Dilemma of a Ghost

by

Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo (called Christina until she abandoned her Christian name in the early 1970s) was born into the Fante people of south central Ghana in 1942. Fortunately for her, her family encouraged its female members to become educated. From her father she heard the famous words of the Ghanaian educator James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey: “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation” (Aidoo, “To Be a Woman,” p. 259). Aidoo attended the Wesley Girls High School and the University of Ghana, graduating in 1964. Since that time, she has studied and taught in the United States, Europe, and Africa. In 1982 she was named Ghana’s Minister of Education by the military government of Jerry Rawlings; the next year, however, she was removed because her views were too radical for the regime. Since then, Aidoo has lived primarily in Zimbabwe and the United States. In addition to plays, her literary works include stories, poems, and books for children. Aidoo wrote her first play, Dilemma of a Ghost, during her days as an undergraduate, and it was performed by the Students’ Theatre of the University of Ghana. In retrospect, Aidoo herself has expressed amazement at its boldness. Ten years after its creation, she stated, “I myself haven’t had the courage today to confront this whole question of Africa and black America in those stark terms” (Aidoo in Vincent, p. 5).

Events in History at the Time of the Play
The Fante legacy. Aidoo’s people, the Fante, are a subgroup of the Akan, a large grouping of peoples that makes up most of the population of southern Ghana. The Akan peoples are distinct, even though they share similar cultural practices and speak mutually intelligible dialects of the same language.

Except for the Asante, their traditional rivals, the Fante are the largest and most powerful of the Akan groups. The Asante Confederacy, which controlled the interior regions of the country from the late seventeenth century until the area’s subjugation by the British, met its fiercest opposition from the coastal Fante. The Fante successfully blocked Asante expansion to the coast, and defended their own inland trading interests until the early nineteenth century. Even after losing a protracted war to the Asante, the Fante maintained their independence from their conquerors; their trade and wealth dwindled, but they remained free.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Fante were initially receptive to the British colonizers who offered a
measure of protection and leverage against the Asante. The Fante entered into their initial treaties with the British in 1844. At first, the Fante saw the British as valuable trading partners and military allies; however, when the British attempted to usurp rights exercised by the people's kings and chiefs, the Fante rebelled. To protect their traders and trade interests, the British wanted to exercise control over law in the area, but the people were unwilling to relinquish this control. Although the Fante Confederacy of the 1860s failed in its attempt to oust the British, and the Gold Coast (the future Ghana) became a full-fledged British colony in 1874, this first anti-colonial protest was an important milestone. It inspired later generations of Ghanaian nationalists, reminding them that the British had not simply assumed authority where none had existed before; they had forcibly wrested it from its original owners.

Aidoo herself comes “from a long line of fighters” (James, p. 13). Her paternal grandfather was jailed and later killed for his anti-British activities. Aidoo also reports that the Fante were known for “their recalcitrance, their rudeness, their contempt for the imperial set-up, and for the white man” (Aidoo, “Male-ing Names in the Sun,” p. 31).

Akan women—a mixed inheritance. In “To Be a Woman,” a long, anecdotal, and passionately argued essay written in 1980, Aidoo deplores the traditional subjugation of women in Akan culture. While excelling her family, she maintains that, as a general rule:

the position of a woman in Ghana is no less ridiculous than anywhere else. . . . Once you, the young man, had been bold enough to go and take her off her mother's back, you could also take it for granted that you had acquired a sexual aid;

a wet nurse and nursemaid for your children;
a cook-steward and general housekeeper;
a listening post; an economic and general consultant;
a field-hand and, if you are that way inclined, a punch-ball.

(Aidoo, “To Be a Woman,” p. 259)

Aidoo goes on to tell story after story depicting the discrimination and degradation she has suffered as a female scholar and writer. Ghanaian culture, she asserts, still sees women as fit mainly for tending the home and bearing children. A strong woman is suspected, feared, put back in her place. The perception of this in-

equality has stoked the fires of Aidoo's feminism throughout her career. However, her claims for the totality of gender inequality among the Akan are somewhat surprising, in that certain features of Akan culture might be expected to lead to greater parity between men and women than is the case elsewhere. These factors include the method of calculating genealogy, the division of labor, and the division of authority within a household.

