

CHAPTER 7

DOMESTIC TENSIONS REFLECTED IN THE POPULAR THEATRE IN GHANA

K. BAME*

The popular drama of every society, whether it be the popular plays of Elizabethan England, the one time popular Commeda dell'arte of Italy or the Yoruba Folk Operas of Nigeria, (Beier, 1954) reflects, possibly in an exaggerated or dramatically accentuated form, some social facts, happenings and conflicts of that society. In order to be popular, such plays tend to be attuned to the interests and experience of their audiences. Such are the Ghanaian comic plays which constitute what is here termed 'the popular theatre in Ghana'.

These Comic Plays are a Ghanaian type of popular drama, staged by itinerant guitar bands, which call themselves "Concert Parties", Trios, and describe their all-male actors as comedians. They are believed to have been started in about 1918 by Master Yalley, headmaster of an elementary school in Sekondi, a coastal city in the Western Region of Ghana. He was followed by a new generation of comedians - Bob Johnson and his associates - whose successive Concert Parties were 'The Versatile Eight' formed in 1920; 'The Two Bobs and their Carolina Girl' formed in 1930 and 'The Axim Trio' formed in 1937. The Axim Trio has been an important agent for the diffusion of the Comic Plays and it can rightly be said to have given birth to the numerous Concert Parties now operating in Ghana, examples of which are Kakaiku's Concert Party, F.K. Micah's Concert Party, the Akan Trio and the Happy Stars Concert Party.

Beginning from Sekondi in the West the plays spread East-ward along the coast to Cape Coast, Aboso and to Accra, from where the diffusion changed direction. It turned Northward to Apedwa, a town near Kibi,

* Dr. Bame is a Research Fellow at the Institute of African Studies, Legon.

about sixty miles north of Accra and then to Kumasi, the capital city of Ashanti Region.

The membership of these Concert Parties ranges from ten to fifteen persons, a majority of whom are usually Akan or can speak Fanti or Twi, the two Akan languages which are used in comic play performance. The performance takes place on different types of stages varying from a small platform made of boards or cement in the courtyard of a village compound to the modern stage of a city theatre. The comedians do not use curtains; theirs is a permanently open stage with a dressing corner usually improvised for a play and dismantled when it is over.

The popular appeal of the Comic Plays is widespread throughout Ghana and the size of the audience, members of which come from all classes, but a majority of whom are the ordinary folk, ranges from about two hundred play-goers in the villages to about two thousand persons in the big towns and cities.

The Comic Plays mirror on the stage some of the social problems and conflicts confronting Ghanaians in their rapidly changing society. The majority of problems and conflicts reflected in the plays concern the family and kinship organisation. This fact in itself seems to emphasise the vital role which the domestic institutions play in Ghanaian society.

In Ghana, as in other African countries, the family or the 'extended' family goes beyond the performance of the universal functions of the family which include bringing new members into the society, taking care of their physical maintenance, socializing and giving them their initial social status (Chinoy, 1968: 163). In a society where no social security services for the entire population yet exist, the extended family system provides an important source of social security. Everyone looks to his kinsfolk for support and security (Busia 1962: 14). A Ghanaian turns to his kinsfolk for food and clothing when he is unemployed. In time of illness it is the responsibility of his kinsmen to help him regain his health, either by finding a traditional healer to treat him or by sending him to the hospital.

The expenses incurred during his illness are borne by his kinsfolk if the patient has no means to pay for them. The kinsfolk detail their representatives to nurse or cater for the patient until he regains his normal health.

In the event of a Ghanaian becoming involved in a court case he counts on his kinsfolk for assistance and support. Custom and tradition enjoin them not to fail him. In fact if members of his lineage or extended family fail to provide him with the necessary support and help in time of need their action will become what has been termed "a standing reproach to the family" (Busia, 1950: 14). Thus it is not surprising that the extended family or kinship in general, which holds such a pivotal place in Ghanaian social life, should receive appropriate attention in the Ghanaian popular theatre. The family and kinship are so vital and important to Ghanaians that any erosion of the mutual obligations which the members owe to each other must naturally raise concern for them and call for a corrective action on their part. A fact of sociological interest, and which receives due comment in this article, is the contribution which the comic plays make towards this corrective action-social control.

