twenty-five years. This is his reward for: "twenty-five years of loyal service." (p.4) His son, Allotey, replies that: "but, father, a gold tiepin after twenty-five long years of loyal service to that company is nothing to be excited about." (p.4) Ataa Kojo's son draws his father's attention to a grave injustice—loyal service spanning twenty-five years should be worth more than just a gold tiepin!

In addition, and from another angle, the Namibian writer, Neshani Andreas, adds her voice to the call in awakening grass-root activism in her novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. Neshani Andreas, through the eyes of her protagonist, Mee Ali, tells the story of Mee Ali's young friend, Mee Kauna. In the struggles of Mee Kauna and other women in the novel to assert their individuality and exercise their rights as equal members of the community, the writer subtly but surely gingers women at the grass-root levels of society to stand up and fight for their place. The writer achieves this by the creation of strong characters such as, Mee Fennie, who walks out of a bad marriage and is still successful as a business woman and single parent.

Similarly, Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian writer, in his play, *A Doll's House*, presents to us his protagonist, Nora Helmer, the wife of a banker, Torvald Helmer. When Torvald falls sick, Nora forges her father's signature in order to borrow money from the bank so that she can take care of her sick husband's financial commitments for his treatment and healing process. This line of action, although illegal, was necessary because women in Henrik Ibsen's time were not allowed to be financially independent. But Torvald needed help. However, when Torvald finally finds out what his wife did in order to save him he becomes upset and disappointed in her. Their once beautiful marriage is shaken by this incident. The marriage becomes so unbearable for Nora who does not understand why her husband should be so upset over something she did in order to save his life. The play ends with Nora leaving her keys and wedding ring behind. Then she slams the door behind her. This play aroused sensation and even caused riots because it refused to conform to the societal spaces for women at the time. It rather began a revolution to give women their own voices. Ibsen becomes a grass-root activist.

All of these examples prove that the experiences of all of the different characters from different writers reveal the injustices in the society. And by discussing these issues in their writings, these writers serve as mouthpieces for the poor and marginalised in society. Like Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, the works of writers such as George Orwell, Bill Marshall, and Athol Fugard & Co., places the spotlight on the lack of human faces within the work space or labour agreements. Their works sometimes subtly and other times provocatively, cause positive changes to be made to conditions of service and living at the grass-root levels. In as much as this is not to say that the difference in experience and work output cannot be ignored when it comes to salary structures, it does not also mean that the labour of the least within the labour ladder should not be agreeably rewarded.

Also, the other side of the writer or storyteller's role as a grass-root activist within social and family spaces is presented by writers such as Neshani Andreas and Henrik Ibsen, who ginger grass-root activism from a feminist view point. By raising these issues in their various narratives, these writers or storytellers, like many others, instil in the people at the grass root levels the zeal to fight for better conditions of life within the family and social space.

Probably, a more typical example could be Augusto Boal's creation of the Theatre of the Oppressed and the Forum Theatre in the 1970s. Boal created these theatres to speak directly to the social, political and economic challenges at the grass-root levels of society. The aim of these theatres were not just to speak about the problems, but to generate in the masses the zeal to step-up and take active roles in changing their lot. It is as a result of this that the writer continually plays the role of a grass-root activist.

In playing the role of the historian as well as grass-root activist, the writer also plays the role of an entertainer. In *Grave Yard People*, Mawugbe presents a dark comedy. Although the issues discussed by the characters are serious issues facing contemporary societies, they present their case with humour. For instance, the appearances of Joe Saggars, Nyembi, Anahg and Jack are hilarious. Nyembi has no front row teeth but a dark space, and she continuously smiles just to show the dark space. And she has a funny way of smiling that gets the audience into thunderous laughter. Joe Saggars also speaks in a deep nasalised tone that also causes laughter in the audience whenever he speaks. Jack the Feller also moves in a zombie-like manner that creates lots of laughter in the audience.

The use of language also creates humour. For instance, when the ghosts invade Bodza's room, he threatens to call the police: "Bodza: I am calling the police!" (p.14) And madam Anahg relays the message to her companions: "Anahg: People did you hear that? The man is calling the fire brigade." (p.14) Her comment is humorous and as such, creates laughter in the audience. In fact, diction is manipulated all through the performance in order to create dark humour. For instance, Jack the Feller's narration of his ordeal, although heart breaking, also creates humour:

JACK: The Housing Allocation Committee of that noble institution, The Social Security Insurance Trust (SSIT), into whose coffers I made regular monthly contributions during all my forty-five working years on earth as a living being, with registration number 4743074, said my wife and children were disqualified.

