The Tongue of the Community: Code-Switching, Vernacular Authority and Postcolonial Identity in Ghanaian Theatre for Development Practice

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Abstract

In Ghanaian Theatre for Development (TfD) practice, the use of indigenous languages, including Fante, Twi and Ewe, alongside or in place of English is commonly framed as a pragmatic measure for ensuring community accessibility and engagement. This paper contests that framing. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in the Gomoa Mankoadze and Asebu communities respectively in the Central region of Ghana, it argues that code-switching in TfD performance is a postcolonial ideological act that works simultaneously as a dramaturgical strategy, a knowledge-legitimation device, and a decolonial refusal of linguistic coloniality. The paper introduces the concept of vernacular authority to describe the epistemological weight that indigenous-language performance carries in community contexts and develops a three-part typology of code-switching in TfD practice, namely *functional*, *affective* and *authority* switching grounded in observed performance work. Situating these practices within postcolonial literary and linguistic theory, the paper argues that the spoken, community-embedded TfD text constitutes a form of African literary production that postcolonial scholarship has not yet adequately theorised. The paper concludes by calling for a TfD poetics that takes the vernacular performance text seriously as literature, and for facilitator training that treats language choice as a theoretical and political rather than merely logistical matter.

Keywords: African literature, code-switching, Ghana, linguistic coloniality, postcolonial identity, Theatre for Development, vernacular authority.

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1. Introduction

There is a moment in a Theatre for Development (TfD) performance in the fishing community of Gomoa Mankoadze, a coastal community in the Central region in Ghana, that illuminates the subject of this paper. A performer, playing a community elder confronting a local official about waste dumping near the lagoon, begins her speech in English. She speaks about environmental policy, regulatory frameworks and the rights of coastal communities. The audience listens with polite attention. Then, with no announcement and no pause, she switches to Fante, her local dialect. She speaks now of the lagoon as patrimony, as sacred inheritance, as the body of an ancestor whose dignity has been violated. The audience, which moments earlier was an attentive crowd, becomes something else altogether, a congregation, spect-actors. People call out. An older woman stands. The air in the space changes.

The switch was not incidental. It was rehearsed. The facilitating team had identified it in the devising process as the moment when the performance would shift from explanation to invocation. The English section established the facts of the case in the register of governance. The Fante section established the emotional, spiritual and communal stakes in the register of belonging. Neither register could do the other's work. And it was the Fante, the vernacular tongue of the community's own self-understanding, that called the audience into active engagement.

This paper takes that moment as its point of departure for a theoretical argument about language, performance and postcolonial identity in Ghanaian TfD practice. The core claim is that code-switching in TfD performance is not a pragmatic accessibility measure but a postcolonial ideological act. When TfD facilitators and performers choose indigenous languages, whether Fante, Twi, Ewe, Ga or any of the over eighty languages in Ghana, they are not just making performance accessible to communities with limited English. They are asserting the epistemological authority of vernacular knowledge, resisting the colonial hierarchy that positions English as the language of legitimacy and indigenous tongues as dialects of deficiency. They are enacting what this paper terms vernacular authority which is understood as the epistemological weight that accrues to performance when it speaks to a community in the language through which that community names its world. Accordingly, this paper develops the concept of vernacular authority and proposes a three-part typology of code-switching in Ghanaian Theatre for Development practice based on fieldwork conducted in Gomoa Mankoadze and the Asebu traditional areas, both located in the Central region of Ghana.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section reviews the principal scholarly traditions that inform the study. It examines postcolonial theories of language and coloniality, Ghanaian scholarship on vernacular performance authority, and sociolinguistic approaches to code-switching before bringing these traditions together to develop the concept of vernacular authority and the analytical framework guiding the study. Each offers a different angle of illumination, and it is in their combination that the full significance of what happens when a performer switches from English to a local dialect becomes visible.

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2.1 Linguistic Coloniality and the Damage of Language

Any engagement with language politics in African performance must begin with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's analysis in Decolonising the Mind (1986). For Ngũgĩ, language is not merely the medium through which culture is communicated; it is the very form of culture's existence. To subordinate a people's language to the coloniser's tongue is therefore not a secondary act of conquest but the deepest damage of the colonial project. Ngũgĩ writes of the psychological violence done to the colonised child who learns to experience the world through two competing linguistic systems, one that carries the weight of institutional authority and one that carries the warmth of home, and who is taught to understand this not as colonial imposition but as natural hierarchy. Fanon (1952/1967) arrives at a related understanding from a psychoanalytic perspective. In Black Skin, White Masks, he argues that the colonial subject who adopts the coloniser's language undergoes a process of psychic identification with the coloniser, in which the indigenous self comes to be experienced as inferior and provincial. The language one speaks is not only a communication tool; it is a declaration of where one stands in the colonial order. For the Ghanaian professional who uses English in formal contexts and Twi or Fante at home, this split is not a personal idiosyncrasy but a structural inheritance, the daily enactment of a hierarchy that colonialism established and postcolonial institutional culture has largely kept in place. Recent decolonial scholarship confirms that this hierarchy has outlived formal colonial rule. Veronelli (2015) names it the coloniality of language, a process through which colonised peoples were cast as lacking full expressive capacity in their own tongues, while Mignolo and Walsh (2018) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) show how the same logic continues to determine which languages, and therefore which knowledges, are treated as legitimate in postcolonial institutions.

