

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

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<https://jaac-sca.org>

ISSN 2637-3610

Volume 3 Issue 4

December 31, 2019

## Bilingual Education with Bilingual Plays: Abdallah's 'The Witch of Mopti' as a Model

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**Citation:** Brew, F. & Nukpezah, P. (2019). Bilingual education with bilingual plays: Abdallah's 'The Witch of Mopti' as a model. *Journal of African Arts & Culture*, 3 (4), 15 - 40.

### Abstract



Many African countries that were colonised imbibed the coloniser's language as their own and used them as their national language. The local languages have mostly been relegated to domestic communication. There have been however, recent debates to introduce local languages as national language and to be used as medium of instruction in schools. This paper contributes to these debates and proposes the use of drama in the teaching and learning of local languages. It argues that drama uses dialogue, gestures, movements, props and can integrate music and dances which are created in context for selective and appropriate language and culture. Drama becomes even more potent in aiding the learning of language when it is written in multilingual dialogue as in the plays of Mohammed Ben Abdallah. The paper employs

conceptual analysis to discuss Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti* in which he uses bilingual dialogue as a model that could aid the learning of a local language.

**Keywords:** Language, culture, bilingual, drama, communication

## Introduction

The people who lived along the Gulf of Guinea, before the arrival of the Europeans at the latter part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, communicated in several indigenous languages (Edu-Buandoh, 2016). The British who arrived as traders and missionaries cleverly maneuvered to become the masters of the autochthones and later named their place of sojourn the Gold Coast. The indigenes gullibly negotiated on their blind side and gave their all, in exchange for zilch. They gave up their culture, language, religion and their people. In normal parlance, the reversal should have been the case; a visitor learns the language and culture of their host, to be able to fit in and cope, not *volte-face*. The colonisers introduced their language to aid interaction with the autochthones, but that language remained even after independence. Consequently, English, the Queen's language has since become the national language all Ghanaians must read, speak and write. The language situation in Ghana has become quite complex in recent times. In some instances, children are not able to speak any Ghanaian language although they have lived in Ghana all their lives. English language has become their first language (L1) whilst they learn a local language only in school as a subject. In this case ironically, their mother tongue rather becomes their second language (L2). This is so in the case of many children of middle-class parents. Some of these children speak their local language with an English accent and are ridiculed sometimes by their more native-sounding speakers. In the past decade however, there have been debates in various African countries, including Ghana, in a bid to introduce vernacular in our schools for a start, to write books, stories and plays in local languages. This article argues that plays such as Abdallah's (1989) *The Witch of Mopti*, which uses bilingual dialogue, i.e. English and Akan, could be used in introducing local languages and culture in schools. The article is set on the premise that "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 12). The quest of the authors was to understand how varied languages are used to bring meaning in situations in a play text. The authors employed conceptual analysis approach that allows examination and analysis of certain occurrences in a text. (Palmquist, Carley, & Dale 1997). Through the approach authors identified sections in the play where bilingual language is used and critically analysed their effectiveness in communicating to bilingual audiences. In choosing the sample 'a criterion-based selection' approach was used to select a play that will aid the researchers to achieve the purpose of the study

(Merriam, 1998, p. 61). *The Witch of Mopti* was purposively selected because it is one of the few Ghanaian plays that mainly use a combination of English and a local language in the main text. The play is uniquely crafted in a way that could aid the learning and teaching of the two languages.

## **Languages Across the Ghanaian Curriculum**

Ghana is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. "In 1960 roughly 100 linguistic and cultural groups were recorded in Ghana" (Berry, 1995, p. 79). Although, many of these languages are still spoken by subgroups of the main ethnic groups, there are 11 official languages, referred to as Government-sponsored languages (National Commission on Culture, n.d.). The languages and the regions in which they are spoken are as follows: Akuapem Twi (Eastern Region ), Asante Twi (Ashanti, Bono Region, Ahafo Region and Bono East Region), Ewe (Volta Region and Oti Region), Dagaare (Upper West Region), Dagbani (Upper West Region), Dangme (Greater Accra Region), Ga (Greater Accra Region), Gonja (Northern Region, Savannah Region and North East Region), Kasem (Upper East Region), Fante (Central Region) and Nzema (Western Region and Western North Region). These languages are among subjects taught at Basic Schools in the regions where the specific language is located. All pupils in *Basic Schools* in Ghana write an exam in their regional local language although the score is not a requirement to proceed to the next level of education. These local languages also exist as elective courses in Senior High Schools in Ghana. It is also possible to learn all government sponsored local languages at the University of Education, Winneba and few of them at the University of Cape Coast. Some colleges of education also offer courses in selected local languages. Ghana's premiere university the University of Ghana inexplicably runs courses in English language and other modern languages: Swahili, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic and Russian. Considering the aforementioned, it is not surprising that Ghana uses a foreign language as a national language.

## **Ghana's National Language**

Formal education in Ghana started with the arrival of Europeans, as they established schools and churches. The British stayed longest and subsequently had the most influence on the school curriculum. Mathematics and English Language were paramount subjects taught in schools because they needed to communicate and trade with the local people (Gbedemah, 1975). After independence, Ghana continued to use the British curriculum until major educational reforms in 1987 when the Jerry John Rawlings led Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) steered the affairs of Ghana (Osei, 2004). Although the reforms made changes to the curriculum, including substitutions and mergers of subjects, English language has since remained the national language. It is the medium of expression at all levels of education in Ghana. A student

must earn at least, a credit pass at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), to proceed from Junior High School to Senior High School. Students who desire to pursue university education must earn at least a credit pass in English Language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Without the required grade, one has to find alternative ways of education, which must obviously exclude tertiary education.

### **Africans in the Quest to Use Local Languages as Medium of Instruction in School and as a National Language.**

There have been attempts and debates during and after colonial invasion of Africa to use a culture friendly curriculum in schools. Initial attempts to introduce culture-friendly curriculum by their colonisers were rejected by some African countries.

... the model of adapted education was proposed by the Phelps-Stokes Commission in the early 1920s. The Commission, based in the USA, aimed at modifying the Western-oriented curriculum used in African schools at the time so that it better reflected what they saw as African realities. However, the high-powered initiative was doomed to failure, as Nigerian, Kenyan, Ghanaian and Cameroonian parents roundly rejected the new curriculum (Gifford & Weiskel, as cited in Trudell, 2010, p. 407).

