

## **Introduction: Ghana in Transition**

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### **Ghana: Transitions**

In her widely read essay on COVID-19 in India, published in the Financial Times in April 2020, Arundhati Roy called the pandemic a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next”, arguing that this was a unique opportunity for communities to re-evaluate their status quo:

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.<sup>1</sup>

Roy specifically showcased the many contradictions in which India, her native country and place of residence, found itself. In this special issue, we turn the attention not so much to Ghana under the pandemic – although one of the contributions deals specifically with the COVID-19 situation – but rather to the idea of transitioning which, in the case of Ghanaian postcolonial history, has happened on many occasions. As the first sub-Saharan country to attain independence in 1957, Ghana – renamed from the Gold Coast to mark a turn away from British Colonialism – has often been at the centre of African and international narratives of postcolonial transformation. Back then, the nation itself was imagined by many of its leaders, intellectuals, writers, and artists as a shining beacon of another world to come, with the iconic black star on the national flag indicating the rise of Africa’s power. Ghana’s first president,

Kwame Nkrumah, famously promoted Pan-Africanism as a mode of resistance against what he termed ‘neocolonialism’, i.e., the endurance of exploitative relationships between once-colonized countries and their once-colonizers even after independence. Nkrumah’s particular brand of African pride would also have an impact on communities beyond the African continent. Concurrently, with regard to Ghana and its African neighbours, the Nkrumah dream, pursued through varying political and economic manifestations, reformulated the Pan-African agenda by increasingly re-imagining and referring to the country as “the gateway to Africa”. This referent, often evoked in political, economic, and even academic discourses would position and reinforce Ghana as “a very visible symbol” of great change and promise for the rest of the African continent<sup>2</sup>.

During the rise of the Black Power movement in the USA and the Caribbean in the 1960s, Ghana became a favoured destination for African American and Afro-Caribbean activists, including George Padmore, Maya Angelou, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Richard Wright, C.L.R James and the world-famous boxer Muhammad Ali. Their voyage was often framed as a *return* to the very space their ancestors originated from, granting Ghana a unique position in the imagination of diasporic Africans, alongside Ethiopia (which was central to Rastafari for example). This is perhaps most emblematic in Muhammad Ali’s donning of the Oyokoman, traditional *kente* cloth in the design worn by Ashanti royalty. Ali indeed seemed to have walked through a portal when he entered Ghana, shedding his African American identity, marked by the legacy of enslavement, to return to the imaginary pre-colonial space of the Ashanti kingdom.

Another major transition was that performed by one of the leading figures of African American thought and foremost Pan-Africanist, W.E.B. Dubois, who travelled to Ghana in 1961 upon invitation from Kwame Nkrumah, and would spend his last years there. Dubois was by then in his 90s, and once he moved to Ghana, the United States government refused to renew his passport – prompting this luminary of African American culture to take on Ghanaian nationality. The W.E.B. Dubois Centre for Pan-African Culture in Accra, located in the house where Dubois lived and where he is also buried, remains an important place of pilgrimage for tourists, especially African American visitors. Today, more people of African descent in the US consider Ghana their home destination of choice, with many permanently relocating for diverse reasons which always include the problem of racism and identity<sup>3</sup>. For such cultural migrants, the issues of race, place, power, and identity echoed from Frantz Fanon’s seminal works on blackness through to Achille Mbembe’s profound critique on race constitute everyday lived realities with concomitant psychological effects that pressure escape or endurance. When the former is chosen, it often charts paths to Ghana, from where also vigorous activism regularly emerges in support of acts of endurance manifested partly through resistance drives such as the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>4</sup>.

The notion of Ghana as the place where African Americans, essentially an uprooted community, would find their origins was strongly promoted by the famous television series *Roots*, which featured Ghana's notorious slave castles along the coast, in which hundreds of enslaved Africans were imprisoned for months at a time, while the slave ships waited for enough human 'cargo' to be gathered to fill their bellies. It has been noted that the highly successful series boosted African American tourism to Ghana, as well as the now well-established DNA tests that allowed many diasporic Africans to indeed retrace their ancestry to what is now Ghanaian territory. In this context, we should also note the momentous *Year of Return* of 2019, when the Ghanaian government in effect invited diasporic Africans, especially African Americans, to resettle in Ghana, in commemoration of the first ship to land on American territory 400 years earlier (in 1619), carrying enslaved Africans from the slave castles along the Ghanaian coast.