Pennycook (1998) extends this to the contemporary world, arguing that the prestige of English in postcolonial societies is not a natural outcome of its communicative efficiency but a product of historical power, reproduced through educational systems, media and professional culture. The preference for English in formal Ghanaian contexts, including universities, government offices and NGO discourse, is not ideologically neutral. It reproduces the colonial valuation of certain ways of knowing over others, positioning communities whose knowledge is articulated in indigenous languages as an illiterate community. Kubota (2020) identifies a comparable hierarchy within academic knowledge production itself, in which scholarship from and about the Global South is routinely positioned below that of the Euro-American centre. In Ghana specifically, Anyidoho and Dakubu (2008) observe that English remains the language of officialdom and social mobility even as Ghanaian languages continue to anchor everyday identity and belonging. It is into this context that TfD practitioners step when they make choices about language. That is why those choices carry ideological weight far beyond their functional implications.

2.2 Vernacular Authority: Toward a Concept

The concept of vernacular authority, as this paper develops it, draws on several Ghanaian and African scholars working at the intersection of language, performance and community life. Perhaps, the most immediately relevant is Yankah (1995) whose study of the okyeame, the royal spokesperson who mediates speech between a chief and his audience, illuminates the performative dimension of authoritative vernacular utterance in Ghanaian public culture. For Yankah (1995), the power of authoritative speech in Akan culture is inseparable from the

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context of its utterance, the social identity of the speaker and the linguistic register in which it is delivered. There is speech that conveys information and there is speech that constitutes authority. This latter form is always vernacular, always embedded in the community's own epistemological tradition. Sutherland (1975), whose contribution to Ghanaian theatre was grounded in a lifelong argument for indigenous language as the authentic medium of dramatic expression, understood this instinctively as a practitioner long before it was theorised. In her development of Anansegoro as a Ghanaian theatrical form, Sutherland (1975) did not simply incorporate Akan language for authenticity; she insisted that the stories, the rhythms and the moral frameworks that the theatre was designed to carry could only live properly in the language that had shaped them. The choice of Twi in performance was, for her, a choice about what kind of knowledge the theatre was capable of making available. Nketia's (1955) analysis of Akan funeral dirges provides a related insight. He demonstrates that the elevated language of Akan mourning performance is not a stylised expression of grief but its formal constitution; the language does not describe bereavement but enacts and shapes it, creating a communal space in which individual loss is transformed into shared meaning. This understanding that language constitutes rather than merely expresses certain forms of communal experience is central to what this paper means by vernacular authority.

Ansu-Kyeremeh (2005) reinforces this from a communication studies perspective, arguing that Ghanaian communities possess sophisticated, elaborated systems for producing and validating knowledge that operate through indigenous languages and cannot be translated into English without substantial loss. This loss is not merely a matter of finding the right word; the indigenous knowledge system is organised differently and the language through which it operates is constitutive of that organisation rather than simply expressive of it.

Building on these foundations, vernacular authority describes the epistemological legitimacy that is conferred on performance when it is articulated in the community's own language. It is not merely a matter of comprehension, though comprehension is its precondition. It is the quality of being heard as speaking from within the community's own frame of reference, of naming the community's experience in the community's own terms and thereby validating that experience as real, significant and worthy of collective attention. When a TfD performer switches from English to Fante to describe the violation of the community's relationship with its lagoon, she is not just making herself more understandable. She is invoking a register of knowing that English cannot reach.

2.3 Code-Switching as Postcolonial Praxis

Scholarship on code-switching offers conceptual tools that help to make sense of what is happening in TfD performance when facilitators and performers shift between languages. What Myers-Scotton (1993) calls the markedness of language choice is particularly illuminating. In any multilingual context, speakers share an implicit understanding of which language is the natural default in a given situation, the choice that signals belonging and appropriateness, and which choices stand out as departures from that expectation, carrying additional meaning precisely because they deviate from what is normally expected. In formal Ghanaian institutional contexts, English is that expected default; it signals competence, professionalism and institutional belonging. In these settings, Indigenous languages carry meaning beyond their content because they depart from that expectation.