For most groups of the Akan, genealogy is matrilineal: people calculate their family relationships in terms of their mothers and grandmothers. This abusua is not simply an arrangement for organizing heredity—it has important legal and social consequences that protect women's rights and provide them a measure of autonomy even from their husbands. The authority in a clan is generally not the oldest woman, but rather her brother, so that Akan societies are, in the final analysis, male-governed. However, women play important roles in decision-making, both formally and informally. For instance, in the Asante Confederacy women were responsible for determining kings and chiefs, and the sisters of ruling men had broad powers and responsibilities, and a great deal of personal wealth. Within non-royal households, too, older women work with their brothers to apportion family duties and to determine life-paths for the family's younger members. Finally, the baroque property laws of the Akan separate men's and women's personal property (and both of these from family and clan property). Unlike most European women until recent centuries, Akan women did not surrender their personal wealth to their husbands upon marriage. Furthermore, Akan inheritance law dictates that a woman's property be willed to female family members, so that female property remains female. In spite of these powers, however, women are fundamentally measured by their success in bearing children: an infertile woman is among the most despised and pitied of creatures.

The division of labor among the Akan is similarly mixed in its effects on women. Both men and women participate in agriculture, with men responsible for clearing land and women and children for tending the fields; women are generally in charge of cooking and cleaning. Hunting and fishing, two of the most important sources of food and money for the coast-dwelling Fante, are male domains. But women dominate another, even more important segment of the economy: petty trade. In marketplaces and on street corners throughout Akan territory, women
Ways of the Akan

Traditional life for all branches of the Akan people revolves around family and market. Akan religion is centered on respect for ancestors; a family's founders are celebrated throughout the year, invoked in prayer, and involved in many rituals. For instance, when a couple has a child and is given the traditional gift of a bottle of gin or wine, the first drink is poured on the earth as a libation for one's departed ancestors.

"The living have a sense of dependence on the ancestors; it is believed that they are constantly watching over the living relations and punish those who break customs" (Warren, p. 31). The Akan generally assume that early death is a punishment from these ancestors for some sin; the aged—and thus virtuous—members of a clan are accorded the utmost respect. The eldest members of an extended family are generally responsible for apportioning duties and privileges among the younger members.

Although the social and political developments of this century have led to alterations in Akan ways of life, especially in the larger cities and among the educated elite, the basic Akan social unit is still the extended family. A man pays a bride price to a woman's family, after which she enters his family unit. When the man makes his payment (in money, goods, or services), he formalizes his marriage to the woman and gains full control over her. It is still not unusual to find several generations of a family living in one large dwelling, with in-laws and various dependents. Even when modern contingencies prevent this organization, the family remains close. For instance, in Dilemma of a Ghost, the college graduate Ato must live in the city where his job is; however, his family not only keeps a room for him in the family compound, they actually add a wing to the house for him and his new family.

The Akan have a variety of forms of cultural expression. Music plays an important social role, especially in situations of mourning and celebration; drums are the most important musical instrument. Metalwork, terra cotta pottery, wood-carving, and especially weaving are highly developed; the Kente cloth produced in Ghana is world famous. Good storytellers are highly esteemed, and proverbs pepper everyday speech. The fundamental Akan proverb is "Wubu okwasea be a, obisa wo ase," which translates as "If you tell a fool a proverb, he will ask you its meaning" (Warren, p. 64). Proverbs pass on the common sense of the people, and express their deepest understanding of human existence.

In its slim 50 pages, Dilemma of a Ghost manages to include expressions of all these facts of traditional Akan life. The extended Yawson family functions almost as a single character to oppose Ato and his wife. In the foreground of the play's setting is the crossroads leading to market, farmland, and the Yawson home, symbolically uniting the major aspects of Akan life. Most tellingly, proverbs and folklore are essential to the play's content. To introduce the play, Aidoo chooses the "Bird of the Wayside," a folkloric figure symbolizing storytelling and rumor. The African characters, especially the two village women who comment on the Yawsons' troubles, use proverbs to seal arguments. Once the tribal wisdom has been produced, it seems, there is nothing left to say.
still monopolize the sale of food items and many small goods. Sociologists have estimated that 90 percent of sales of certain common items (such as clay pots, plantains, rugs, and shawls) are made by women, and over half of all women’s employment is in the marketplace. Older sociologists tended to overlook the importance of trading and selling, and thus to underestimate the status of women in Ghana; more recent studies have revealed how essential such activity is, and the measure of autonomy it provides women. The spread of Western-style education has also led to more varied opportunities for girls. And, while boys have benefited more on the whole, an increasing number of parents have come to believe that education is important for all children. Aidoo herself is an early example of this growing trend.

