

Making Space for Performance: Theatrical- Architectural Nationalism in Postindependence Ghana.

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David Afriyie Donkor

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Making Space for Performance Theatrical-Architectural Nationalism in Postindependence Ghana

David Afriyie Donkor (bio)

On October 21, 1961, the Ghana Experimental Drama Studio, a theatre house, opened in the center of Accra, Ghana. Founder and design conceptualist of the Studio, Eflia Theodora Sutherland, welcomed an invited audience comprising members of the international press, diplomats, University of Ghana faculty, market women, party officials, nuns, a local chief, and young women who, as historian Robert July describes, were "swathed in brilliant prints. . . . lightly turbaned, loaded with gold" and "anciently elegant in a manner that Europe would not dare."¹ As Sutherland completed her welcome speech, the growling of motorcycles and the wail of sirens emerged and ended with the sound of slamming car doors. Amid applause, guest of honor and president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah strode into the Drama Studio with his retinue. In scheduled remarks, he spoke about his hope for the renaissance of the arts in Africa and his dream of Pan-African unity aided by the language of art. He pointed to Africa's long-standing reliance on outsiders for material and cultural growth and charged Africans to "look inwards" to "our own exertions. . . . endeavors" to "bring about the progress, unity, and strength of Africa."² Four years earlier, at Ghana's independence in 1957, Nkrumah had declared that Ghanaians were going to "create our own African Personality and identity." His 1961 remarks thus connected the Studio with the projection of a new postcolonial national cultural consciousness to the world.

In this essay I examine the architecture and dramaturgical work of the Ghana Experimental Drama Studio in the context of the Pan-African cultural [End Page 29] nationalism of the early postindependence era in Ghana. Nationalism is at root belief in the idea (with its corresponding claims, attitudes, sentiments, behaviors, and/or projects) that an aggregate of individuals or communities has a common origin, history, or cultural ties so as to constitute a distinct people or "nation" with a congruent political-economic unit. Several theorists view nationalism as something that arises out of the historical processes and conditions of modernity, in tandem with the nation-state—the most significant

political-economic unit in our modern world.³ Efforts to forge a coherent national identity entail a good deal of cultural construction: active defining of the contours (social, cultural, economic, political) and constitution of that nation in the imagination of its people. So, it makes sense that after independence in 1957 Ghana—a turn-of-the-nineteenth-century geopolitical invention, scalded from the still-smoldering ashes of British colonialism—would be the ground of an intense Pan-African nationalist cultural construction. But, nationalist cultural projects have broad notions of identity that must inevitably confront the problem of multiple selves and worlds: individuals and communities have a complex cluster of interplaying identities that matter in any given context of cultural representation. What about the nation did the Ghana Experimental Drama Studio represent, and how did this representation fare amid competing ideas about nationalist art and/or cultural practice?

My question arises in view of a historical background in which the work of theatre and architecture in the construction of national cultural identity is relatively well documented. Less represented, although still present in the historical literature, are the theatrical and architectural nationalisms of the African countries that sought a new national consciousness in the wake of their independence from European powers during the mid-twentieth century. Yet, practically nonexistent is consideration of the theatre architecture of this postindependence (arguably postcolonial) era wherein theatrical *and* architectural nationalism met in the representation of African national culture and identity. This yet-to-be-properly-accounted-for African domain of theatrical-architectural nationalism is what I engage with in this essay. I begin with a biographical sketch of Eflia Sutherland's life, focusing on the political environment in the period from her return to Ghana after studies abroad to when she started making plans for the Studio in 1960. I turn my attention then to the Studio itself, focusing on its design and the inspiration for that design. I then examine the status of the Studio as a national theatre by looking at the historical..



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—DAVID AFRIYIE DONKOR

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