An examination of specimen themes of the plays seems in order here. Out of twelve representative themes of the plays which the writer recorded in a recent study (Bame, 1966) nine deal with the family and kinship organization. They cover fostering and the treatment of foster children; the changing extended family obligations; marital tensions and conflicts over matrilineal inheritance. Four of the themes have been summarised below for illustrative purposes.

Specimen I Treat Somebody's Child as Your Own.

By Kakaiku's Band

An Ashanti man met and married a woman, Nkatiaba, by whom he had two daughters. He had had another

daughter Mansa, by a previous wife who died and left him alone with the young girl. Unlike a good mother, Nkatiaba discriminated between her own two daughters and her step-daughter. She gave her own daughters good clothes to wear, while Mansa wore a single shabby cloth all the time. Mansa did all the domestic chores including cooking, while the two beloved daughters enjoyed themselves. Mansa was frequently scolded and beaten by her step-mother. On one occasion when she finished cooking Mansa sent the food to Nkatiaba who gave her two favourite daughters some of the food to eat and sent Mansa to sweep the kitchen before eating her share. On her return, Mansa found that her two half-sisters had eaten most of her share and had poured water in what was left. She wept bitterly singing pitiful songs.

Nkatiaba once revealed to her two daughters the fact that Mansa was a step-child to her and they in turn contrary to her warnings, revealed it to Mansa. She then realized why she had been singled out for maltreatment.

When the girls' father fell ill nobody but Mansa was sent to care for him. The man died and Mansa came to report it to Nkatiaba, who asked Mansa to stay at home and take care of things, while she and her two favourite daughters went to see about their dead father. At the time of the funeral celebration, Nkatiaba bought mourning cloths for her two daughters, but none for Mansa. She pleaded with her step-mother for a new cloth for the occasion because there would be a lot of visitors around, but Nkatiaba refused and so Mansa used her old and shabby cloth throughout the funeral celebration.

Not long afterwards, the chief of the town, in which the now widowed Nkatiaba lived with her two daughters and Mansa, beat a gong-gong for all the people to assemble in his palace to celebrate his annual festival. The question of clothes arose again. Nkatiaba secretly bought two sets of cloths for her two daughters and advised them not to tell Mansa to whom she did not give any. She pretended she and Mansa would not attend the festival. Mansa came

from the kitchen to see her two sisters holding their new cloths and discussing about the forthcoming festival. In the night she wept bitterly calling her dead mother to come and take her away. (Her pitiful songs and condition aroused sympathy from the audience and not less than ten members were seen sobbing while she was weeping.)

While Mansa was asleep, the ghost of her mother brought her extremely beautiful clothes, shoes and a lady's umbrella for her to attend the chief's festival,

The day of the festival came. Mansa's sisters dressed in their new clothes and went to the festival leaving her in the kitchen. After they had left, Mansa dressed gorgeously in the clothes given her by her mother's ghost and attended the festival. By the time she arrived radiant with beauty at the palace most people had already assembled there. The chief was sitting in state and ladies were dancing to the festival drumming. Mansa joined the dancers unrecognized by her two half-sisters. Her beauty charmed the chief so much that he asked her for a dance. During the dance, Mansa realizing that she must arrive home before her sisters stole silently away.

The chief was disturbed when he could no longer see the lady with whose beauty he had become infatuated. Annoyed and frustrated he dispersed the gathering and sent people to find his lady for him. But the lady was nowhere to be found. Fortunately or unfortunately, in Mansa's anxiety to steal away before her absence from the kitchen could be discovered, she left one of her shoes in the palace. The chief found it and immediately realized it was his lady's shoe because he had noticed it while they were dancing.