Although this resistance has not completely died out, there has been continuous advocacy for African countries to use vernacular as medium of instruction in school in recent times. For instance, Igboanusi (2013) reasons that low illiteracy rate in Gambia is due to the insistence on the use of English as a medium of expression in schools. He argues that children make better achievements in literacy when the “teacher uses a familiar language, which the children already understand, and that the knowledge which children have acquired in learning to read and write in their mother tongue can be transferred effectively in learning and reading English better and faster” (p.10). An important point here is that learning in the local language breaks the barrier between home and school and gives children the freedom to communicate and learn without language inhibition. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been an advocate for indigenous language use in education, as it recommends the use of vernacular in the education of children in its Monographs on fundamental education (UNESCO, 2003).

There are suggestions that imbibing vernacular could greatly benefits a people. Brand (2011) believes that Africans can contribute meaningfully “to social, political and economic development in Africa [...] by using African languages as organs of its own expression, and drawing on its own resources” (p. 187). Shi-xu, Prah and Pardo (2016) seem to support Brand’s proposition as they posit that a country that uses a foreign

language is unlikely to develop. If it does, the people have to learn that foreign language, to be able to develop anything scientific and of course language description will be in a foreign language which most indigenes might not be able to understand. Using a local language is so important for every society because as Bodomo (1996) puts it, “every language is an efficient tool for encoding the peculiarities of the particular environment in which a people live” (p. 33). Of course, language is made of familiar things in the environment and therefore if language is full of strange symbols, it becomes difficult for learners to learn and understand them. The upshot is that the people cannot contribute meaningfully to developmental issues. Bodomo (1996) also observes that “it is only when new ideas are communicated, when technology transfer is done, in the indigenous African languages that Africans can begin to get nearer an increased participation in the development discourse” (p. 49). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is more passionate about this and although he was imprisoned in 1977 for writing his play, *I Will Marry When I Want* in Kikuyu language and engaging peasants to perform, he was even more motivated to write in the local language even within his incarceration period (Inani, 2018).

In Ghana, there have been several proposals and debates all in attempts to introduce a local language as a national language and to use local languages as a medium of instruction in schools. For instance, Jane Naana Opoku Agyemang, a former Minister of Education and a Professor of English, blamed the poor development of the nation on the use of a foreign language as the medium of instruction. She was “determined to push through the language policy at the highest level so that school children can be taught in their mother tongue” (Essel, 2015, para. 2). As has been mentioned earlier about resistance, there are many who are against this determination. One argument is that if children in primary schools are taught with local language, they will not have the basics to build on to the next level of education where the medium of instruction remains English language.

The cumulative effect of this situation is that students do not have proper linguistic capacities to think critically in English. And even if they are naturally endowed with a sense of critical thinking, they still lack the competence of articulation and translating this endowment into English for serious academic work (Azindoo, 2016, para. 4).

It is also argued that the world has become a global society and English Language is seemingly becoming the world’s language. As Ama Ata Aidoo indicated in an interview with Morosetti, “we’ve realized that English, for instance, gets you further. It’s an international language, not just an international language, it’s the international language” (Morosetti, 2011, p. 137). Aidoo’s point here notwithstanding, the major hurdle in the process of integrating vernacular as a national language rests on the training of

instructors. "The challenges for governments wishing to experiment with or implement bilingual policies include the training of teachers in appropriate pedagogies and the dearth of learning materials in African languages" (Edwards & Ngwaru, 2012, p. 123). It has even become more complicated as the world has now become a global society and we need to find local vocabulary for technological items such as computer, mobile phone, printer, scanner, tonner among others. It is against this debate of language and communication in Africa that we discuss the subsequent sessions of this article.

### **The Choice of Writer's Language.**

Although, there is the desire for some African writers to write their works in vernacular, most writers tend to write in English language since most African countries have not been able to establish a local dialect as their national language; a language that at least most people in a country can understand. There are also a number of African writers who cannot write in their local dialects. Ama Ata Aidoo, who has, -between 1965 and 2012- written and published 2 plays and nine novels explains why she writes in English language in an interview with Morosetti.

... I didn't choose English at all! It was the language of education and socialisation. At least with me, and I think most African writers who write in English and French, we were colonised. We were actively negotiated out of our first languages. ... Our first languages I couldn't have chosen I just automatically started writing in English because that's the language I find expression in. You can write Fante, but so far I have not got enough energy and courage to write anything substantial in Fante (Morosetti, 2011, p. 137).

This is not only Ama Ata Aidoo's story; it is the story of a lot of African writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer who has been a strong advocate for the use of Kikuyu, one of the local languages in Kenya as a national language, also laments over the attitude towards local languages as compared to English language in Kenya.

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p. 12).

Similarly, Abdallah says although he has mastery over the English language and has no problem communicating in it, he often constructs his thoughts in a local language before translating them to English. He however expresses the difficulties in this approach. "A lot of times I like to use proverbs, and you have to find a way to keep the flavour of the

way our people say things” (Agbenyega & Gibbs, 2000, p. 66). Can writers like Abdallah, who have to think in a different language and translate in another language, a foreign language, compete with their counterparts whose original language is the language of expression both in thinking, speaking and writing? Edwards and Ngwaru (2012) reveal from interviews with some African writers and publishers that:

While the drive to produce more titles in African languages offers new opportunities for local writers, it also creates new challenges. Very few African authors write in their first languages; ... Prospective authors face a double challenge: developing the skills required for producing books that will appeal to children, and working in a language where the genre specific norms are still evolving (p. 128).

Despite the difficulties some African writers make efforts to include vernacular in their writing, an approach that might contribute to bringing local languages to the fore of education and offer Africans the pride to communicate in their local languages as the debate advances between full local language adaption and bilingualism.

Language used by African playwrights to a large extent depends on their personal background, philosophies and their perceived audiences. Most writers use the language of their colonisers. However, there are some playwrights who integrate the language of their people, whilst others find ways of communication that the majority of the people can comprehend. These include transliterations, pidgin English, Limited English proficiency (LEP) and a blend of English and local languages. Others use non-verbal forms such as dances and mimes to make their plays intelligible to punters. We acknowledge the efforts of some of such writers and make references to some of their plays here.