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In TfD performance, however, this dynamic is reversed. Within the community space, the indigenous language is the expected, natural choice, the language of ordinary life and ordinary knowing. English is the departure, carrying the connotations of institutional distance, outside expertise, and the NGO or university world from which many TfD practitioners come. When performers move between these registers, they are not simply switching languages; they are moving between epistemological worlds and showing the audience where different kinds of authority reside.

Canagarajah (1999) offers a further dimension by arguing that code-switching in postcolonial contexts is frequently a deliberate, sophisticated act of resistance rather than evidence of linguistic inadequacy. The deficit view, which treats the mixing of languages as a sign of incomplete mastery, misses what is actually happening when African speakers draw on multiple linguistic resources simultaneously. In TfD, this resistant dimension is not incidental but structural; the whole logic of TfD rests on the conviction that communities possess the knowledge, the creativity and the authority to name and address their own conditions. Language choice is one of the most immediate ways in which this conviction is enacted or quietly denied.

Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space is useful here too. In TfD performance, code-switching produces a kind of hybrid utterance that belongs fully to neither English nor Fante but draws on both in ways that generate meanings available to neither alone. This is not a failure to choose but a productive inhabitation of the space between; it makes visible the multiple epistemological worlds that community members navigate daily and creates performance that speaks honestly to the complexity of that navigation. Recent work on translanguaging sharpens this point. García and Li (2014) and Li (2018) argue that multilingual speakers do not shuttle between sealed linguistic systems but draw on a single, integrated repertoire, and that the boundaries between named languages are partly the product of colonial and national histories (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; see also Canagarajah, 2013). Seen in this light, the movement between English and Fante in TfD performance is experienced by community audiences not as a breach of linguistic rules but as a meaningful act of positioning.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are grounded in qualitative fieldwork conducted across two communities in Ghana's Central region: the coastal fishing settlement of Gomoa Mankoadze and the Asebu Traditional Area. The two sites were selected purposively (Patton, 2015) for three reasons. First, both are Fante-speaking communities in the same region, which held the language of performance constant and allowed differences in code-switching practice to be traced to the purposes of the TfD work rather than to differences between indigenous languages. Second, the sites offered contrasting epistemological terrains. In Gomoa Mankoadze, TfD engaged a contemporary development problem framed largely in the English of governance and environmental policy. In contrast, in Asebu it engaged a formally elaborated oral heroic tradition carried almost entirely in Fante. Studying the two together made it possible to observe how code-switching operates at both ends of this continuum. Third, the authors' sustained prior engagement with both communities provided the relationships of trust that extended ethnographic fieldwork requires (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research adopted a practice-based ethnographic approach, drawing on participant observation, performance documentation and post-performance dialogue as its primary data-collection methods. This

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design is consistent with established traditions of reflexive, practitioner-researcher inquiry in TfD scholarship (Mlama, 1991; Prentki & Preston, 2009) and with the broader turn toward practice-led research in applied theatre studies (Nicholson, 2014; Thompson, 2009).

Fieldwork in Gomoa Mankoadze was conducted over six months in 2023, in the context of a TfD project addressing plastic waste management on the community's beaches and lagoon. A facilitation team from the University of Education, Winneba, worked with a community ensemble of 25 participants, including fisherfolk, market women, youth group members and representatives of traditional leadership. Data were generated through ten devising workshop observations, eight formal performance observations across three community venues and twelve semi-structured interviews conducted individually with performers, facilitators and community members following performances. Interviews were conducted in Fante with simultaneous interpretation and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Fieldwork in the Asebu traditional area was conducted in 2022, engaging with TfD work exploring oral heroic narratives and community identity. Eight performance events were observed, and ten interviews were conducted with community elders, performers and facilitators.

Analysis followed a thematic coding procedure applied to interview transcripts, field notes and performance documentation. An initial open-coding phase identified recurring patterns in participants' descriptions of language choice, followed by focused coding that progressively refined these patterns into the three-category typology presented in Section 4. Member-checking, in which findings were shared with key participants for verification, was conducted at both sites. Ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate offices in the University. Entry into each community was negotiated with its traditional authorities, namely the chief and elders of Gomoa Mankoadze and the Asebu Traditional Council, who granted permission before fieldwork began. All participants provided informed consent and are identified in this paper only by role and community affiliation in accordance with their stated preferences. The authors' complementary positions as a Ghanaian Theatre for Development practitioner and scholars of language and sociolinguistics, with prior fieldwork experience in these communities, enabled them access and interpretive depth.

4. A Typology of Code-Switching in Ghanaian TfD Practice

The theoretical frameworks established earlier find their most concrete expression in the specific ways that code-switching operates in TfD performance, and it is from observing those specificities carefully across fieldwork sites that the following typology has been developed. The three categories are analytically distinct, though in practice they frequently overlap within a single performance or even within a single scene.

