This is the published version of a chapter published in *Preserving the Landscape of Imagination*: *Children’s Literature in Africa*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Granqvist, R. (1997) There is a Child in Every Adult and an Adult in Every Child: Interview with Kofi Anyidoho. In: Raoul Granqvist and Jürgen Martini (ed.), *Preserving the Landscape of Imagination*: *Children’s Literature in Africa* (pp. 277-282). Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi, B.V.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-9220
There is a Child in Every Adult
and an Adult in Every Child

INTERVIEW WITH KOFI ANYIDOHOM
by Raoul Granqvist

RAOUL GRANQVIST: What was your own reading as a child?

KOFI ANYIDOHOM: As is probably true of African literature in general
there is that exposure you had as a child growing up in a village
situation through the stories, folktales, the songs, and then going to
school and discovering almost a disjuncture, another tradition, which
in my case involved for instance reading Grimms’ stories in Ewe
translation! So I grew up with an interesting exposure to children’s
stories from around the world. This was both positive and negative.
Some of the stories that came to me from the West via translation I
can still recall with tremendous pleasure. But the method of transferring
those experiences from faraway into my consciousness and my
educational programming was not necessarily very positive.

The colonial system required you to memorize and repeat even before
the poems you read made any sense to you; you barely understood them. So you have this very strange situation where on the one hand you live in a world of poetry in your home where it is so much part of daily life that even the language your mother uses to abuse you is “poetic”; and on the other where in a typical classroom situation you had to struggle with gaining control of the grammar and the sound system of English and at the same time being forced to assimilate poetry in a very rigid way. So 99 per cent of the children developed an intense hatred for poetry, not because there was something

Kofi Anyidoho is both a poet and literary scholar, a specialist of African and African-heritage literatures. He teaches at the University of Ghana, Legon.
The interview was conducted in Umeå, Sweden, on 14 May 1995.

wrong with poetry: It was poetry as the printed word and it became a terror because if you couldn’t memorize it, there was always the cane!

So English poetry was beaten into you as a child... In addition to this reading and the methods by which it was transferred to you, I know that you have grown up in an artistic family. How did this “second” exposure affect you?

When I eventually started to write for children I had to fall back upon some of those game-songs, with their heightened sense of rhythm. Recalling my own involvement in these games, for instance, as a child was very crucial for me. I had to re-enter the aesthetic realm of the child to be able to produce these songs and figure out what principles, what creative techniques would appeal to the sensibilities of the child. As an adult you tend to forget that in children’s literature the stress is really on form rather than on content, although they will learn the morals and other ideas.

Kofi Anyidoho in Umeå, 1995

Photograph: © Raoul Granqvist
I grew up in a community where music making (poetry, drumming, dancing) was widespread. I have never seen my father dance nor heard him sing, but several of his brothers are fantastic people when it comes to the performing arts. But it is on my mother’s side that the real talents lie. My mother – she died in 1978 – was a composer and a performer. My mother’s father, Abotsi Kobli Anyidoho, was a well-known composer and I remember that each time he came home from his travels inland he always brought new compositions, and it was an occasion for celebration of music, poetry and dance, and he would teach all the new songs that he had composed while away. When my grandfather died there was a ritual performed at his burial meant to transfer the gift of songs to my mother. And not long after this my mother formally got involved in performing funeral dirges; she became leader of a group that regularly performed at practically everybody’s funeral in the community. This tradition is called *Akpalu* or *Nyayito*.

*Are you now seen as the new representative of this family tradition?*

Yes and or no! No, in the sense that they understand that I am a poet but that for the most part I am not operating within their tradition. For them a poem should be sung...