Nigerian playwrights tend to use Pidgin English for characters of low status, circuitously using a language that is quite popular with their people. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan probably considering the educational level of a soldier’s wife, put the following dialogue in pidgin English.

SOLDIER 1: Well, I am tired of these last-minute orders. I can just picture the Sergeant calling his wife one day. ‘Darring!

SOLDIER 2: ‘Yessaaah!’

SOLDIER 1: ‘Darring mi!’

SOLDIER 2: ‘Yes, di’yah! I’m here’

SOLDIER 1: ‘How many pickin we get?’

SOLDIER 2: ‘Pardon?’

SOLDIER 1: ‘Pickin, we pickin. How many we get now?’

SOLDIER 2: ‘Hm, which kin’ question be that?’ Why you dey axe me? You know say na two I born (2006, pp. 58-59).

Again, in his play *Midnight Hotel*, Bicycle is described as a young man who had just come from the village and as such cannot speak English language fluently. His dialogue as in the example shown here is Pidgin English throughout the play.

BICYCLE: No be my fault at all, sah chief, I swear! I jus' dey pass jeje for corridor. Nahim I hear de bell twing twing for Room 9. So, I stop. I say - Bicycle, dat na Room 9, de dey call you. I go to de door. Chief, you tell me abi you no tell me, say make I dey knock for door before I enter any room for dis hotel? (2003, p. 11).

Also, in Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, the steward, Polycarp, speaks pidgin throughout because he is not well educated.

POLYCARP: Beg to report sah! ... Di 'yawo done come for house, sah!...

LEJOKA-BROWN: When did I become your joke-mate?

POLYCARP: Na true Oga Major - I no craze yet.

LEJOKA-BROWN: (POLYCARP) You mean she has entered our house ... on ... her

own two feet?

POLYCARP: I swear, master, make God hammer me for head if say na lie I ... (2006, p. 30).

However, the other characters speak different levels of English as per their background. Liza, for example is an educated American and as such her language is quite sophisticated as against Lejoka-Brown himself and his other two wives. Thus, the different levels of the same language are used to differentiate the different characters and in disguise using language in a way that will appeal to audience of different backgrounds. Again, none will feel alienated from the language and most importantly to the message of the play. Although Pidgin is very popular in Nigeria, it is not very established in Ghana as an acceptable form of communication. It is often the informal language, which is to some extent popular among male students in their casual conversations. Students are discouraged from speaking pidgin because it is believed to be the cause of low grades in English language in West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination and appalling writing skills of university students. Although, Ghanaian educators especially have an aversion to the promotion of pidgin language in Ghana, some playwrights attempt to include it in their play. In deGraft's *Through a Film Darkly*, for instance Sewah attempts speaking with Adamu who is a houseboy in Addo's house.



SEWAH: Good morning Adamu. Where you dey all this time? Master'e go out just now. 'E vex small for you because you no come early.

ADAMU: (with just a trace of smile) I was in the kitchen all the time, madam. ...

May I bring the breakfast things?

SERWAH: No, I go make ... (Looking sharply at Adamu) Why don't you speak pidjin? You speak English quite well. Where did you learn it?

ADAMU: At school (1970, p. 16)

This ends the use of pidgin in this play. The playwright has justified that a character of low status can speak regular English and as such throughout the play no one spoke pidgin. It is worth noting that, aside the fact that Ghanaian educators abhor Pidgin English, pidgin is probably more difficult for Ghanaians as compared to Nigerian writers. In using pidgin for a character in *The Hot Chair*, the playwright acknowledges it was easier to write in regular English language than to write pidgin. Example is the mortuary man's line: 'TETTEH: Me too I go go de strike some, I go talk dem say make dem give me de money wey doctors no like. Me I like am. One man him poison be another man him meat' (Brew, 2010, p. 32). She indicates that it takes more time to write few sentences of pidgin than to write about two pages of regular English. It is not surprising that a lot of Ghanaian writers do not use pidgin in their writing.

Ghanaian playwrights however, use different approaches in getting their plays to the level of audiences with different backgrounds. It is common to find playwrights use Limited English Proficiency (LEP) for characters of low status. In Sekyi's *The Blinkards* for instance, characters of low status speak LEP as shown in the example here.

MISS TSIBA: Oh. There is that young man who look too much at me at Chapel last Sunday. He look fine. I think I have seen him coming out of Mr Onyimze's house the day we have called there. Oh, he is coming here! I hope he will want to speak to me. I will drop my handkerchief when he gets near; then he pick it up, and we can talk without being introductions. That's what the girl has done in the book I read last night till morning' (1915, p. 47).

Aside the use of LEP English, Sekyi uses the local language, Fante for other characters he portrayed as complete illiterates as shown in the ensuing dialogue. He however, provides English translations of all dialogue written in Fante, probably, for those who are Fante 'illiterates'.

1ST LADY: N'atar yi ye fɛw ae!

2ND LADY: Nhwɛ ne kyim!

3RD LADY: Nhwɛ n'asopaatsee

4TH LADY: Emi n'ahwehweɛenyiwa no na mepɛ (p. 49).

Ama Ata Aidoo uses direct transliteration from Fante to English as shown in the following examples in *Anowa*: 'OLD MAN: Somebody's - Thin-Thread' (Aidoo, 1969, p. 25). 'Anowa: Please, Mother, remove your witch's mouth from our marriage' (p. 38). 'My mouth is at the dung heap' (p. 45). 'I thank your mouth' (p. 45). In *Dilemma of a Ghost* there are such transliterated Fante such as, 'She can cut a drink' (Aidoo, 1982, p. 41). Additionally, although Aidoo acknowledges her handicap in writing her local language, there are Fante expressions in *Anowa* as shown here: *nkabasroto* and *bubas* (p. 75), *Nananom Mpow* (p. 84), *Due, due, due* (p. 88), *Odomankoma* (p. 23), *Nana Bosompo* (p. 24) and *Korado Ahima* (p. 25). Probably, in her quest to compel punters to learn the local language, Aidoo does not provide English translation as in Sekyi's *The Blinkards*.