Existing scholarship on language in TfD has tended to treat the use of indigenous languages as a practical necessity rather than as a theoretically significant dimension of the work. Where language is discussed, it is typically in the context of translation challenges, facilitation logistics, or the general desirability of working in communities' first languages (Etherton, 1982; Prentki, 2015; Prentki & Preston, 2009). What follows is a more theoretically grounded typology, developed from fieldwork observation in the Gomoa Mankoadze and Asebu communities, which distinguishes three forms of code-switching in TfD practice according to their dramaturgical function and epistemological significance.

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4.1 Functional Switching

Functional switching occurs when performers or facilitators shift to an indigenous language because the concept being communicated belongs to an indigenous knowledge system that has no adequate English equivalent. This is not simply a vocabulary gap, a matter of finding the right translation, but an epistemological difference; the concept is constituted by the indigenous language and does not survive intact in translation.

In the Gomoa Mankoadze plastic waste TfD project, facilitators found repeatedly that environmental degradation could not be adequately framed in English without importing a conceptual vocabulary, including sustainability, ecological balance and environmental rights, that was both alien to the community's own understanding of its relationship with land and water and embedded in a discourse of international development that positioned communities as recipients of knowledge rather than its producers. When facilitators switched to Fante to speak of the lagoon as *oman asase*, communal land held in sacred trust across generations, they were not translating the English concept but introducing a different concept altogether, one grounded in indigenous land custodianship, ancestral obligation and communal rather than individual ownership. The Fante concept carried moral and political weight that its nearest English approximation simply did not.

Functional switching is significant because it enacts, rather than merely claiming, the principle that indigenous knowledge systems are not deficient versions of European ones but autonomous frameworks with their own internal logic and their own resources for understanding community life. When a TfD performance deploys *oman asase* rather than environmental protection, it is not making a stylistic choice; it is making a knowledge claim.

4.2 Affective Switching

Affective switching occurs at moments of emotional intensity, communal solidarity, or ritual significance, moments when the performance needs to activate registers of feeling and belonging that the colonial language cannot reach. As the opening example illustrates, this form of switching is often carefully prepared in the devising process, identified as the hinge point at which the performance will shift from information to invocation, from the cognitive to the affective.

In Akan performance culture, certain emotional and spiritual registers are not merely expressed through language but constituted by it. Dirge-singing, praise poetry, the formal language of mourning, the call-and-response structures of communal gathering are not emotional expressions that happen to occur in English; they are Fante. As Nketia (1955) demonstrates in his study of Akan funeral performance, the elevated language of mourning does not describe grief from the outside but creates the communal space in which grief is shared and transformed. To attempt these registers in English is not to risk inadequate translation but to commit a category error, to offer a representation of something in the place of the thing itself. When a TfD performer deploys these registers, they are not adding emotional colour to an otherwise neutral communication. They are activating the community's own affective and spiritual resources, summoning what it means to be this community, in this place, with these relationships and these obligations.

Affective switching also works as a marker of performer identity and community membership. A facilitator who can switch authentically into the community's language, demonstrating not

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just linguistic competence but the felt knowledge of when and how to deploy the language's affective registers, signals that they are not an outsider deploying technique but a person speaking from inside the community's world. For TfD practitioners working with Freire's (1970) dialogic principles, this authenticity is not a stylistic preference but the ground on which genuine participatory engagement becomes possible.

The significance of this was captured with striking clarity by one of the performers in the Gomoa Mankoadze ensemble. Reflecting on the devising process, she described the moment when the facilitating team first brought the switching into rehearsal:

> *In rehearsal, we tried the lagoon scene in English first. It felt like we were reading a government report. When we brought it into Fante, using the old names for the water, the other performers started to cry. We knew then that was the version. English told the story. Fante made it true. (Female performer, Gomoa Mankoadze TfD ensemble, personal communication, 2023)*

This distinction between telling the story and making it true captures something that is difficult to arrive at through theory alone. It is the experiential core of vernacular authority, the felt difference between information delivered and knowledge activated.

4.3 Authority Switching

Authority switching occurs when performers or community members shift to indigenous language specifically to invoke indigenous knowledge hierarchies, when an elder speaks, when a traditional governance form is enacted, when ritual authority is claimed or acknowledged. This form of switching is structurally distinct from the first two in that it is not primarily about the content of what is said but about who is authorised to say it and in what register that authority is properly expressed.

In Ghanaian traditional culture, the speech of chiefs, elders, chief's spokespersons and ritual specialists carries authority by virtue of being delivered in the appropriate language and the appropriate register of that language. The *chief's spokesperson* whom Yankah (1995) analyses does not simply relay the chief's words; he transforms them into the formal, elevated register through which chiefly authority is properly articulated. This linguistic transformation is constitutive of the authority, not merely expressive of it. When TfD performances work within or alongside these indigenous authority structures, creating space for an elder to speak in the elevated Fante of formal address or invoking ancestral authority through appropriate linguistic form, they are not simply being culturally sensitive. They are recognising that authority, in these communities, is linguistically constituted, and that a TfD practice which ignores this cannot honestly claim to be participatory.