We may then say that Ghana features as a portal of sorts for descendants of enslaved Africans looking for a way back to a pre-colonial past that would allow them to leave behind centuries of exploitation, marginalization and structural disadvantage experienced in the once-colonized territories of the so-called 'New World' to which their ancestors had been forcefully transported. A complex example in popular culture is presented in the figure of Kofi Kingston, a professional wrestler who initially presented himself as Jamaican, but later on embraced his Ghanaian background. Similarly, we can also see Ghana as a frame of reference through which many imagine and construct their identities through diverse African experiences, marking a transition, a coming into being, that hints at some form of initiation. Conversely, the perception of the nation by those who remained in the territory throughout colonialism, the transition to independence and the building of a postcolonial nation often assumes a different tone. The spatial dimension of such transitions – so strongly symbolized by the re-crossing of the Atlantic – is replaced here by political acts, cultural performances and narratives. In its first twenty-six years as an independent nation, Ghana experienced five military coups and two failed countercoups, beginning with a CIA-backed coup that ousted Kwame Nkrumah himself in 1966. The country also transitioned from Nkrumah's (largely failed) experiment in African socialism to more neoliberal economic policies in part dictated by the World Bank and the IMF, which made Ghana dependent on foreign aid. By the 1990s, the country was deeply entrenched in the World Bank's structural adjustment program, which dictated how it should manage its agriculture, health care, education, mining and even water supplies. In a 2004 report, unabashedly titled "Impoverishing a Continent: The World Bank and the IMF in Africa", that focused on several African countries, Asad Ismi writes the following on Ghana:

GDP per capita was lower in 1998 (\$390) than it was in 1975 (\$411); 78.4% of Ghanaians live on \$1 a day and 40% live below the poverty line; 75% have no access to health services and 68% none to sanitation. [...] the World Bank's emphasis on export

expansion to reduce debt has only increased Ghana's external debt from \$1.4 billion in 1980 to \$7 billion in 1999. This has made Ghana subject to the World Bank's Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to keep this larger picture in mind as we examine the way the country has managed and continues to manage its many transitions. At the same time, it is precisely the heightened sense of rupture, remaking, recovery and reinvention also implied by the notion of the portal that this special issue seeks to explore in greater detail. The contributions collected in this volume turn our attention to both the cultural sphere in contemporary Ghana and to the critical work of contemporary Ghanaian scholars thinking about Africa more broadly. In that sense, the issue also intends to highlight common experiences, concerns and manifestations on the continent, showcasing the contributions of Ghanaian literary criticism to leading debates about issues such as the impact of colonialism, modes of resistance to it, and the ongoing neocolonial entanglements in the continent that affect Ghana as well as other nations. Thus, the notion of Pan-Africanism, so tenaciously promoted by Kwame Nkrumah, finds its expression in the following pages, suggesting that this is an item that has been kept in the 'luggage' of Ghanaian intellectual thought, to use again Arundhati Roy's image of what communities should consciously choose to take with them through a portal.

In line with this editorial, the first contribution, by Victoria Osei-Bonsu, focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, foregrounding health communication as conveyed by the government and reactions to it in a selection of 'popular' information circulated on social media. These contributions to the Ghanaian public sphere are read in conversation with the short story "The Message" by Ama Ata Aidoo, one of the country's foremost authors. Osei-Bonsu is interested particularly in questions of ambiguation in health communication and the attending production of half-truths and rumours by the general public. The COVID-19 experience has made the need for accessibility all the more pressing. If the government has largely failed in making the pandemic more comprehensible to the wider public, the production of memes in social media has at least resisted the tendency of medical information to remain veiled in mystery. Aidoo's story offers a parallel portrait of this tension between official health discourse and everyday experiences of ambiguation (and resistance to it). Examining the intersections between medical education and cultural expressions, Osei-Bonsu argues for the importance of the Medical Humanities as a field that allows us to read literature as a way of making "medicine more humane" and in that sense more accessible to a wider public.