In addition to the varied languages African playwrights use, most of them also use local proverbs which enrich the language. Just as proverbs are often used by elderly in most African societies, playwrights normally will enrich the dialogue of elderly characters in their plays with proverbs. An example is this dialogue from *Anowa*: 'Old Woman: Badua should have told her daughter that the infant which tries its milk teeth on every bone and stone, grows up with nothing to eat dried meat' (p. 41). And in *Dilemma of a Ghost*, there are proverbs such as: 'PETU: ... One must take time to dissect an ant in order to discover its entrails' (p. 10). 'ESI: ... The vulture, right from the beginning wallows in the soup he will eat' (p. 31). In *Midnight Hotel*, the character Alatise's dialogue is full of proverbs each of which is preceded or ends with the phrase 'Eti-ro-o'. 'ALATISE: And as the proverb says, eti ro-o! A woman with goitre may be ugly, but you will not improve her looks by marrying her to the man with elephantiasis of the scrotum' (p. 57). Alatise is a retired headmaster, full of knowledge, both in formal education and indigenous traditions and his dead right proverbs enriches the language of the play. The writers cited have used various forms of language to communicate to their target audience. However, we will focus on Abdallah's unique approach in the use of language. But before we do, we ask, how can drama aid the learning of any language?

### **Learning Language through Drama**

Drama has been projected as an art form that provides the opportunity for practice in the learning of any language (Giebert, 2014; O'Toole & Stinson, 2009; Somers, 1994). Drama's strong point in aiding the learning of language is that it "concentrates on speaking and action, the predominant language modes of daily life" (Somers, 1994 p. 106). Scholars also argue that drama and language use same mode of communication. "Language itself - verbal, and also vocal and gestural language - is not only the primary instrument of human communication but also the prime medium of drama" (O'Toole, 2008, p. 14). Dramatic art can aid oracy as observed below.

Drama can provide a context for much more genuinely two-way, and multi-way communication. Drama offers a framework for the learning that is fictional but, inside the fiction, both purpose and meaningful, so allowing connection to the real-world context. Drama provides intrinsic motivation when students have something to say and a reason for saying it (O'Toole & Stinson, 2009, p. 66).

In the Ghana Junior Secondary School curriculum, children are not just expected to learn a local language, but culture as well, thus naming the subject 'Ghanaian Language and Culture'. Of course, language is a component of culture; any language is spoken by a peculiar group of people who have identical way of life. Language, therefore cannot be efficiently studied in a vacuum, it must be studied in context, a unique property that drama offers. "Drama is, after all, the art form of the spoken word and gesture and the body. More than that, the very basis of drama is putting ourselves in other people's shoes to imagine human situations and to contexts that are or might be" (O'Toole & Stinson, 2013, p. 161). Just as it is in real life, every scene requires different vocabularies. If people find themselves in the hospital, market, school, home, durbar grounds, or any such occasions, aside the basics of that local language, specific expressions and words would be used in interactions. Such contexts can always be created in drama to help learners use apposite language to communicate. In Somers's experiences for instance, various dramatic scenes can be created for learners to learn appropriate language in "polemic, officialese, compassionate, debate or persuasion situations; drama can create the laboratory in which students experience and observe characters who employ the words and forms under study" (Somers, 1994, p. 105). This of course could include, verbal, gestures, songs, dances, movements, costumes, props and mannerisms that will aid learners to acquire the language and the entire culture under study.

So far, we have deliberated on the different languages in Ghana, the national language and the difficulties of African writers in their quest to write their plays in a language that their people can understand. We have cited examples from various plays specifically of Ghanaian and Nigerian playwrights. We have also discussed the debate on the quest to introduce vernacular as a medium of instruction in schools and attempts to make such a national language. The potential of using drama to teach language and culture has also been discussed. In the next session we look at the bilingual nature of Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti* as an example of a technique that could aid people to learn any language, specifically, a Ghanaian local language created in context. We precede that discussion with what we know about Mohammed Ben Abdallah.

### **Abdallah's Background that Gives Impetus to His Works.**

In a conversation with Abdallah on May 13, 2013, he gave the authors of this article insight into his life and career that have contributed to his style of writing. Abdallah's career in the performing arts started at St John's Grammar School where he played Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Excellence in playing this role earned him a full scholarship to complete his education; an award that changed his status from a non-resident to a resident student. After training as a teacher at Wesley College in Kumasi, Ghana where he excelled in inter-house drama sessions playing roles such as Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, Abdallah then went to the School of Music, Drama and Dance (now School of Performing Arts) of the University of Ghana, Legon, to pursue a course in Theatre Arts, costume designing and scenery. He obtained a masters degree at the University of Georgia and later PhD at the University of Texas both in the United States. He taught various courses at the Department of Theatre Arts, university of Ghana, Legon. These include: Technical Theatre, Playwriting, Stage Movement, Theatre Management and Stagecraft. He also taught similar courses on post-retirement contract and part-time basis at the University of Cape Coast and University of Education, Winneba, respectively. He served as a Minister in the then PNDC administration headed by Jerry John Rawlings and has contributed immensely towards the development of Theatre practice in Ghana. His plays, which include *The Slaves*, *The Trial of Mallam Ilya*, *The Alien King*, *The Verdict of the Cobra*, *The Fall of Kumbi* and *The Witch of Mopti* have been studied and performed in theatre schools in Ghana and internationally. Abdallah lived many years in Kumasi; has a good command over the Twi language and very familiar with the culture of the Asantes. He had also lived at Nima in Accra, and experienced a way of life with ordinary people. His religious background as a Moslem gives him knowledge of Islamic practices as well as a command over Arabic and Hausa, languages although not Ghanaian, are spoken vastly by practicing Muslims in Ghana. Abdallah's wife of many years is a Catholic and an Asante royal, which shows he is receptive to other beliefs and cultures. His multi-faceted background reflects in his writing, making him one of the very versatile playwrights in Ghana and Africa.