Authority switching also has a critical dimension that is central to TfD's political project. When community members from subordinate social positions, particularly women and young people, switch into the formal linguistic register of traditional authority, they are claiming for themselves the epistemological weight normally reserved for those at the top of the traditional hierarchy. TfD, with its Boalian (1979) commitment to giving voice to the oppressed, creates a performative space in which this kind of authority switching becomes possible and politically meaningful.

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Several clarifications about the scope and status of this typology are warranted. First, the three categories are analytic rather than taxonomic: They are intended as conceptual tools for attending to what language-switching does in performance, not as a closed or exhaustive system. They emerged from systematic observation across two Ghanaian fieldwork sites and should be understood as grounded in those contexts; their applicability to TfD practice in other African or global settings remains to be tested and extended (Conquergood, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Second, the categories frequently co-occur within a single scene or utterance: a performer invoking an elder's authority through formal Fante praise-language may simultaneously accomplish affective and epistemological switching. The typology foregrounds dramaturgical and epistemological functions, not all sociolinguistic dimensions of code-switching, which are addressed more comprehensively in the sociolinguistic literature (Blommaert, 2010; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003). Third, the typology is explicitly a generative model: it is offered as a starting framework to prompt further empirical and theoretical development, not as a definitive account of all the forms that code-switching takes in African TfD practice.

Table 1. A Typology of Code-Switching in Ghanaian TfD Practice

Type	When it occurs	Epistemological function	Fieldwork example	Facilitator competency
Functional switching	When the concept belongs to an indigenous knowledge frame that survives only in the vernacular language	Asserts the epistemological autonomy of indigenous knowledge systems; enacts rather than describes the principle that vernacular knowledge is not a deficient translation of colonial categories	*Oman asase* (communal ancestral land) deployed in place of "environmental protection" in the Gomoa Mankoadze plastic waste project	Epistemological attentiveness: capacity to recognise concepts native to the community's knowledge frame that cannot be imported from development discourse without distortion
Affective switching	At moments of emotional intensity, communal solidarity, or ritual significance that the colonial language cannot reach	Activates the community's affective and spiritual resources; shifts performance from information to invocation; constitutes rather than represents	Switch from English to Fante in the Gomoa lagoon scene, transforming attentive audience into active congregation; performer's testimony: "English told the story. Fante made it true."	Affective and ritual sensitivity: understanding of performance moments at which activating vernacular registers is both possible and appropriate; requires sustained community

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Type	When it occurs	Epistemological function	Fieldwork example	Facilitator competency
		communal feeling		engagement, not only linguistic training
Authority switching	When indigenous knowledge hierarchies are invoked: elders speak, traditional governance is enacted, ritual or ancestral authority is claimed	Constitutes (rather than merely represents) authority; enables subordinate community members to claim epistemological weight normally reserved for traditional hierarchy	Asebu performers invoking heroic ancestors through *mpae* praise-language and *mmrane* call-and-response; elder's testimony: "English does not know who our heroes are."	Authority-structure awareness: grasp of how linguistic registers confer or redistribute credibility, and ethical understanding of when facilitators from outside the community may mobilise such registers

Note. The three types are analytically distinct but operationally co-constitutive; in mature vernacular performance, they frequently co-occur within a single scene or utterance.

5. Case Study Analysis

The two communities examined here represent different registers of the code-switching argument this paper makes. In Gomoa Mankoadze, the central challenge was to reclaim environmental knowledge from the discourse of international development, and to restore to a community its right to name its own relationship with the landscape. In the Asebu Traditional Area, TfD practice intersected with a deep and formally elaborated oral heroic tradition, raising questions about what kind of literary authority that tradition carries and what happens when performance honours it. Together, the two cases show that code-switching in TfD is not a single gesture but a complex of related practices whose significance shifts with the specific epistemological terrain of each community.

5.1 Gomoa Mankoadze: Language and Environmental Knowledge

The Gomoa Mankoadze TfD project, conducted in a coastal fishing community in Ghana's Central region, was developed in response to a significant local crisis: the proliferation of plastic waste on the community's beaches and in its lagoon, driven by increasing plastic consumption, inadequate waste management infrastructure and the absence of community-specific environmental education. The project was facilitated by a team from the University of Education, Winneba, working over a six-month period with community members including fisherfolk, market women, youth groups and traditional leadership.