Upon the chief's orders all women who attended the festival, including, of course, Mansa's two half-sisters were made to try the shoe in turns. This was done in the hope that the woman whom it fitted would be the obvious owner and the chief's lady. The shoe did not fit any of the women who

were supposed to have attended the festival. At last Mansa was called from her kitchen to try it and to the surprise of everybody present it fitted her perfectly. She was asked to go and dress in the very clothes with which she attended the festival. She did so and returned to tell her sad story to the chief who, upon hearing it banished Nkatiaba from his district and married Mansa. Mansa's two half-sisters now became her maid-servants. The chief and Mansa celebrated their marriage with music and dancing.

Moral: Step-mothers should treat their step-children like their own children. If they maltreat their step-children, God in a mysterious way helps the children and punishes the step-mothers.

Specimen II The Death of One's Mother Deprives
one of Family ties

By Ahamano's Band

A certain woman failed to take care of her nephew, whose mother on her deathbed had left him in his aunt's care. Instead she pampered her own daughter, Felicia, by lavishing all her money on her. She refused to give even a pesewa to the orphan boy. The orphan on his own apprenticed himself to a trade and by dint of hard work qualified in the trade. The aunt refused to give him money to pay for his tutorship.

The orphan prayed to his dead mother and the gods and his aunt suddenly fell ill. The prodigal daughter Felicia, called in a Mallam who revealed that the woman's illness was due to the ill-treatment of the orphan. Following the entreaties of Felicia, the Mallam cured the sick woman and warned her against any further ill-treatment of the orphan boy. When she regained her health Felicia urged her to help the orphan boy, but the mother refused to do so. The orphan boy made a second bid to get money from his aunt to pay for his apprenticeship

fee. But again the woman this time not only refused but insulted the boy, who became so enraged; he wanted to fight his aunt, but restrained himself however. He prayed again and the ghost of his mother and the gods again avenged him. The aunt fell seriously ill. Felicia again called in the Mallam who first asked the orphan boy whether or not he should cure his cruel aunt. The boy was hesitant in giving an answer but his cousin, Felicia, entreated him and he consented. (The audience jeered at Felicia's entreaties and urged the orphan boy with shouts not to consent to the treatment of his cruel aunt.)

After she had regained her health for the second time, the woman apologized to her nephew and she and Felicia gave the orphan boy money and clothes which he happily accepted.

Moral: The death of one's mother tends to end one's family ties as illustrated by the orphan boy's story. What happened to the cruel aunt is the lot of people who fail to discharge their customary obligations to the children of their dead relations.

Specimen III There are Dangers in Contracting
A Marriage During a Sojourn.

By Agyekum and His Happy Stars' Band.

A young woman who had lost her mother took to wandering from place to place enjoying herself. In the course of her wandering she met and married a certain happy-go-lucky bachelor. Some time after the marriage the young woman left her husband to go and visit her brother. No sooner had she left than another 'good time' young woman arrived from Takoradi. She sang two songs and her sweet voice attracted the young man who became infatuated with her and told her he had no wife. Soon the Takoradi girl and the young man began to enjoy themselves.

The wife was involved in a lorry accident during her journey to see her brother. A house-boy, hearing about the accident, went to tell his happy-go-lucky

master who, because of the presence of the Takoradi girl, pretended he had no wife and therefore he did not know what the boy was talking about. The injured wife with wounds bandaged and unable to walk now arrived and crawled towards her husband, who disowned her and described her as a mad woman and a witch. He and the Takoradi girl scorned the injured wife.

The brother of the injured woman called in a doctor who asked for the patient's husband. The husband again disowned the injured wife. The doctor offered the woman good medical treatment and told the husband he would in due course regret his wicked deeds.

Meanwhile the Takoradi girl demanded money from the happy-go-lucky man who had none for her. Very soon a quarrel ensued between her and the man. She took the man's clothes as her fees and left him almost undressed wearing only his short pants.

The wife having recovered from her wounds returned well-dressed only to see her wicked husband standing almost naked. The man bowed down his head in shame and regretted his deeds. He asked his wife to forgive him which she did.

Moral: There are dangers in marrying a person whom one does not know well as evidenced by the story of the disowned wife and her sufferings.

Spicemen IV. So is the World.