G-YARDERS: On what grounds?

JACK: On the grounds that the children had no Christian first names.

G-YARDERS: Incredible!

JACK: And that my wife was an illiterate-common-low housewife. So the distribution was done over and above her head.

G-YARDERS: That's cheating!

NYEMBI (To Bodza): Yet, you accepted his monthly contributions as worker number 4743074 without asking whether the money had any Christian name attached to it. (p.36)

Although the above exchange between the G-Yarders and Bodza discusses a very serious matter—the unfair manner in which pensions are disbursed in Ghana remains a problem. The choice of words used by the characters are witty, sometimes glib when it is Bodza responding to an accusation, and also humorous, making the audience as well as the characters laugh over their diction and Bodza's glib responses.

Likewise, in the telling of Joe Saggars story, language is equally beautifully manipulated to create humour while still discussing a very sensitive issue. Joe Sagger's problem has to do with having all the education but no job:

JOE: I completed the sixth form at the handsome age of thirty-two with 'A' - 'A' - 'B' - 'B' grades.

G-YARDERS: In which subject areas?

JOE: Mathematics..... 'A'

Geography..... ‘A’
Economics..... ‘B’
And General Paper..... ‘B’

JACK: That certainly should land you a good job.

ANAHG: Certainly, and it must be something in the Executive Officer Class.

G-YARDERS: Sure!

JOE (Sadly): It rather landed me in the University from where I graduated after five years with a first class BSc. Degree in MATHEMATICS.

G-YARDERS (surprised): Mathematics.....why that?

BODZA: The nation was in dire need of very good Mathematicians who would calculate what percentage of the national per capita kenkey each citizen was supposed to receive as his or her rightful share. (p.40-41)

Kenkey is a local meal made from corn dough. It is used in the play to represent GDP or wealth distribution among the masses. Its position in Bodza’s response as to why Joe Sagggers needed to study mathematics, although glib, creates humour.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe’s use of diction to create humour is similar to what Ola Rotimi’s character, Lejoka-Brown, in his play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, does. When Lejoka-Brown talks about the monetary benefits of politics, he tells his friend, Okonkwo:

LEJOKA-BROWN: ... politics is the thing now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want to chop life?—No, no—you want to chop a big slice of the national cake?—Na politics. So I said to my party boys – when was it? Last week, or so. I said to them ... I said: [striking an oratorical pose] Cakes are too soft, Gentlemen. Just you wait! Once we get elected to the top, *wallahi*, we shall stuff ourselves with huge mouthfuls of the national chin-chin ... (p.4)

Lejoka-Brown replaces the “national cake” with the “national chin-chin,” because it is not only harder, but can be more plentiful as compared to cake which is soft and cannot be as plentiful as chin-chin. And as Lejoka-Brown speaks, the writer, Ola Rotimi, instructs that he makes funny faces of chewing in order to invoke more laughter from the audience. As such, two things creates humour—diction and action.

Although both playwrights, Efo Mawugbe and Ola Rotimi are talking about the very serious problem of corruption in politics and labour, their diction is humorous, and the audience laugh at the use of diction and action, and as such, are entertained. There is also humour in Joe Sagger’s explanation as to why he talks with a nasal sound:

JOE: I had to borrow a lower jaw and a right thighbone from the G- Yard bone Library, to enable me walk here to render my testimony. Unfortunately, the Jawbone I got couldn’t fit properly. (p.48)

Mawugbe’s characters’ use of language and action serve as a source of entertainment for the audience. Also, Nyembi’s story creates humour as a result of the exchange between her and Bodza. She narrates her ordeal as a surgical nurse working in a remote part of Ghana without the requisite tools for the job. She says:

NYEMBI: The tools to work with were just not there. No theatre gloves, no theatre mask, no wash basins, no dressing pack, no disinfectants, very miserable salary, there was no job-satisfaction. (p.51)

And Bodza comes in with his usual glib and humorous response that she should have improvised, because according to him: “drivers at times use soapy water for brake fluid when the going gets tough.” (p.51) And Nyembi replies that: “I wouldn’t know how to improvise job satisfaction.” (p.51) Although the dialogue between Bodza and Nyembi reveals a serious problem within the health sector in Ghana, diction and action are further manipulated to create dark humour.