Despite all the potential benefits which might grow from their matrilineal importance, authority within the home, and trading activity, Akan women are still second-class citizens in most ways. A United Nation’s report sums up the situation:

In all the ethnic groups in Ghana, women are not considered the equals of men, and this belief is reinforced by social practices [such as polygyny] and religious beliefs. Throughout Ghana a woman is considered in need of protection and is under the control of someone, usually male, throughout her life.

(Manuh, p. 3)

Reversing the diaspora? The transatlantic slave trade of the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries decimated the population of West Africa, tearing millions of Africans from their homelands and depositing them in the Americas. These early arrivals, the African slaves and their descendents, occupied a strange, two-sided position in the western hemisphere. On the one hand, they were clearly no longer African: within a generation, they spoke the language of whatever colony had enslaved them. Meanwhile, they evolved new languages of internal communication peculiar to themselves and different from the mainstream languages of their masters—such as creole and patois in the Caribbean and the West Indies. This was a major achievement, extraordinary in the midst of calculated deprivations. Always considered second-class, inferior people fit only for forced labor, the slaves were never allowed full membership in society at large. To their colonial masters, the color of their skin, and their African origin, marked them as inferior.

It is not surprising, then, that the movement for black equality in the United States has involved profound curiosity about Africa. Historians point out that thoughts of Africa tended to rise among African Americans when racial tension in America was high. Before the abolition of slavery, a movement arose that called for the repatriation of black slaves to Africa. Supported as much by whites who wished to keep America racially “pure” as by blacks, this movement resulted in the formation of the colonies of Sierra Leone (1787) and Liberia (1822). This wish for a mass return was revived briefly in the aftermath of the Civil War, when white Southerners attempted to terrorize their former slaves back into submission. However, by this point Africa itself was being carved up into colonies by European powers in a race to extend their empires, and such wishes did not become reality.

In the early twentieth century, African American attitudes toward Africa took a different turn. Among the small educated elite grew the idea that people of color the world over had to unite to end all forms of racial oppression, be it segregation or colonialism. In America this movement was spearheaded by W. E. B. DuBois, who helped organize conferences on race that drew not only African Americans but also many members of Africa’s budding nationalist movements. What DuBois was for the black American elite, Marcus Garvey was for the masses of disenchanted African Americans. While DuBois explored the intellectual underpinnings of racism, and sought out reasoned ways to combat it, Garvey stirred millions with impassioned rhetoric. He claimed that inferiority would begetaguer black people as long as they lived in a white society, and called for a return to an Africa freed of its colonial oppressors and united as one nation. Garvey’s popularity indicates the depth of black disenchament with life in the racially unequal countries of the Americas.

In the 1950s the relationship of Africans and African Americans took a new turn. In the United States the civil rights movement, which attempted to demolish the structures of racial inequality, coincided with the struggle of many African countries for independence. African Americans celebrated the liberation of Ghana in 1957, and there was an explosion of interest, on the part of African Americans, in Africa’s history and cultures. (W. E. B. DuBois himself moved to Ghana in the early 1960s and became a Ghanaian citizen in 1963.) It finally seemed as if conditions were right for closer relations between Africa and diasporic Africans in the United States.
This hope was not unfounded; however, it was somewhat optimistic. From the movement that led to the formation of Liberia in the 1820s, to Garveyism in the 1920s and beyond, American blacks used the idea of Africa as a symbol of freedom and home, but gave less thought to the real differences that separated their experience in the United States from that of their kin who had not been taken. The educated elite and a handful of missionaries had actually traveled to Africa, and African American scholars had done a great deal to enrich scholarly understanding of African culture. But the average black American knew no more about Africa than did the average white American, and the picture each of them had was composed as much of movie images and postcard clichés as of actual reality. In 1960 Rayford Logan wrote, “American Negroes who grew up in the early part of this century probably first heard about Africa when a minister, priest, or missionary appealed for funds to support missions there. The missionaries frequently gave a distorted picture of the African way of life because they did not understand it” (Logan, p. 218). Other sources of “information” included adventure movies set in the African jungle and newspaper reports—hardly the most accurate portrayals of African life. When Eulalie, the young African American in Dilemma of a Ghost, comes to her new husband’s village, she half expects to meet the simple, childlike African that she has seen on postcards and in movies; instead she finds a sophisticated culture whose ways she does not understand, and whose members she is continually offending.

