

The Last Visitor's Note

Marlon M
Bailey

BAILEY as it turned out was probably the last caller at the late Ms Sutherland's to be granted an interview before her translation early in 1996. He recalls this visit when Sutherland bared her mind on children education and documentation.

Throughout her life, Efua Sutherland

was committed to preserving traditional African art and teaching children authentic artistic methodology void of European influence. During our conversation, Sutherland constantly spoke of documentation. She spoke of an imperative to document the African way so that the children could have a means of continuing their great African artistic tradition. 'Documentation is important because the children or the next generation need to know history in order to create a new reality for themselves, so we must document in order for our children to know,' Sutherland remarked. Historian W. Robert July discusses Sutherland's idea of children being the focus for documentation. He attests that she clearly understood the threat of European cultural hegemony to the preservation of Ghanaian artistic traditions, especially when it is internalised by



Efua Sutherland

children; this is what compelled her to write several children's books, short stories, and plays. Ultimately, she was determined to create a body of dramatic literature written by Africans, which was to be enjoyed by Africans-by schoolchildren as well as public at large (75).

Artistic authenticity was also essential to Ms. Sutherland's work. Always committed to doing things 'the African way,' Sutherland consistently criticised those who sought to imitate European artistic methods and traditions in the belief that the coloniser's way is the only way. Ms. Sutherland articulated the need for a commitment to the African theatre void of European influences.

Well, first we must be true to ourselves and our own artistry. There has been too

much concern with what Europeans do and how Africans can do what Europeans do. You see, you don't strive to write a play like Moliere because Moliere is not you. You can appreciate Moliere because maybe his plays have some universal quality to them, but you shouldn't as an African, attempt to recreate what Moliere created. Europeans have traditionally sought to imitate, and unfortunately some Africans do the imitation thing as well.

Similar to Sutherland's view on artistic documentation, she again pointed out the importance of children. She stated:

If we continue imitating we don't have anything to give our children-anything true to use as an inspiration or a guide to use in their creative process-something that is African. I mean, really, why would I want to write like

Moliere or any other European for that matter?

Of course, the entire continent of Africa is very familiar with the struggle for cultural autonomy. Due to this long history of largely European colonial rule over Africa, indigenous practices are continually overshadowed by foreign influences. It is asserted or implied by many that there are no indigenous African art forms. However, Sutherland vehemently argued that there are definitely discernible and identifiable African art forms, particularly in regard to theatre. She also challenged African artists to move beyond their colonial training in an effort to rectify the historical absence of a commensurate attention to the African artistry in their European education.

Finally, Sutherland was an advocate

as African people own. It is what we use.

One of the most important distinctions that Sutherland made is that African art does not seek to simply reflect social problems, placing the responsibility of deriving solutions on the people; instead, African art is the solution. She further stated:

If there is a famine or something, the people will do a ritual, which uses all of the art forms. It is used as method to combat the ills of a particular time or to solve a particular problem. It is used within our culture.

Sutherland argued for an artistic tradition that challenges the plethora of external influences from European colonisers. The historic preponderance of a European influence has created a mainstream artistic tradition that is seen only as an activity for the socially privileged. In actual practice, it

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for art that was unabashedly functional. She constantly spoke of art that people can actually use to solve their problems as opposed to art that facilitates social escapism and denial. In all of her artistic accomplishments, Sutherland sought to meet the variety of political and social needs of African people. For example, during the final portion of my interview with Sutherland, she emphatically spoke of the need to erase the dichotomy between art and life.

To Africans, art is life; it is a way of life; it is essential to our existence. If we don't preserve it and we lose it, then we have nothing. Our children, who are key to our cultural sustenance and development, will start to crave for it; they are raised on it. Art has always been the constant thing that we

is divorced from direct community relevance, particularly those communities that are economically and socially deprived as well as politically silenced. As in the 'West,' the disparity between the rich and poor in Ghana and many other African countries widens, the nature of how art is viewed becomes constrained and construed by the limited but powerful purview of the elite—a consequence that Sutherland totally opposed. However, Sutherland's belief in the principle and practice of artistic purpose and usefulness, or art for political responsibility and social obligation, was constant. Consequently, Sutherland's commitment to this African value led her to create such groups as the Ghana Society of Writers and the Ghana Experimental Theatre. Needing a

home for the theatre company, she conceived the Drama Studio and was instrumental in its construction and completion in 1961.