Fortunately for me I came into creative writing at the time when there was a national programme sponsored by the Ghana Education Service, the Creative Writers’ Association. This was in the mid-sixties. The programme started for students in Teacher’s Training Colleges but was extended to include students in secondary schools. The writers were to write for young people as well as inspire them to write. The best thing was that the texts which came out of these efforts were immediately published, mostly in English but also in Ghanaian languages, and sent back to the schools. A whole series of publications, called “Talent for Tomorrow” (1964-1972/73), came out of this; for each year there was a new publication of stories and poetry, sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The earliest piece of mine was a poem in Ewe, titled “Mina Magblae.”
I understand that Efua Sutherland has been extremely important for the development of a Ghanaian literature for children – as well as for you?

Yes! I did not write especially for children until the mid-seventies while at the University of Ghana when I got involved with Sutherland who at this point was initiating a project through the Ghana Drama Studio, under the title “The Children’s Drama Development Project.” My involvement as an assistant to her had two sides to it. Sutherland believed that to write for the Ghanaian child you needed to know about the life of this child in as many different contexts as possible. So she initiated a research phase and I worked for her in my home area. We found out how the child participated in various aspects of everyday life and in festivals, in the religious life of the community. And all these observations were documented; we interviewed parents about their conception of the child, about their own childhood and asked them to compare to see whether there had been any major changes. Out of this project developed also a photographic exposition which actually went on a world tour. This body of information was to be available to writers who were to write about children. The whole project went on into the early eighties.

What came out of this activity?

A body of texts, a collection of plays for children that were published in mimeograph form. All the texts that were finalized, or had been tested on stage with children, moved to a second level of the project. The idea was to publish these texts as a package for the school system, but up till now this has not been realized, although Sutherland, I believe, is still making efforts to achieve this. All the plays were circulated and many of them have seen several productions. Those of us who produced some of these plays are now making individual arrangements for publication. My play Akpokplo (meaning ‘frog’) which I initially wrote in English and eventually re-created in Ewe is now in the process of being formally published later this year in Accra. It is about one ugly character and a handsome one. But the one

---

who is physically ugly happens to be extremely gifted... and you can work out the rest. One of the most successful plays also coming out of this activity is R.A. Cantey’s Ghana Motion which has also been performed several times but is yet to be officially published.

Are you saying that writing for children in Ghana has had its heyday, that the early objectives have failed?

The national project has collapsed. But the interest in children’s literature has not necessarily vanished. It is dispersed, though. And most importantly, a Children’s Literature Foundation has been founded to promote this literature. Sutherland focussed on the production of literature for children, the Foundation focusses on getting children to read. And it is really an important thing that so many of us, the creative writers, produce literature for children, because we can offer the children the cultural grounding that they require and sometimes lack. This has to be done within the realm of education where we should move from the world of the child, from the child’s home background, her and his daily life, towards the rest of the world – not from prescribed ideologies. This is the challenge that the Ghana Ministry of Education is currently facing.

A children’s literature may not be a literature about children or a literature through children. However, sometimes such categories are hard to uphold. And in your own “poetry for adults” the child is a constant guest. Also I am reminded of the title of one of your own collections of poetry, Earthchild with Brain Surgery.²

I think it is important for us to keep in mind that there is a child in every adult and an adult in every child. So there is always going to be a meeting-point, a point of overlap. But in the area of the arts, there is a point where literature for children has to be specific to children. However, as you pointed out, much literature for children is enjoyed immensely by adults; this was the case with the Ghanaian plays we have discussed. – Yes, the child figure is always a recurring thing in most of what I have written. There is a sequence in my latest poetry

---

collection *AncestralLogic & CaribbeanBlues,*

called "Children of the Land," which I initially wrote for children. I was invited by Efua Sutherland to do a special creative programme for school children in Accra in July-August 1984 to mark the birthday of OAU. So I composed this sequence of poems to celebrate the independence movement with children in the focus. I organized it in five blocks, the first block presenting the countries of Northern Africa, and the others representing the Eastern, the Western, the Central and the Southern part of Africa. Out of this I organized a dramatized performance with children. It made such an impact; it was the greatest pleasure for me to watch the kids take this material and make it their own. The kids had done some research; each one was appropriately dressed for the country he or she represented. So my text was no longer abstract, but real.

---