The devising process revealed a fundamental tension in the community's relationship with environmental discourse. Community members were aware of the problem and concerned

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about it; this was not a community that needed to be informed about the damage being done. What they resisted, and in some cases actively rejected, was the framing of the problem in the language of international environmental development, including talk of sustainability, carbon footprints, global ecosystems and regulatory compliance. This language, consistently experienced as the language of government officials and NGO representatives who arrived from outside, positioned the community as the site of a problem to be managed rather than as the custodians of a landscape they understood more deeply than any external authority.

The turning point in the devising process came when the facilitating team became attentive to what was being lost in their own use of English. As one facilitator reflected:

> *When we started the workshops, we were explaining everything in English because we thought that was the professional way to do it. Then, one of the older women said to me, 'You are speaking about our water, but you are not speaking to us.' That was the moment everything changed. We had been describing their world to them in a language that was not theirs (Female TfD facilitator, Gomoa Mankoadze devising workshop, personal communication, 2023)*

The performance text that emerged navigated this tension through deliberate code-switching. The English register was used consistently for scenes involving institutional actors, including government officials, NGO representatives, and schoolteachers and for the formal statement of legal rights and policy frameworks. The Fante register was used for scenes of community deliberation, ancestral invocation, and the articulation of indigenous knowledge about the lagoon ecosystem. This was not a simple opposition between outside and inside, or between wrong and right; the English-language scenes were not vilified, and several of them represented institutional actors making genuine efforts. But the Fante scenes were where the community's deepest knowledge lived, where older fisherfolk spoke of seasonal patterns, breeding grounds and the signs that the water gave when it was sick, knowledge accumulated across generations and encoded in Fante vocabulary that had no English equivalent.

The most significant scene was one in which a senior fisherwoman, performed by a community member of approximately sixty years, described the changes she had observed in the lagoon over her lifetime. The scene began in English; she spoke of declining catch sizes, of the visible plastic accumulation, of children who could no longer swim in waters she had swum in as a girl. Then, in a shift prepared across multiple rehearsals, she switched to Fante to describe what the lagoon had been. She invoked its Fante name, its ancestral significance, the ritual relationship between the fishing community and the body of water, the knowledge of fish behaviour passed to her by her grandmother. The switch was marked by a visible change in the audience's physical behaviour; people who had been watching became people who were remembering. The affective register that the Fante unlocked was not nostalgia but something closer to collective grief, and it was that grief, shared and named together, that generated the commitment to change the performance was designed to produce.

The post-performance dialogue reinforced the significance of this. Responding to a question about what had moved him most in the performance, one community member offered a formulation that distils the argument of this paper with remarkable economy:

> *When she spoke about the lagoon in Fante, using the old names our grandmothers used, I felt it in my chest. In English, it was information. In Fante,*

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> *it was our life. (Male community member, post-performance dialogue, Gomoa Mankoadze, 2023)*

5.2 Asebu Traditional Area: Oral Heroism and Vernacular Literary Authority

The Asebu Traditional Area, also in Ghana's Central region, provided the fieldwork context for research into the relationship between cultural heroism, oral narrative and community identity. The TfD work conducted in this area drew extensively on the community's oral heroic tradition, the narratives of legendary ancestors, founding figures and cultural heroes whose stories are preserved in oral performance and whose authority continues to shape community self-understanding.

The theoretical question that this fieldwork raises for the present paper concerns literary form. The oral heroic narratives of the Asebu community are, by any reasonable measure, literature: they are carefully crafted, formally elaborated, aesthetically complex and socially consequential. They are performed by specialists who have learned both the content and the formal conventions of the tradition; they are received by audiences who understand those conventions and evaluate performances against them; and they serve the same functions, including making meaning, preserving memory, shaping identity and exploring moral complexity that literary scholars attribute to written literature. Yet, because they are oral, communal and ephemeral, postcolonial literary scholarship, which despite its critical ambitions has largely focused on written texts by named authors, has not yet found adequate critical tools to account for them.

Sutherland's (1975) work on *Anansegoro* is instructive here. Her insistence that Ghanaian drama must find its authentic form in the oral storytelling traditions of the culture, rather than simply transplanting European theatrical conventions onto African material, was an argument precisely for the literary seriousness of the vernacular performance tradition. What she was defending, as a practitioner and scholar, was the epistemological authority of a form of literary production that the colonial academy had systematically refused to recognise as such.

When TfD practice in Asebu incorporated elements of the oral heroic tradition, including the formal Fante praise-language known as *mpae*, the *mbrane* (call-and-response structure) and the invocation of heroic ancestors as models for contemporary action, it was working within a living literary tradition whose authority in the community was considerably greater than that of any written text. The switch into praise-singing was an authority switch of the most fundamental kind; it summoned the epistemological weight of a tradition that the community recognised as its own most serious form of knowledge-making.