By Kojo Brake's Band

A certain poor man, Kojo Brake, realizing that he could possibly make his fortune by farming, decided to do so with the help of his wife. The wife, well aware that it was Brake's nephew who would inherit from him, asked her husband to let his nephew, Kwaku Sharp, join them in making the farm. Kojo Brake accordingly asked his sister, Sharp's mother, Esi Nana, to let Kwaku Sharp go and help in making his farm. Esi Nana, then better off

than her brother, pretended she did not know Kojo Brake, let alone recognize him as a brother. She completely disowned him.

Kojo Brake then invited his nephew to go and farm with him but Kwaku Sharp was infuriated by the suggestion and he had a row with his uncle for suggesting farming as a vocation to him.

While Kojo Brake was mourning his poor condition, Kwaku Sharp and his mother, Esi Nana came drunk and poked fun at him. Kojo went to make a cocoa farm with the help of his wife and, as fate would have it, the farm flourished; Brake became rich within a few years. His sister Esi Nana and nephew, Kwaku Sharp now came to him for money, but he understandably refused to give them even a pesewa.

Esi Nana and her son plotted to kill Kojo Brake by means of sorcery and inherit his property. But Kojo Brake too went to consult a shrine priest who gave him some medicine for self-protection. Kwaku Sharp brought medicine to his uncle's house to kill him, but it turned against him and he became mad.

Moral: People should not resort to evil means to obtain a share of their relations' or anybody's hard-won wealth, and riches. Anybody who does that may go Kwaku Sharp's way.

The first of domestic issues which forcibly strikes an observer frequenting these plays through its recurrence is the theme of the ill-treatment of orphans and house maids by their foster parents.

Dr. K.A. Busia in his "Report on a Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi" shows how and why the practice of fostering is common in Ghana. He writes: "...the practice of sending children away to live with relatives and friends is neither new nor uncommon, and in the old days it was a way of ensuring that children received proper discipline

and training from respected members of the community and were not spoiled by over-fond parents. It was also a way in which members of the extended family shared the responsibility for training their young relatives...." (Busia 1960: 91). More recently E. Goody has corroborated Busia's point and shown that the practice is common both in Northern and Southern Ghana (Goody, 1966). The death of one or both of the parents of a child necessitates what she terms 'crisis fostering' as distinguished from voluntary fostering.

It is the kind of neglect and ill-treatment suffered by orphans, who fall into the 'crisis fostering' category, which is usually brought into relief in the plays; it is the same kind as that suffered by housemaids who in some cases are in fact orphans as well.

Thus in the first specimen story given above, Mansa a half-orphan girl and a house-maid is discriminated against and ill-treated by her step-mother and half-sisters. Similarly in the second story an orphaned boy, whose mother on her deathbed left him in the care of his aunt, suffers ill-treatment and cruel neglect at the hands of the aunt and his cousin. The writer has recorded a number of similar themes in which people ill-treat, neglect and discriminate against the children of the dead relatives, while they spoil their own children with money and luxury.

A reader who is not familiar with Ghanaian society may be puzzled by the repetition of this theme in the Concert Party plays and wonder whether it is a true reflection of Ghanaian family organization. Perhaps a brief look at the relevant facts from Ghanaian society may be helpful here. Dr. K.A. Busia in his survey of Sekondi-Takoradi provides empirical evidence on the treatment of housemaids. His evidence has since been corroborated by Ione Acquah in her "Accra Survey" (1958: 75). She asserts that the treatment meted to housemaids in Accra is similar to that found by Dr. Busia in Sekondi-Takoradi.

Two case histories of an orphan boy and a housemaid reported by Dr. Busia in his survey, among many others, illustrate the sort of ill-treatment they suffer, epitomized in the first and second specimen themes given above and show how truly Comic Plays reflect Ghanaian society. Dr. Busia found in his study that one of the boys who turned delinquent because they were neglected by their relations,

"was born at Kisi, 26 miles from Sekondi. His father died when he was about four years old. A year later his mother married again. The second husband had another home in Apowa (4 miles from Takoradi) and the mother often went to live there. During these visits he remained at Kisi with his father's brother and sisters, but none of them accepted direct responsibility for him. So he was left to himself without proper supervision" (Busia 1950: 93).