So, despite their natural interest in their ancestral home, African Americans had a great deal to learn about Africa. And, as the experience of Eulalie Yawson in Dilemma of a Ghost indicates, the learning experience was as likely to be painful as fulfilling.

The Play in Focus

Plot summary. Dilemma of a Ghost covers more than a year in the life of the Yawson family, but presents the action in brief snippets spread out over time. Thus, Aidoo presents the degeneration of Ato Yawson’s relationship with his family as a realistically slow progression; at the beginning of each scene, conversation between characters fills in the gap of unrepresented time. The play opens with a long speech by the Bird of the Wayside. This folkloric figure introduces the Yawsons, a family of seemingly great wealth in the countryside outside of Accra, Ghana. Seemingly great, because the Yawsons have spent a fortune educating the firstborn son of the clan, Ato, in the United States. Now he has returned. In preparation, the Yawsons have added a wing to the clan house for him to stay in when he visits—for he must live in the city, where his job is.

The Bird of the Wayside disappears, and Ato enters onstage with his wife, Eulalie, an African American. She and Ato fell in love at school and now he has brought her to his homeland to live. In this brief introductory scene, the audience sees the young couple’s anxiety and optimism. They know they are embarking on a difficult project of cultural reconciliation, but they are confident they will master the situation. For her part, Eulalie is ecstatic to be in Africa: “To belong to somewhere again . . . sure this must be bliss” (Aidoo, Dilemma of a Ghost, p. 9).

Act One proper begins with the two village
women, the First Neighbor Woman and Second Neighbor Woman, who will serve as chorus, commenting on the action of the play. They provide important information and reinforce the themes of family interaction in the story of the Yawsons. The first woman is childless and laments this fact; the second argues that children are as much a burden as a help. They argue this point over Esi Kom, Ato's mother. The second woman claims Esi has gone into debt to finance her son's education. But now that he is educated, the first woman points out, he can get a high-paying job to pay all her debts.

After the two women depart, the Yawsons greet Ato, who has come to the family home without Eulalie. This scene introduces the Yawsons: most significantly, his grandmother, Nana, and his sly, rebellious sister, Monka. The scene opens in playfulness and celebration, but closes in tears. At the midpoint of the scene, Esi Kom mentions the bride price she is assembling for Ato's wedding, anticipating that he will wed someone from their area soon. At this point, he has to admit that he is already married. The announcement creates confusion and consternation, which only increases when the Yawsons learn that their new in-law is an American. At first, they assume she is white; they soon learn that she is African American, a descendant of slaves, but this fails to placate them. In Fante society, to marry a slave is to marry a woman of no family; and not to have a family history is the worst thing that can happen to a Fante. Act One closes with Nana lamenting the fact that she has lived long enough to witness this disgrace.

Act Two consists of two brief scenes. First, the two women return and discuss the obligations of children to their parents. This discussion provides a counterpoint to a soliloquy by Eulalie, which follows immediately. In a page and a half, Eulalie recalls her life in the United States and her continual dissatisfaction with racial inequality. She again celebrates being in her spiritual homeland, where she belongs . . . but these pleasant thoughts scatter as she is frightened by the sudden beating of drums in the distance. It seems that Eulalie is not as comfortable with African culture as she would like to be. Ato enters, and the two discuss drums, witchcraft, and having children. Eulalie is reconsidering her original desire to delay starting a family. In a move that will have important repercussions, Ato insists that they keep to their original plan of waiting for children.