Dark humour is also created by the playwright, Kobina Sekyi, in his play, *The Blinkards*. In this play, the playwright throws light on the gradual loss of cultural identity and space that plagued the Ghanaian society under colonial rule. In his play, he also predicts how this gradual loss of identity will affect the Ghanaian society in the future. Kobina Sekyi’s play makes mockery of a Ghanaian woman, Mrs. Brofosem, who spends only three months in England, but returns home excessively Europeanised. Mrs. Brofosem’s insistence on wearing English clothing, eating English snacks, using a lorgnette, as well as speaking English filled with bone-agonizing grammatical errors creates humour all through the play.

For instance, when Mr. Tsiba brings his daughter to be taught the English ways by Mrs. Brofosem, the demands he puts across to Mrs. Brofosem are laughable. He tells Mrs. Brofosem:

MR. TSIBA: You make her behave like white lady. Teach her all the things you have learn at London. By the grace of the big one in the sky, I get some money. I have many cocoa land. I want you to make her English... Mrs. Brofosem, some book I have reading say, 'All modest young ladies blush at certain times.' I look in the dick-hendry, and I see 'blush' means to redden in the face... But I think 'blush' is some English powder for face. I have never seen it here. Order some for my daughter. I have many cocoa ... (p.21)

The audience laugh at Mr. Tsiba's poor use of English and at his unreasonable demands. In creating a play in which action and diction creates dark humour, the playwright also predicts Ghana's future. Presently, although Ghana is no more under colonial rule, her cultural identity has been lost in many ways. All the issues raised in this play and laughed at by the audience are contemporary issues faced in society. This goes to show that the writer's duty goes beyond a historian and a grass-root activist. His duty as an entertainer is equally important. It is through entertainment that he informs, educates and admonishes.

Conclusion

All of the writers whose works are cited form an agreeable quorum that clearly proves that the writer or storyteller has a duty that goes merely beyond entertainment. As such, the African writer or storyteller can still strongly maintain that he or she has the duty of a historian as well as a grass-root activist in addition to the duty of an entertainer.

It is therefore plausible to conclude that Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's insistence of creating a play that clearly spells out the duties of the African writer as not only an entertainer but also a historian as well as a grass-root activist is in no way placing the African writer in an inflexible box. He, however, exposes and appreciates the multiple roles that the African writer plays by writing. The flexibility of these roles is seen in new and emerging writings by Africans. A typical example is the position of the LGBTQ community in Africa. In a continent that frowns on LGBTQs due to traditional beliefs, the writer becomes the voice of this marginalised group within the society. In order to safe guard this marginalised group as well as advocate the need for their spaces in contemporary African societies, writers such as Unoma Azuah, and her novel, *Edible Bones*, have emerged to tell the story of the LGBTQ community. They are not just telling stories for entertainment, they are recording history and creating grass-root activism.

In fact, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe believes that the writer has an important duty to society, and he expresses this through his character, Jack the Feller:

JACK: You are the city crier in the courtyard of the country's conscience. You have a duty to prod society. To wake her up from her slumber to meet her responsibilities. (p.48)

In the above lines by Jack, Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, sums up the duty of the writer as a historian—"city crier"; as an entertainer and as a grass-root activist—"to wake her up from her slumber to meet her responsibilities." (p.48)

As such, by the end of the play, Bodza, who has been proving stubborn and unperturbed by the accusations from the ghost characters finally admits his guilt. He wakes up from his dream screaming that he is guilty. Then he tells his fiancée, Aysha:

BODZA: Ayisha, I am okay. I don't need a doctor. I now know the subject I should have written about. Yes...now I know...The long forgotten, neglected, taken-for-granted, faceless heroes and heroines lying in our cemeteries...(Sombrelly) The Grave-Yard people. (p.73)

As such, the play comes to an end with Bodza clearly stating his duties as a writer. In taking up the responsibility to write about the "faceless heroes and heroines" he becomes a historian, a grass-root activist and an entertainer.

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