This life history bears a close resemblance to that of the orphan boy given in the first specimen story. The case history of the housemaid is as follows:

"A married couple, the husband literate, and the wife illiterate, have a housemaid, A., a girl 10 years old. She is related to the husband. A sleeps in the kitchen which is full of rats. She used to be allowed a mat and pillow, but because she was a bed-wetter, she was deprived of them, and she now sleeps on a sheet of brown paper and has no pillow. She has two changes of clothes. She does the marketing and assists in cooking, cleaning and washing. She is frequently given corporal punishment. On one occasion, she had red pepper rubbed into her eyes for coming home late from an errand. She begins the day's activities at 5 a.m. and is usually up till after 10.00 p.m." (Busia, 1950: 36).

How different is this case history from Mansa's life story as revealed in the second specimen story? Such situations are far from rare in Ghanaian society, especially in the towns and cities.

Such treatment of housemaids and orphans when depicted in the plays arouses spontaneous pity in the audience and sometimes elicits tears. Some members of the audience themselves, their relatives or friends may have been victims of such ill-treatment and so when it is dramatized on the stage, they find it agonizing and sometimes unbearable. Some shed tears when their own sufferings are, as it were, played back to them.

Another frequently recurring theme is the disowning of wives by their husbands, as illustrated in specimen III. A pertinent question which may be posed in this connection is 'Are Ghanaian men really so flippant in their marriages as to keep on disowning their wives as the plays seem to indicate?' The answer here is that they do not simply disown their wives but rather, like men elsewhere, divorce them to marry other women. In the traditional face-to-face society the sanctions of customs and norms exercised more effective control over the individual members of the society and the divorcing of wives may not have been as frequent as it is in the rapidly changing Ghanaian society of today. The impact of Western educational values and ideas on marriage, quite different from the traditional ones, seems to have increased conflicts between husband and wife, and husbands married under customary law divorce their wives lightly to marry other women. In some cases a man divorces an illiterate wife to marry a literate one more fitting to his economic and social status as an educated man. Here too Dr. Busia provides ample evidence in his survey. He found during his investigations that:

"There were examples of literate men who were first married to illiterate girls under Native customary Law, and later when they were able to afford to marry literate girls

under the Ordinance, they divorced their illiterate wives. The practice is not uncommon, and affects marital relationships, as well as the care of the children of the first marriage" (Busia, 1950: 42).

Just as the enactment of the orphan and housemaid episodes elicits tears from some members of the audience, so does the enactment of these marital conflicts. The story of specimen III was enacted at Saltpond, a coastal town in the Central Region of Ghana. The response of a certain woman to the play observed by the writer may be described here in illustration of the point.

One section of the play showed the injured woman with bandages all over her body crawling on her knees towards her husband. The husband started driving the injured wife away, telling another woman who was with him that he did not know the injured woman. As the injured wife began weeping, singing and bemoaning her fate many members of the audience literally queued up to present her with money. The writer was sitting on a seat between two women. The woman sitting on the left of the writer was weeping bitterly and the one on the right turned to her and said, "compare this with your case and console yourself." The remark from her friend made her weep all the more. The woman who wept bitterly had had an experience similar to that of the injured woman. The sympathetic feeling which the injured woman's condition aroused in the audience gave her an opportunity to express her own grief openly. The woman who wept in response to somebody else's misfortune obviously released her feeling of grief which otherwise might have remained unexpressed. She went home from the play-house presumably somewhat emotionally relieved.

In another scene of a play observed by the writer, a cocoa farmer who had been toiling all his life with his wife and children, working on his farm, died just at the time when he was about to enjoy the fruits of his labour. The farmer's maternal nephew who inherited from him maltreated the widow and her children.

He drove them away from the farmer's house and refused to care for them; he would not even give them money for their food. A man among the audience, witnessing some of the demerits of matrilineal inheritance dramatized on the stage was overheard by the writer and others sitting near him to say: "This nephew-inheritance must be stopped!" In the course of the same scene tears were seen flowing down the cheeks of a girl among the audience. When asked why she was crying, she replied that she was sorry for the widow and her children. She further revealed that similar treatment was once meted out to her sister when her husband died.