Act Three takes place six months later. A boy and a girl sneak into the Yawsons' house to play hide and seek. They sing the song that gives the play its title, the song of a ghost at a crossroads, who cannot decide whether he should go to Cape Coast or to Elimia. The song awakens Ato from an afternoon nap; he is upset because it gave him a bad dream. This brief scene sets the tone for the explosion that follows. Two hours later Esi Kom brings a bundle of snails to Ato and Eulalie; Eulalie, however, upon learning that they are meant as food, is repulsed and throws them away. Monka witnesses this rudeness and tells her mother. Esi Kom and Monka visit to Ato all the complaints they have been stifling since his return: he and Eulalie have been rude when the family visited them in the city; Eulalie does not respect the traditions of her husband's culture; worst of all, Ato spends all the money he makes on Western luxury items for Eulalie, while his family continues to wallow in debt. Eulalie, who does not speak Fante and so knows no more than what she can judge from their tone of voice, further irritates them by the European, unmwomany act of chain-smoking. The fight ends in an impasse, as Monka and Esi Kom storm out.

The fourth act takes place six months later. The occasion is the annual sprinkling of the stools, a ceremony that celebrates the family's ancestors. (A stool represents one's ancestors—some families keep one stool while others keep one for each of its former heads of clans. In any case, sprinkling the stool with water or wine is a way to recall the ancestors and propitiate them so that they will ensure a profitable year.) It is a time of great concentration on family, heritage, and obligations—all the things that Ato has ignored. The act begins, again, with the two village women. They repeat the rumors that Ato has not given money to his family, and that Eulalie spends all their wages on machines. Then they add news: the Yawsons believe that Eulalie is barren.

Eulalie enters, drinking whiskey. Ato futilely pleads with her to stop. His uncle enters and announces that they want to perform an Akan ritual to help Eulalie conceive. Almost all can be forgiven if Eulalie can present Nana with a great-grandchild. Ato is shocked at the proposal, and too scared to admit that the problem is not infertility but intent: he and Eulalie do not want a child yet. When he confesses the situation to Eulalie, she too is angry with him. She begins to see him as a coward who would rather let his family hate her than explain her customs to them. As Act Five begins it is the next morning and
Eulalie is drunk. She and Ato argue. She calls his people savages; he retorts, “How much does the American negro know?” (Dilemma, p. 48). Finally, he slaps her, then flees as she crumbles to the floor.

Time shifts to midnight of that day. Ato wanders onstage, yelling for his mother. The two women enter as well, and discuss the evil potions surrounding this marriage. When they leave, Esi Kom opens the door to the house. Ato tells her that Eulalie has vanished, and attempts to explain the grounds of their argument. But instead of offering solace, Esi Kom castigates him. She realizes that because he has not served as an intermediary between African and African American, he has failed both sides: “Before the stranger should dip his finger / Into the thick palm nut soup, / It is a townsman / Must have told him to” (Dilemma, p. 52). Eulalie then wanders onstage, and Esi Kom accepts her into the house. The play ends with Ato standing, alone and disconsolate, in the courtyard. As the lights dim, the voices of children are heard, singing:

Shall I go to Cape Coast?
Shall I go to Elmina?
I can’t tell
Shall I?
I can’t tell
I can’t tell
I can’t tell
I can’t tell...

(Dilemma, p. 52)

The necessity of motherhood. In a soliloquy discussing Eulalie’s exotic stove and refrigerator, the First Neighbor Woman says:

Your machines, my stranger-girl,
Cannot go on an errand
They have no hands to dress you when you are dead...
But you have one machine to buy now
That which will weep for you, stranger-girl
You need that most.
For my world
Which you have run to enter
Is most unkind to the barren.

(Dilemma, p. 40)

It is significant that this speech is given to the first woman, who has, throughout the play, lamented her own failure to conceive. For her, barrenness is the worst of all curses; she would be unable to understand a deliberate effort not to conceive a child.