Abdallah is famous and popular for his theatre form he calls Abibigoro. "Abibigoro is a search for a distinctive African theatre" (Sackey, 2000, p. 364). It is the second after Sutherland's experiment with Anansegoro, in the search for a theatre that craves an independence from established theatre conventions which conventions only best suit the initiators whose audiences are passive. The search aims at breaking the theatre's fourth wall to make way for rapport with audiences, and the possibility of co-opting them in performances. Asare, in an introduction to the (2008) edition of *The Trial of Mallam Ilya* writes:

Abibigoro aims at evolving an integral theatrical form that acknowledges and attempts to get through the consciousness of these diverse social and cultural groupings, at the same instance. It attempts to popularise theatre practice that is 'popular' and still sophisticated; a theatre that emerges as compelling, documented literature without being exclusive and elitist; a theatre which lifts folkloric artistic values to various strata of modern utilisation (Abdallah, 2008, p. xi).

Abibigoro merges storytelling, music and dance as explained by Abdallah in unsophisticated terms in a promo for the performance of *Song of a Pharaoh* at the University of New Hampshire, USA in 2012. Abibigoro is a concept that can be described as a theatre form that projects the African culture by integrating, storytelling, songs, dances, drama, rituals, mime and forms of language that speaks to the African people, language that the African people can understand and respond to. For a theatre that purports to espouse a particular culture, use of language becomes paramount, because "any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p.12).

### **Abdallah's Use of Language in *The Witch of Mopti***

The setting of a play comprises its entire world; this includes first and foremost, the place, time and the people, who are the characters or performers (Opaskar & Trost, 1998). The people and place and the time dictates the culture; which is projected by their costumes, props music, dance, and the form of communication which include language, gestures, mime and specific cultural practices. A playwright also considers the type of audience they envisage will patronise their plays. All these blend to give the play a form. In the ensuing session we discuss the language and its essence in Abdallah's *The Witch of Mopti*.

### **The Witch of Mopti**

In *The Witch of Mopti* Maimuna, a paternal auntie of the newly enstooled king, vows to destroy him and his entire kingdom; this is because he chooses the daughter of a poor fisherman as his bride over her daughter. Her charms make the king impotent but he is soon restored after he employs the help of powerful medicine men. However, the witch sacrifices her only daughter to access spiritual powers to make all citizens of Mopti mad, including the necromancer who had come from outside of Mopti. The king discovers that the only way to 'break' the witch's spell and remain king of his people is to drink from the well from which the 'Moptians' fetch water; he does so and the citizens realizing the king is as mad as they are, retain him as their king and leader.

The play, just as in all others has several themes and intellectual values, but for the purpose of this article we stick to few characters whose language and dialogue support the arguments of this article. The character Togbi, suggests he hails from the Volta Region of Ghana. In this play he is a member of the Abibigromma and one of the storytellers but projected as a highly educated person. He speaks very fluent English and also understands the Akan language the others speak. Kofi Onny is also a member of Abibigromma and a co-storyteller. He is portrayed as semi-literate but very fluent in Akan-Twi. Although he does not speak English except for two phrases, he understands everything others say except the very sophisticated one like quadruplets. The character Maimuna, is portrayed as bilingual, speaking both English and Twi in her communication with the people of Mopti. Dzifa and Adwoa are portrayed as illiterates who speak quite a sophisticated brand of Twi. All the other characters speak some level of English. Abdallah uses these characters to communicate to his audiences who might not understand English language as well as those who cannot understand Akan. In this way characters are made co-interpreters of each other's assigned language, a unique style of writing as portrayed in the ensuing chunks of dialogue.

At the beginning of the play, there is a conversation among some members of the Abibigromma, who are the storytellers in the play. Although all members of the group decide to tell the story, we see only Abotsi and Kofi Onny telling the story; each doing it in the language the playwright has assigned them.

1. ABOTSI: ... My brothers and sisters, Kofi Onny says you don't understand a word of the white man's English ... he says ...
2. KOFI ONNY: Oboa, manka saa. Abotsi me mpe saa oo! Oboa, manka se monte Brofo. Me se, enye obiara a owo ha na ote Broni kasa ase.
3. ABOTSI: But Kofi, how do you know that all the people here understands Twi?
4. KOFI ONNY: Manka se obiara a ote ha biara te Twi ...
5. ABOTSI: But I am sure everybody here can understand English even if they cannot speak it.
6. KOFI ONNY: Ah! Abotsi paa. Wo dee woasei! hwe! M'adamfo Kwashivi sei, oye Ghana ni nso onte Akan kasa biara. Na, wo gye di se woantumi ansua Twi a eye Ghana ha kasa no anka ono ara ne kasa a yede woo no ho a, eye den na otumi sua Brofo kasa a eye Oburoni kasa ka? (pp. 4-5).

The dialogue above between Abotsi and Kofi Onny is a discussion about language; specifically, languages we speak in Ghana as well as the handicap of other tribes in understanding each other's local dialect as indicated in (line 6). Probably, just as his contemporary from Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Abdallah is creating an argument that Africans should master their local languages before learning a foreign language. This dialogue can spark a debate on the issue of local and national languages in Ghana. Do we have to just understand or speak our mother tongue? Must we learn another Ghanaian language in addition to our mother tongue? Or do we have to just learn English language, a foreign language because of migration? Conversation between the storytellers who are also members of Abibigoro continues as follows:

1. ABOTSI: ... As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted; this is Abibigromma.
2. KOFI ONNY: Ose, wo fre yen Abibigromma. Asee kyere se yedi Abibigoro.
3. ABOTSI: Some people think we do concert.
4. NII SAI: Some think we are just jokers.
5. KOFI ONNY: Ebinom koraa se yen dee asa nko ara na ye sa. Ye bo dondo na yere sa. Dondology! Some say we are dondologist.
6. OSABUTEY: Some even say we do drama and play all sorts of musical instruments.
7. KOFI: Ebinom koraa se ye to anasesem ... (p. 5).
8. OSABUTEY: My friend who made you the story-teller?
9. NII SAI: I did!
10. KOFI ONNY: Hwe, enne me na me to anasesem no oo! ... (p. 6).
11. NII KWEI: Oh, are we going to perform the story of The Witch of Mopti?
12. KOFI ONNY: Yes! Ohene bi ne Obayifoo bi ho asem! Se nea Oburoni see ne no..
13. TOGBI: Mopti is an old-walled city far away on the banks of the river Niger.
14. KOFI ONNY: Me nim ho, me nim ho! me nim ho! Me nim Mopti; meka wo nan se me nim ho. Eho, na nsuo mu nam a yefre no "Wa hene mpaboa" no firi no.
15. DZIFA: Wonim ho ampa. Eho foo na wokyere nsuo mu nam, ho, deko Bandiagara ko ton no (p. 7)
16. KOFI ONNY: Na saa Mopti Kuro yi koraa ne su ban ne sen ...?
17. TOGBI: What do you mean? "What kind of town is Mopti?" ... (p. 8).