This type of weeping as an active response to some incident in the Comic Plays is not uncommon during play performances. To a question which the writer posed about it in a national survey of comic play-goers three out of five replied that they had seen somebody shedding tears while watching a Concert Party play and more than one in five confessed that they had themselves wept in a similar manner. Two reasons offered by two of the respondents for weeping are germane to the theme of this paper:

1. "I was sorry to see how a woman helped her husband to amass wealth and the husband divorced her."
2. "I have lost both my mother and father; someone in a play also did the same and her sufferings were too pitiable".

The fourth specimen story calls attention to some other areas of tension and conflict in Ghanaian domestic life. Kojo Brake's wife, conscious of the fact that it was Brake's nephew or other matrikinsman who would inherit his property at his death, asked her husband to let his nephew help them to make the cocoa farm. The matrilineal inheritance among the Akan people of Ghana just alluded to is a well known source of tension and conflict between wives and the matrikin of their husbands. It is matrilineal inheritance which is seen to give rise to the unwillingness or reluctance of Akan urban couples to

undertake joint economic enterprises or joint savings, found by Christine Oppong in a study reported elsewhere in this volume.

The story brings into focus yet another source of friction in the matrilineal inheritance. That is matrikin are sometimes unwilling to help their relatives acquire wealth or property, which they nevertheless look forward to inherit in future. The story also highlights the belief among the Akan that some nephews sometimes get rid of their uncles by means of sorcery or witchcraft in order to inherit their property. Thus Kwaku Sharp with the support of his mother refused to help his maternal uncle Kojo Brake in making the cocoa farm and yet, when Brake became rich by making the farm, Sharp and his mother requested Kojo Brake for money. When he refused to give it to them they plotted to kill him by means of medicine and inherit his money and property.

Now to shift focus, we take up the examination of the contribution which the Comic Plays make to the reinforcement of values concerning the family and domestic obligations - in short their contribution to the system of social control in Ghana.

As already stated in Ghana custom demands that the kinsfolk of a dead person take good care of his children, just as they would take care of their own children. Any relative who shirks from this responsibility or ill-treats the orphans of his dead relative in a traditional community invites misfortune and illness meted out by the dead relative - to himself. However, as a result of social change, it is observed that the joint responsibility of the extended family system is breaking down, so that the children of dead relatives are, in some instances, being neglected because the successor is not fulfilling his customary obligation (Busia, 1950; 94).

When this is enacted in the plays and a relative who has failed to discharge his obligations to the child or children of a dead relative is afflicted with sudden illness, as occurs in the second

example given above, the plays serve the latent function of reinforcing these changing but nevertheless cherished values of Ghanaians, in that they indirectly call for the fulfilment of the traditional family and kinship obligations.

The plays contributions to the systems of social control take other forms. When the comedians give the morals of their plays, they tell the audience to refrain from indulging in the vices they dramatize and rather emulate the virtues revealed, which are of course, those which help to achieve harmony in the society. The morals given above provide representative examples.

Apart from these overt means by which the comedians try to make members of the general public, who form the audience, conform to the accepted social principles of Ghanaian society, the plays are replete with many covert more subtle means of achieving the same end. The condemnation which the audience give to the life and deeds of immoral and wicked men and women, who appear in the plays, and the disgraceful and miserable end which always comes to such people, cannot fail but have a restraining influence on members of the audience, who at one time or another may be tempted to lead a similar life. This is an important latent function of social control which the plays perform. A large proportion of the play-goers interviewed by the author testified to the reality of this function of the plays. Out of the 885 respondents, 571 acknowledged that the lessons and morals they got from the plays had a guiding and restraining influence on their daily life and behaviour.

It can be said in conclusion that if the Comic Plays do anything at all, it is that in a comical fashion, they present to their audiences slices of Ghanaian social life, its strains and stresses, centring largely upon the family and kinship. Their popularity is undoubtedly partly due to this faithful reproduction on the stage of Ghanaian social realities, which enables the play-goers to be outside observers of and at the same time mental participants in the unfolding episodes of the domestic dramas.

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