The First Neighbor Woman is not alone. One of the defining features of Akan society is its emphasis on fertility as the measure of a woman’s success. Children are prized and coddled; the family’s energy is focused on maximizing opportunities for them. But any sort of failure in the childbearing process puts a woman at risk of scorn and rejection. Barrenness is still among the most common reasons for divorce. Before the spread of modern medicine, infant mortality stood at 50 percent; all sorts of charms and rituals were designed to prevent this catastrophe. “If a new-born baby died before eight days the mother angrily whipped and mutilated the body, wrapped it in sword-grass, put it in a pot and buried it near the women’s latrine; this was to discourage it from returning again” (Warren, p. 13). The burial of a child inverted the normal burial ceremony; participants wore white to insult the dead child’s spirit and to prevent it from returning. Similarly, to die in childbirth was a great disgrace, and the dead woman’s body was abused along with the child’s. And, as witnessed in Dilemma of a Ghost, other rituals were designed to heighten fertility or surmount barrenness.

A SONG OF TWO CITIES

The cities alluded to in the song of the ghost, Cape Coast and Elmina, are both loaded with significance in Ghanaian history. Elmina is a fairly old city, one of the oldest of the Akan urban centers. Cape Coast, on the contrary, “is a fashionable modern city important today as an educational center” (Chew in Cox, p. 38). Cape Coast was built by the British and was used as their administrative capital until the 1870s. Elmina also has a role in Ghana’s colonial past; it was there that the Portuguese built their first trading fort in Ghana, at the end of the sixteenth century. Thus, both cities evoke the encounter of Akan peoples with Europeans. The ghost’s indecisiveness, which strikes such terror in Ato, seems to reflect the main character’s indecisive wavering between African and Western perspectives on life. He is committed to his wife but fails to explain his own culture to her. He wants to remain on good terms with his nuclear family but fails to deal with them forthrightly. In short, he tries to have the best of both worlds by not rejecting any part of either. While at first blush he may not seem drawn to his own culture, a number of his actions indicate otherwise. At a crucial moment at the end of the play, to name one example, he slaps Eulalie and says that she knows nothing about Africa.
The immediate cultural reasons for this emphasis on childbearing can be understood simply enough. In a pre-industrial culture where the basic mode of survival is subsistence farming, a large family is more secure than a small one. Children do not drain a family of its resources; instead they become, at a relatively early age, contributors to its wealth. They help farm and harvest the crops, help their mothers in petty trade, and do housework. Furthermore, in a culture where public welfare and social services are still evolving, people cannot depend on the government for support when they grow sick or too old to work. That role must be assumed by the family. In fact, the extended family is the key social unit in Akan society. An aged person without family to take him or her in, a person who has alienated his or her family—these people are in a precarious position indeed. Thus children are not simply objects of love, not simply help around the house: they are the best investment a married couple can make in its future. The economic usefulness of children is reinforced by their religious and cultural significance. The Akan religion is founded upon family. On the one hand, a family's deceased ancestors watch over their living descendants; these ghosts or spirits are prayed to, remembered in ritual, and succored. They are imagined to have the power to help the living or to punish them for transgressions—including the failure to bear children promptly, as Esi Kom notes: "any woman who does it will die by the anger of the ghosts of her fathers—or at least, she will never get the children when she wants them" (Dilemma, p. 51).

However, the ghosts of a family's ancestors also depend on their survivors. Without descendants to honor and remember them, these ancestral spirits are forgotten, homeless. This explains the poor treatment offered the corpses of babies who fail to survive; the family wants to drive away the spirit that cannot live, and keep it from returning to haunt them again.

Ato Yawson flouts all the responsibilities he has as a son in Akan society. He has forgotten that he was educated, not for himself but to help provide his family with a better life. The Yawsons went into debt to finance his American education, but from their point of view it was not a sacrifice but an investment. The high-paying white-collar job he gets when he returns is supposed to repay the debts and more. Instead, Ato focuses on himself and his wife, providing luxury items for their home while ignoring his mother's financial troubles. This in itself speaks a neglect of his culture's traditions, but there is more. As Esi Kom comes to realize, her son has not explained his culture to his wife; he has allowed her to think of his family as ignorant, uncultured primitives. Therefore, even though it is Eulalie who eventually calls the Yawsons savages, Ato must bear the responsibility for her scorn; he has not respected his family enough to consider their traditions worth defending.

All of these flaws are focused by Ato and Eulalie's decision to postpone childbearing. For the Yawsons, this is the ultimate gesture of arrogance and selfishness. Contraception means playing god, thinking one has the right to decide when a child's spirit can enter the world. It is also selfish; choosing not to have children means assuming that a child is the sole property of husband and wife, overlooking the fact that everyone in the extended family desires to see new additions. It is, in the end, the clearest symbol of the belief that one's own life is the most important, that one has the right or even the duty to live for oneself alone. Thus, it is fitting that this, rather than machines or money or education, causes Ato and Eulalie's struggles with the Yawson family.