A community elder, reflecting on the TfD performance after it had been presented to the community, articulated the relationship between language and ancestral authority in terms that no theoretical framework manages more efficiently:

> *Those stories about our ancestors, you cannot tell them in English. English does not know who our heroes are. When you speak their names in Fante, with the right words, they are here with us. When you speak them in English, they stay in the past. (Community Elder, Asebu Traditional Area, personal communication, 2022)*

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The elder's formulation maps precisely onto the typology developed in Section 4, and it is worth making that correspondence explicit. The invocation of heroic ancestors through praise-language and through "the right words" constitutes authority switching in its most fundamental form: the performance is authorised not by institutional credentials but by the linguistic register through which ancestral recognition is constituted. The statement that ancestors "are here with us" when summoned in Fante captures the affective switching dimension: the switch does not describe the ancestors but enacts their presence as a communal and spiritual reality. And the insistence that these stories "cannot" be told in English points directly to functional switching: the heroic tradition is not a content that can be transferred between languages but a set of meanings that exists only in the epistemological frame that Fante constitutes. All three forms of switching are at work simultaneously in the oral heroic performance, and it is the depth of their integration that gives Asebu's vernacular literary tradition its distinctive authority. This integration also confirms that the typology's categories, while analytically distinct, are operationally co-constitutive: in mature vernacular performance practice, authority switching, affective switching and functional switching reinforce one another as dimensions of a single epistemological act.

The implications for postcolonial literary theory are significant. If TfD performance can incorporate and activate a living oral literary tradition and if that tradition carries greater epistemological authority in community contexts than written African literature, then, the categories through which postcolonial literary scholarship has typically operated, including author, text, publication and readership, are inadequate to describe the literary field in which TfD operates. A postcolonial literary theory adequate to TfD practice would need to account for literature that has no single author, no stable text and no publication date but that, nonetheless, does everything we ask literature to do.

6. Discussion: Implications for Postcolonial Literary Theory and TfD Pedagogy

The evidence presented in Section 5 invites two related theoretical proposals. The first is a reconsideration of what postcolonial literary theory can and cannot account for when its primary object of analysis remains the written text. The second is a practical rethinking of what TfD facilitator training must address if it is to take language seriously as an intentional and epistemological dimension of the work rather than a necessity.

6.1 The Spoken Community Text as African Literature

The analysis developed in this paper suggests that postcolonial literary scholarship may need to expand its conceptual vocabulary to account for a form of literary production that its existing categories do not yet adequately describe: the spoken, communal, performance-embedded text produced by TfD practice. Such texts have no stable written form; they are authored collectively through a devising process that involves the whole community; they exist only in performance and each performance is different; and their literary achievement, their capacity to generate meaning, activate community feeling and produce transformative insight is inseparable from the vernacular authority of the language in which they are delivered.

This is not a new argument in the broadest sense: oral literature scholarship, from Ong (1982) to Barber (2007), has long insisted on the literary status of oral texts. But TfD practice presents a particular challenge and opportunity for this argument because TfD texts are not traditional

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oral forms that predate colonial contact; they are contemporary productions made in the present, drawing on both indigenous and introduced resources. They are, in Bhabha's (1994) terms, thoroughly hybrid, and their hybridity is not a weakness to be overcome but a feature that enables them to speak to communities whose lives are themselves hybrid, lived across multiple languages, multiple knowledge systems, and multiple registers of authority.

A postcolonial literary theory adequate to these texts would need to engage seriously with vernacular authority, understood as the epistemological weight that indigenous-language performance carries in community contexts, as a literary value comparable in significance to aesthetic complexity, narrative sophistication, or intertextual richness. It would need to acknowledge that some of the most politically consequential literary acts occurring in Africa today are happening not in print but in the open air, in fishing villages and farming communities, in languages that international literary scholarship cannot read.

6.2 The Reflexive Paradox and the Limits of This Paper

This paper itself enacts the paradox it analyses. It is written in English, for an English-language audience, by scholars whose institutional position requires them to produce knowledge in the colonial language. In arguing for the epistemological significance of vernacular authority, this paper cannot itself exercise vernacular authority; it can only describe it, theorise it and gesture toward it. This is not a trivial limitation. There is something that this paper simply cannot do, something available only to the Fante performance it describes and acknowledging that limitation is part of taking the argument seriously.

This reflexive awareness has been central to TfD's postcolonial self-understanding, at least since Mlama (1991) raised questions about the relationship between TfD practitioners and the communities they work with, and it remains a live concern in more recent critiques of the ideological positioning of TfD in Africa (Plastow, 2014; Prentki, 2015). The scholar who theorises vernacular authority in English participates, despite himself, in the reproduction of English as the language in which African experience must be validated to count for the international academy (Mbembe, 2016). There is no clean resolution to this paradox; there is only the commitment to naming it clearly, and to ensuring that the communities whose practice this paper theorises receive the recognition and the authority that the theory claims for them.