With Kofi Darkoh-Ankrah we turn to yet another exploration of the eminent value of literature as a medium through which to examine broader social issues. Focusing on the role of clothing in a selection of Ghanaian literary texts, Darkoh-Ankrah explores the close relationship between the access to, and choice of, specific garments as well as materials and key questions of identity, both communal and individual. The analysis expands on the ongoing research

on the important role played by clothing in central Africa, specifically using Ghana as a case study. The world-famous Ashanti kente cloth, donned by celebrities such as Muhammad Ali, is just one example of the ways in which clothing works as a marker of one's position in society, while also being a means of communicating allegiances across cultures. As suggested, such tendencies posture towards the expression of identity (social or cultural), emanating from a carefully reflected philosophy of self. Significantly, Darkoh-Ankrah generalizes notions of clothing as mere covering material, thus prompting us to think about the important ways in which clothes could actually be wearing people, rather than people wearing clothes.

The issues of self-expression in relation to communal belonging, featured in this discussion on the importance of clothing in literary texts – and by implication in Ghanaian society in general – lead to a further examination of social identity, specifically masculine, which is ironically disrupted by Opoku-Agyemang and Orfson-Offei's discussion of masculinities and male anxiety in contemporary Ghanaian hiplife, a specifically Ghanaian musical genre that blends hip hop with Ghana's distinctive high life musical style. The authors take a single hiplife track, "Sponsor", by the female rapper Ebony, and the reactions surrounding it, to showcase the current challenges to and reflections on binary masculinity in Ghana. Opoku-Agyemang and Orfson-Offei thus provide a dynamic reading of the song which, while performed by a female artist and indeed advancing a female perspective on men, significantly produces images of masculinity that themselves hint at anxieties faced by (cis)men in contemporary Ghana. The contribution links up the song's stereotypical depictions of male 'failure' and 'lack' with broader social issues affecting Ghanaian society, such as alcohol consumption and internet fraud, cementing an ongoing argument about the importance of reading rap performances as crucial articulations of local and pressing contemporary concerns.

Also at the heart of Lomotey's and Boampong's essay, which is the final contribution to this special issue, are gender issues and the (re-)constructions of identity as products of, but also reactions to, culturally entrenched expectations about gender. Here we move away from the Ghanaian setting to a broader discussion about African Feminism. Lomotey and Boampong take the novel *Ekomo* by Equatoguinean author Maria Nsüe Angüe as a point of departure for an analysis of how feminism is conceptualized within a specifically African context. Very much like the contributions by Osei-Bonsu and Darkoh-Ankrah, this contribution argues for the centrality of literary texts as spaces for the articulation of specific social concerns, as well as providing a platform for the advancement of alternative views that challenge the socio-cultural status quo. Lomotey and Boampong are particularly interested in the way black female voices are given prominence in Angüe's as well as other novels that promote an African feminist discourse. The development of such a discourse includes a critical evaluation of the impact that Western/Eurocentric cultures have had

on traditional African cultures, so that feminism becomes also a lens through which to examine the legacies of colonialism itself.

The different contributions to this special edition portray not just a cosmopolitan but also a complex view of Ghana. This view is informed by divergent and sometimes converging perspectives that ultimately allow for approaches that imagine the country both as a single entity and in tandem with other African countries, simultaneously nation and Pan-African. This volume speaks to existing and future research through its multifaceted nature.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal”. *The Financial Times*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>. Accessed on 11.06.2021.

<sup>2</sup>David A. Weiss, “Ghana – The Gateway to Africa”. *The HuffPost*, April 26, 2012. [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ghana-the-gateway-to-africa\\_b\\_1448936](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ghana-the-gateway-to-africa_b_1448936). Accessed on 07.04.2022.

<sup>3</sup>Favour Nunoo, “The African American who moved to Ghana ‘to escape US racism’”. *BBC News*. August 24, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49394354>. Accessed on 07.04.2022.

<sup>4</sup>“Black Lives Matter: Ghana Protest Leader Arrested”. *BBC News*. June 8, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52969895>. Accessed on 07.04.2022.

<sup>5</sup>Asad Ismi, “Impoverishing a continent: the World Bank and the IMF in Africa”. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*. January 2004. [http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National\\_Office\\_Pubs/arica.pdf](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National_Office_Pubs/arica.pdf) Accessed on 11.06.2021.