Sources and literary context. Aidoo's career as a writer began with short stories published in the influential West African literary journal Black Orpheus. However, her first popular success was as a dramatist. While still an undergraduate she became associated with Efua Theodora Sutherland's Ghana Drama Studio. Efua Sutherland was the first Ghanaian dramatist and the most prominent at the time Aidoo's play appeared; however, she was as important for her work with actors and other playwrights as for her own plays. She avidly experimented with new ways of staging plays, bringing inexpensive outdoor theaters to a country whose playhouses had largely been modeled on the expensive, indoor theaters of Europe. Sutherland's use of tropes from Greek tragedy may have spurred Aidoo to include the Greek-style chorus of the two village women. Perhaps most importantly, Sutherland provided a forum for literary-minded dramatists like Aidoo to develop their skills.

Aidoo has said that she found her subject in everyday life: she knew many married couples of mixed African and African American origins. She also points to a general Ghanaian interest in the black experience worldwide: "I come from a people for whom, for some reason, the connection with African-America or the Caribbean was a living thing, something of which we were always aware" (James, p. 20). She was also work-
ing with a tradition in West African literature of all levels: the depiction of the “been-to” (a native African who has been educated in Europe or America) returning to his people with a white wife. Aidoo ironically suggests that, in adjusting to African life, skin color does not matter: an African American will have no easier a time than any white newcomer. This ironic use of a popular type further allows Aidoo to explore the possibility of links among black peoples worldwide.

Like many of the plays of Shakespeare, *Dilemma of a Ghost* mixes poetry and prose. The language of the play varies from the emotionally charged and imagistic poetry of the two village women, to the simple marital banter of Ato and Eulalie. This variety reveals Aidoo’s ambitious interest in a great number of genres, most of which she would go on to work in. After another play, *Anowa*, she began to publish volumes of poetry, short stories, and the experimental novels *Our Sister Kiliedy* and *Changes*.

Aidoo has suggested that African drama should strive to maintain its own integrity by growing out of contemporary African experiences and to merge African forms of oral narrative with Western literary forms. Her *Dilemma of a Ghost* achieves both objectives—it addresses a topic of contemporary relevance in Africa, and blends African oral forms, such as the proverb, with Western dramatic forms.

**Reviews.** *Dilemma of a Ghost* was first performed by the Students’ Theatre in Legon, Ghana, on March 12, 13, and 14, 1964. It has been revived intermittently in Ghana, other countries of West Africa, and the United States, indicating that interest in the play has survived even though Aidoo herself no longer writes drama.

Critics have seen the play as interesting, at times brilliant, but also as structurally flawed. Naana Banyiwa Horne states that “[t]he weaknesses are mostly structural, growing out of Aidoo’s innovative efforts to blend African oral and Western literary elements, and, for a short play, *Dilemma* has too many acts” (Horne, p. 36). Writing for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Cosmo Pieterse agrees that the play has both strengths and weaknesses: “The play has errors rather than flaws; fair craftsmanship carries one from the poetry, whimsy and humour of the prelude to the stark climax and hopeful end”; “the chorus,” he adds, “is not always structurally integrated, so that thematic coherence and depth are achieved at the cost of formal unity” (Pieterse, p. 170). Viewing the play from another angle, Mildred Hill-Lubin charges that Aidoo’s characterization of Eulalie reveals an ignorance of African American life. “Certainly many of [Aidoo’s mistakes] can be attributed to the author’s youth but, at the same time, they emphasize a more serious concern. They demonstrate raw lack of information, the kind of concept that many Africans possess about their brothers and sisters in the United States” (Hill-Lubin, p. 195). Karen Chapman provides a longer list of technical flaws, including the play’s brevity and its tendency to leave important thematic issues hanging, but concludes, “Despite these probably youthful faults in technique, Miss Aidoo has treated human problems with an understanding unavailable to many dramatists twice her age” (Chapman, p. 30).

—Jacob Littleton

**For More Information**