In the conversation among the three characters, Abotsi and Osabutey speak English language. They talk about Abibigromma; what people perceive they do and what they actually do. Kofi Onny's contribution in Twi to this conversation aids anybody who does not understand English language to follow what they are talking about. Sometimes he translates what another character is saying in Twi as in lines 1 and 2. Other times as shown in lines 8 - 11, he makes contributions that will aid audiences who do not understand English language follow what is happening on stage.

KOFI ONNY: (Music in the background as TOWN CRIER performs solo)  
Mopti hene wuie enne ne adaduanan. Woasie funukese no awie, ato se wode Ohene foforo besi n'akonya so! Mopti foo eeei! Obaa panin fereimo ooooo! Mpanin! Mmofra! Mmaa ne ...! Mmarima! Moptifoo eeee! Nana hema refrefre mo ooooo!' (p. 9).

TOGBI: People of Mopti! Yesterday at sunset we buried out late king. Today, as the sun rises, I bring you the message of Nanahemaa, the Queen Mother of Mopti, and the message of the elders and King makers of Mopti. People of Mopti! Today our new King will be enstooled. Today our new King will get married. Come people of Mopti. The Queen Mother summons you all to the durbar grounds on this great occasion to witness, participate in and bear testimony to both the enstoolment and marriage of our new king. People of Mopti! Come to the durbar grounds. Elders, children, women and men ... People of Mopti, the Queen Mother says, "Come to the durbar grounds" (p. 10).

As opined by wa Thiong'o (1986), language is not just for communication, a culture of a people is also portrayed through their language. The town crier whose duty it is to give public announcement in indigenous societies will normally do so in the local language. A town crier's language is unique and often has special rhythms that attract citizens to pay attention to their message. This town crier in Abdallah's play enters amidst music that he makes special movements to as performed by Kofi Onny, all of which have no equivalent in English language. Notwithstanding the culture and its inherent language, the author considers those who do not understand Twi and provides a sort of interpretation through the dialogue of Togbi. Although the effect is not the same, it provides communication to those who cannot understand Kofi Onny's Twi to follow the story. It is also an opportunity for others to learn a local language for the first time or in addition to what they already know. Abdallah also crafts the ensuing dialogue in similar manner.



1. FIRST WOMAN: Ka woho ooo! Ma wonanso na yere ye aka akyi.
2. SECOND WOMAN: Me re ba oo!
3. THIRD WOMAN: Wo anka wo ho a meko m'agya wo oo!
4. SECOND WOMAN: Dzifa, mere ba oo! Twen me na wokyere wo ho dodo. (Enters running). Me duku te sen (p. 10)?
5. FIRST WOMAN: Eye buei! Na medee be sen ma yenko. Ei! nne dee gyama yebuhunu yen ani so. Mese, yese Mopti hene foforo no, ye se ne no ho fe!
6. SECOND WOMAN: Hwe, ne ho fe dee yenka?
7. FIRST WOMAN: Hmm! Na wo ahunu pen?
8. SECOND WOMAN: Anka!
9. FIRST WOMAN: Saa? Wo ahunu pen? Ote sen? Bome bie!
10. SECOND WOMAN: Me se! Oye tenten gramoo, tumtumtum. Na ne tuntum nso dee eye sono nkoo!
11. FIRST WOMAN: Ei! Ahoofeni!
12. SECOND WOMAN: Me se! **Ne tumtum te se keteke bidie a y'ashe no blu!** Ne se sei fita fita na gyere da mu! Na n'ani! N'ani dee eno na ekum me koraa! Se ohwe wo a, ete se dee orehwe wo sumsum mu. Wo ani ne n'ani shia pe na awosen agu woso.
13. FIRST WOMAN: Ye se **oye obarima** dee (p. 11).
14. SECOND WOMAN: Gaye, gyae, me se gyae na obarima dee oye bi! Mese **oye obarima.**
15. FIRST WOMAN: Hmm! Wo ahunu no pen? Me kyerese wo ahunu se **oye "Obarima ..."**
16. SECOND WOMAN: Adwoa me se gyae na **oye ... obarima!**
17. FIRST WOMAN: Eeee! Se nne dee Mopti anya Ohene kesee. Ne yere nso anya kunu dee! Na whan koraa na wo gye di su orebe ware no?
18. SECOND WOMAN: Yei dee, abisa bi dee. Akoye twe ma me ntwe mmaa mmienu ntam. Ye se aberantee no ara de n'ani asi obaa bunu bi a wofre no Fanta so se ono ara na obe ware no. Nso yese ne sewaa Obayifoo Maimuna, se w'anye nea osee a, na asem na ato no.
19. FIRST WOMAN: Ennee, see nne dee, **ampae a ebe dwa!**
20. SECOND WOMAN: Be sen ma yenkoe! **Yese wo ani tua mu a, wonni ngya wo!** (The leave as they talk. Enter TOGBI on his way to the durbar grounds).
21. TOGBI: Adwoa and Dzifa eii! You have asked the big question. The question that will be answered today. Hmm! My friends; the

question is not who will be King of Mopti today? But who will marry the King of Mopti today? And beyond that question is another ... bigger question. You see it is almost certain that the handsome and strong young King will spite his Aunt Maimuna, the Witch. He will not marry Samake, the daughter of the Witch of Mopti... (pp. 12-13).