6.3 Implications for Facilitator Training

The typology developed in Section 4 has practical implications for TfD facilitator training that extend beyond theoretical interest. If code-switching in TfD performance is not merely a logistical accommodation but a politically and epistemologically significant practice, then, facilitator training programmes need to treat language choice as a theoretical and ethical question, not simply a practical one.

Current TfD training curricula, including those used across Ghanaian university programmes, tend to address language in terms of accessibility, ensuring that facilitators work in languages that community members understand and that performance texts do not rely on registers that exclude participants. This is necessary but insufficient. What is also needed is a systematic engagement with the questions that this paper has raised: What kinds of knowledge can only be expressed in the community's indigenous language? At what moments in a performance

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does the switch to vernacular carry the most epistemological and affective weight? How does the facilitator's own linguistic identity, their relationship to both languages and their fluency in the community's formal and ritual registers, shape their authority in the community space? These are questions that belong in the theoretical core of facilitator training, not in a supplementary module on cultural sensitivity.

A training curriculum informed by the concept of vernacular authority would also attend to the power dynamics of language choice between facilitators and communities. Where facilitators are university-educated professionals working in communities with lower levels of formal education, the default authority structure favours the English-speaking, institutionally credentialled outsider. Deliberate, principled use of the community's indigenous language and, crucially, genuine competence in the formal, affective and ritual registers of that language is one of the most direct ways in which facilitators can enact, rather than merely claim, the dialogic principles that TfD espouses.

The typology developed in Section 4 also suggests a framework for mapping these competencies more precisely. Functional switching demands that facilitators develop what might be called epistemological attentiveness: the capacity to recognise which concepts are native to the community's indigenous knowledge frame and cannot be imported from development discourse without distortion. Affective switching demands sensitivity to emotional and ritual registers and an understanding of the performance moments at which activating those registers is both possible and appropriate; this is not a skill that can be acquired through theoretical training alone but requires sustained, respectful engagement with community life (Conquergood, 2002; Taylor, 2003). Authority switching demands a grasp of the local authority structures through which different linguistic registers confer or redistribute credibility, and an awareness of the ethical complexity involved when facilitators from outside the community mobilise those structures in performance. Training programmes that develop these competencies as a coherent set, rather than addressing them piecemeal under cultural sensitivity or access-and-inclusion frameworks, are better positioned to produce facilitators who can navigate language as the epistemological and political terrain that TfD practice requires it to be.

6.4. Recommendation

The study recommends that Theatre for Development training programmes, practitioner and development agencies treat language choice as a central epistemological and political dimension of participatory practice rather than just a matter of accessibility. Facilitator training should, therefore, incorporate deliberate engagement with indigenous languages, vernacular knowledge systems and the cultural authority embedded in local linguistic forms. Such an approach can strengthen community ownership, enhance participatory dialogue and contribute to the decolonisation of development communication and performance practice.

7. Conclusion

This paper opened with a moment of code-switching in a fishing community on Ghana's Central coast, a moment in which a performer's shift from English to Fante transformed an attentive audience into a congregation. It has argued that this transformation was not merely an affective effect but an epistemological event: the activation of vernacular authority of the deep recognition that comes when a community hears its world named in its own language.

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The concept of vernacular authority developed here the epistemological legitimacy conferred on performance when it speaks to a community in the language through which that community names its world, offers postcolonial literary theory a resource for thinking about the kind of literary production that TfD practice generates. The three-part typology of code-switching, covering functional, affective, and authority switching, provides a framework for attending to language choice in TfD performance with the theoretical seriousness it deserves. And the case study material from Gomoa Mankoadze and the Asebu traditional area demonstrates that the stakes of these choices are not abstract but immediate: they shape whether communities experience TfD as a practice that takes their knowledge seriously or as one that merely wears the costume of participation while delivering a message from outside.

The broader argument of this paper is that African postcolonial literary scholarship needs to take seriously the literature that is being produced in African communities through practices like TfD, literature without stable texts, without named authors, without publication dates but with a power to move, to illumine and to transform that which any literary scholar would recognise. The tongue of the community is not a deficient version of the tongue of the academics. It is a different instrument capable of different music and some of that music can only be heard by those who are willing to follow the performer into the register where the English language cannot go. For TfD practitioners and programme designers, the principal implication is equally direct: facilitator training must treat language choice as a site of theoretical and ethical deliberation, not logistical adjustment and must develop the specific competencies of epistemological attentiveness, affective sensitivity and authority awareness that enable facilitators to work in the vernacular with genuine depth. It is in that depth and not merely in the use of indigenous languages as an accessibility measure that TfD practice finds its most consequential claim to be the kind of participatory, community-centred work that the tradition at its best has always aspired to be.

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