Sutherland's courageous efforts are demonstrative of her awareness of the correlation between social-political movements and artistic ones. As Ghana liberated itself from colonial rule, its art had to reflect and promote liberation from European hegemony as well. After gaining independence in 1957, Ghana experienced a period of invigorating self-empowerment and freedom. Sutherland's accomplishments came at a time of tremendous political fervour, which garnered her overwhelming and timely support from Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of the Republic of Ghana. Consistent with Sutherland's ideas, Nkrumah sug-

views have profound implications for African Americans in their quest for social autonomy in America's oppressive social climate. Due to their recognition of the role of art in social and political struggles both abroad and at home, in recent years, many African American writers have begun to look more closely at continental Africa and the African Diaspora as a way of realising the strong artistic connections that people of the entire African world possess. For instance, Sutherland's idea of artistic documentation in regard to cultural aesthetics is imperative to African Americans because children are constantly bombarded with all of the exploitative manifestations of American popular culture. Living in this environment, African American children have a very difficult time realising their true cultural identity. They become

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gested in July 1974 that Ghana focus inward as opposed to looking to Europe and the United States for its identity and purpose.

Unfortunately, in recent years, due to the downward spiraling of the Ghanaian economy, state support of the efforts of Sutherland and others has rapidly waned, causing most of her contemporaries to move to other countries. Nonetheless, Sutherland's efforts in Ghana inspired several countries in Africa in their search for self-autonomy. Many of Sutherland's ideas have echoed throughout Africa and the African Diaspora. South Africa, Haiti, Trinidad, Senegal, and many other Black nations have recognised and continue to use the arts as an active ally in social and political struggles.

Similar to continental Africans and others of the African Diaspora, Sutherland's

engulfed in the destructive cultural misrepresentations of themselves offered by mainstream America's entertainment industry and fail to engage in any kind of indigenous cultural consciousness.

Largely due to their unique existence in America, many African American artists view art and the Black experience in very myopic and parochial ways, relating artistic heritage only to American shores. Although many African Americans looking to Africa as a cultural birthplace, unfortunately, many approach the thought of look at Africa as a resource, guide, and partner in artistic endeavours with extreme trepidation. Similar to the prevailing situation in Ghana, progressive and socially conscious African American artists suffer under the crippling perils of the rich and the powerful who are

instrumental in determining what constitutes art. So, when Efua Sutherland claims, 'you people in the U.S. do that art-for-art's-sake thing,' she is accurately asserting how popular mainstream artistry in America tends to be disconnected politically and is largely retrograde socially.

In terms of theatre, however, B. William Branch's very important anthology entitled *Crosswinds: An Anthology of Black Dramatists in the Diaspora* reflects Sutherland's vision. This compilation includes Black playwrights from Nigeria, South Africa, Trinidad, Brazil, England, Ghana, and the United States. In his discussion of the anthology, he addresses the question of a shared or common artistic purpose. Most importantly, Branch pignantly articulates some of the key aspects of Sutherland's notion of a theatre that is functional and useful. He states:

These artists unabashedly have axes to grind, evils to expose, and sermons to preach. And yet there is much enjoyment and artistry along the way. Perhaps in the tradition of those unknown African bards who created the ancient Egyptian Passion plays, they see themselves as serving a vital function in their respective societies: that of involving themselves and their fellow humans in a challenge to the mind and spirit, a catharsis of the soul, a search for truth and justice-if not always for beauty. (xxvii)

This anthology, which includes one of Sutherland's plays, is evidence that Sutherland's vision has had an enormous impact on many artists of African descent. Her stern commitment to art and its relationship to social progress is an extremely important notion that tends to wane when political structures become more stable and people are given ostensible security. What Sutherland has done is set a precedent for a

continual struggle to promote an indigenous African theatre as well as other art forms void of non-African influence that, in the minds of African people, warrants recognition equal to the perceptions of superiority given to the various forms of the Western artistic tradition.

By creating a body of literature and several existing institutions, like the Drama Studio, to teach the people of the land about the distinction and validity of their own culture, Sutherland launched an artistic movement in Africa as she simultaneously inspired African artists everywhere. Our artistic efforts need to embody Sutherland's vision and continue the international struggle that she could not finish. Most of all, while we strive for freedom and equality, our art must serve as our method of illumination and reflection, especially to those blinded by the haze of materialism. What 'Auntie Esi' left behind is something that African artists all over the world must emulate in some form if we are to continue on a progressive path to social freedom and a true cultural identity. Efua Theodora Sutherland's death has been a great loss in many ways, but her legacy continues to tremendously impact our lives—she is sorely missed. **GR**

Work Cited

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