The foregoing dialogue, again, shows Abdallah's skill in using bilingual communication. The two characters, Adwoa and Dzifa listed as First Woman and Second Woman respectively feed the audience with a lot of information about the king before he is seen for the first time. They use rich Twi language which includes adjectives and similes. If we were learning Twi from this script, we will be picking adjectives such as *tenten gramoo, tumtutum*, translated as thick, tall and very dark in complexion. Unlike English language where a lady is with good looks is described as beautiful and a man handsome, the adjective *ahoofe*, meaning beauty refers to both sexes. The highlight in line 12 is a simile that emphasises the shade of dark complexion which is being described. In the phrases highlighted in lines 14, 15 and 16 the characters are asking about the potency of the King after they have described his physical features. In Twi, it is not everything that you can boldly talk about; this includes issues that are considered profane or not worthy of public hearing. In this case idioms or *kasakoa* are used to camouflage the conversation. Thus 'oye obarima?' literary meaning 'is he a man' is not asking about the sex of the person but whether or not he can perform sexually. Another idiom, *ampae a ebe dwa* highlighted in line 19 is an expression that forebodes a future mishap. The highlight in line 20 is a proverb, which means, if you are present at the preparation of a meal, you will obviously have a bite. As the pattern follows per the author's style of writing, Togbi enters to sum up the important areas of their conversation in English as shown in line 21. We are then led us to the next action where Maimuna threatens revenge at what she perceives an ignominy.

1. MAIMUNA: ... In rejoicing at the occasion of this vulgar union of Mopti royalty with rubbish, you have also shown gross disrespect for your own traditions and customs. You will all be punished. I have spoken. (*As she leaves KOFI ONNY steps out of the crowd*) (p. 13).
2. KOFI ONNY: Oh! sore ho. Aberewa bone! **What can you do!** Wo ntumi nye whee! Monna yen gye yen ani! Aberewa bone! ...
3. MAIMUNA: Mo dee mo ntwen! Mo be hunu dee mede beye mo! You will see! You will see! I will show you!
4. KOFI ONNY: Oh! Sore ho ko! Aberewa bone! Mo nhuro noeee!
5. ALL: HUUUUUUUUUU!!!! (p. 14).

6. THE KING: ... I ask you all to forgive her. Please continue with your celebrations.
7. KOFI ONNY: Mmo ne kasa! Nana, mmo ne kasa! Oba nyansafoo neno! Mo mpene noeee!
8. ALL: H e e e e e!!! (p. 15).
9. MAIMUNA: We shall show the king of Mopti and his foolish people that: **it is indeed when you rub the nunum leaf between the palms of your hand that you know its smell.**
10. KOFI ONNY: Bayifoo a obu be! Wiase a see ampa! Hwe Ohene yei dee se wo de        wo asem ba ne so a, wobe hunu se see **wo posa nunum a, na wote ne kanan ampa!** Monhuru noee!
11. ALL: H u u u u u!! (p. 17)

Abdallah uses another approach in the use of bilingual dialogue. In the case of Maimuna, most of her dialogue is translated by herself, from English to Twi and vice versa. This is shown in line 3. Part of her dialogue in English is however translated by Kofi Onny to Twi. In dialogue 2, although Kofi Onny does not employ direct translation of what Maimuna says, his response offers audiences who might not understand English language an idea of what the witch is threatening to do. And for the first time Kofi Onny speaks a line of English. This confirms the fact that although he is not able to communicate well in English, he can understand what others say. In lines 7 and 8 he shows some ways that a good deed is praised and how bad deeds are disapproved in lines 4, 5, 10 and 11. The proverb highlighted in line 9 of Maimuna's dialogue is translated in Twi by Kofi Onny in line 10. *Nunum* is African basil, which has highly scented leaves used for its medicinal value. The scent is stronger when crushed, thus the proverb indicates reprisal threatened by Maimuna. In the ensuing dialogue Maimuna seems to have achieved her aim.

1. TOGBI: ... the King of Mopti has lost his manhood! The news spread like wild fire ...
2. KOFI ONNY: Ei, amanfoo, mo ntee nea aba! Yese obaa bayifoo no ato Mopti hene adu.  
Togbi, wo ate anaa! Yese Mopti hene nni ho!
3. TOGBI: Where has he gone to?
4. KOFI ONNY: Wo dee wo asee! Ekyere se, **ne barima awu!** ... (The witches laugh! FIRST and SECOND WOMEN enter.)
5. ADWOA: Dzifa eeei!
6. DZIFA: Yei!
7. ADWOA: Wo ate nea aba!
8. DZIFA: Dabi ooo! Bome ee!
9. ADWOA: Hmm! Meda Onyame ase se enye mea! Fanta atutu

mimirika ako gye n'ani so (p. 21).

10. DZIFA: Aden?
11. ADWOA: See Mopti here ahoofe no, eye aboofe hunu!
12. DZIFA: Wo se sen!
13. ADWOA: **Yese onni ho!**
14. DZIFA: Eh!
15. ADWOA: Ye se ne ko ...
16. TOGBI and KOFI ONNY: Hee! Shut your filthy mouths!
17. KOFI ONNY: Whan na okaa saa asem yi kyere mo! Nkwaadaa bone!... (He chases them out - with curses and blows.)
18. TOGBI: By daybreak, the news was all over the land. The King of Mopti is impotent! According to the laws and traditions of Mopti, however, no man with any form of physical disability is allowed to sit upon the stool of Mopti (p. 22).

The dialogue cited above offers several expressions in Twi and some interpretations for audiences who are unilingual. The condition of the king as stated by Togbi in line 1 is interpreted by Kofi Onny in line 2 in subtle terms, as he uses an idiom, in 'Mopti hene nni ho'. He goes further to explain the idiom in line 4. Dzifa repeats the idiom in line 13. Togbi and Kofi Onny stop Adwoa from giving the same information in very explicit terms. Kofi Onny chastises them for even making the attempts to do so. As explained earlier, per Akan culture, certain expressions cannot be made in public. The playwright shows here that practising the culture within any language is paramount. The play gets more interesting as the king and his chosen bride seem to be winning the battle against Maimuna as indicated in the ensuing dialogue.

1. KOFI ONNY: Togbi eee! Togbi eee! Togbi!
2. TOGBI: What is it?
3. KOFI ONNY: Ohene, yere awo ooo! Mopti hema awo ooo!
4. TOGBI: What! The Queen has a baby! What did she have?
5. KOFI ONNY: Mopti hema awo ooo!
6. TOGBI: **Owoo deen?** Fool! I said what did she have? Is it a boy or a girl?
7. KOFI ONNY: Owoo deen? Owoo mniehe? Owoo nnan! Owoo **baako, mmienu, mmiensa, nnan!** Preko pe! **Mmaa mienu, mmarimma mmienu!**
8. TOGBI: What Quadruplets? You mean she had four babies at once? You mean quadruplets? (p. 23).
9. KOFI ONNY: **Edeen ples** Wo na y'akyene wo kom sei a anka wo

nwo nnan preko pe? Anka wo bo wo du mpo!... (p. 24).

The dialogue here shows Togbi interpreting what Kofi Onny says in Twi to English as seen in lines 3 and 4. For the first time Togbi speaks Twi as seen in line 6. This also shows that Togbi is also bilingual, that he does not just understand Twi but he can speak as well. Kofi Onny's response in line 9, *Edden ples*, gives an impression that although he understands and can even speak English at some level, he is not highly educated like Togbi, thus he cannot understand the word quadruplets. It is interesting also that pronunciation and spellings of some Twi numerals can be learnt from this play; *baako*-one, *mmienu*- two, *mmiensa*- three, *nnan*- four. Kofi Onny does some mathematics as well in line 7, thus the four children are made up of two boys and two girls. As the play progresses to a climax, the author provides some important information to the audience in a language they can understand as seen in the following dialogue between Togbi and Kofi Onny.

1. TOGBI: Silence. I want absolute silence! You must listen carefully! For we have reached the crux of the matter! The eye of the storm! The knot in the heart of the story!
2. KOFI ONNY: Montie, na nea Togbi reka no hia paa!
3. TOGBI: The witch had done the devil's wish! She has signed a pact with the Prince of Darkness. She has exchanged the soul of her only daughter for the minds of the people of Mopti. People are bad! (pp. 29-30).
4. KOFI ONNY: Bo ho bio! Nnipa ye bad! Obayifoo no aton ono ara ne yem ba ama obonsam! Bone nti! Hmmm! Togbi! Onnipa ye bad! (p. 30).

Although the setting at the witches' camp shows a typical local environment, their dialogue is all in English. Their actions convey part of the communication though, but not that explicitly. As Togbi seeks the attention of the audience in transmitting important information in line 1, Kofi Onny interprets same in line 2. The important information about Maimuna's sacrifice as reported by Togbi in line 3 is interpreted by Kofi Onny in line 4. Typical of contemporary Akan speakers he mixes Twi and English; 'Onipa ye bad'. As the play concludes, the King had no one to talk with as all the citizens had gone mad.

1. KING: What is going on here? Mopti ... The whole of Mopti has gone mad!
2. KOFI ONNY: Waka nehooo! Mopti Bayifoo no aka ne ho bio! Mopti Kuro so nnipa nyinaa abo dam!
3. TOGBI: Except the King! The king of Mopti is not mad. But the whole of Mopti has definitely lost its key! (p. 35)
4. KING: ... Oh, God! Who are you? Where do you come from? Have

you come to help me?

5. TOGBI: We pity you and sympathize with you, oh, King! But we cannot help you. (The king breaks down and begins to cry) (p. 38).
6. KOFI ONNY: Oh! Mmobo! (p. 39).

At this stage the playwright makes the storytellers available for a short conversation. In essence the two characters are there to help interpret the conversation. In line 1 the king gives information about what has happened to the entire citizenry. This is interpreted by Kofi Onny in line 2. Kofi says Mmobo in line 6, thus though not interpreting Togbi's dialogue in line 5 still shows that they sympathise with the king's predicament. Although, expressions such as *mmobo* and *Onipa ye bad*, sound like ad-libbing in the performance, reading the script however, one notices that these have been placed to convey some emotions to the audience. The play ends when the king also drinks water from the well and loses his sanity just as his citizens to the disappointment of Maimuna. The storytellers conclude as follows:

1. KOFI ONNY: Ei! Abibigoro wei dee aba wo mu oo!
2. TOGBI: No! no! no! We cannot tell them the moral of the story. Can't you see they are all adults, many of them old enough to be our parents? But I have only one question?
3. KOFI ONNY: Edde kwehen?
4. TOGBI: What would have happened if the King had not drunk from the Well of Madness? In the struggle for Mopti ... Who was the winner ... and who the loser? (p. 41).

Abibigoro takes the indigenous storytelling form which normally ends with reiteration of moral lessons in the story to listeners. In Kofi Onny's dialogue in line 1, Abdallah shows that he is very conversant with the storytelling form he is using. Togbi's rebuttal of his suggestion not only interprets what Kofi Onny said but also allows the audience to deduce for themselves the lessons in the story.

Aside the verbal language, Abdallah uses other forms of communication that portray the culture and context of the actions in the play. There is the dance of enstoolment. The dance depicts a combination of the final stages of enstoolment, and the marriage of the king to Fanta (p. 13). Also, in the king's chamber, 'the couple perform a slow courtship dance during which the bride slowly undresses' (p. 17). It is obvious that in the learning of Ghanaian language and culture, a well-crafted play can serve a dual purpose, justifying wa Thiong'o's assertion that 'Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture' (wa Thiong'o, 1986, p.12).

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the need to establish the local languages of Ghana by providing opportunities for learning these languages. It suggests that the country can employ the use of drama and dramatic forms to teach these local languages as it gives the learner the opportunity to learn from the various contexts that the drama creates. The article also deliberates on Abdallah's play, *The Witch of Mopti* as an example of a writing style that can help the learning of any language as the dialogue is bilingual and skilfully uses other characters to interpret. It is our hope that as the debate progresses in attempts to restore local languages in Ghana and Africa generally, playwrights will take the challenge to play significant role in this quest by building on Abdallah's example. For, "writing in English, or making sure that literature is only available in English, you are starving the imagination of a majority of people" (Inani, 2018, para. 6).

### Note:

We acknowledge that some alphabets in *The Witch of Mopti*, are not the correct Twi alphabets. This we reckon is due to the fact that at the time the play was published the Twi keyboards were not readily available. For instance, the vowel 'e' has been used in place of the actual Twi vowel 'ɛ', and the vowel 'o' has been used in place of 'o'. Instances of the use of such alphabets include the word 'ahoofe' (p. 11) which should rather read 'ahoofɛ'. We have however, quoted the alphabets the way they are in the play.

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