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# Ghana at Fifty

*reflections on independence and after*

## **Emmanuel Akyeampong and Ama de-Graft Aikins**

GHANA WAS A hive of activity in 2007 as it prepared for the fiftieth anniversary of its political independence from the British, effective March 6, 1957. The Jubilee celebrations spanned the entire year, peaking around the anniversary date itself. Final preparations for the independence anniversary reached a fever pitch in January and February of 2007 with the transformation of public spaces in Accra. At the new Tetteh Quarshie Interchange—commemorating the Ga man who had returned to the Gold Coast in 1878 with cocoa pods that he planted in Mampong, Akuapem (to the north of Accra), thus popularizing the crop among local farmers and making the colony the world's leading exporter of cocoa by 1911—grass was frantically grown tuft by small tuft by swarms of young men and women (including nursing mothers) every single day until the evening of March 5, 2007. Across the city, major circles (rotaries) named after Kwame Nkrumah, J. B. Danquah, and Emmanuel Obetsebi-Lampitey—three of the “Big Six” in the United Gold Coast Convention, the Gold Coast's first political party—were shrouded by raffia matting as restoration work on monuments and structures progressed. Liberation square was transformed into a public shrine for the founding fathers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now renamed the African Union (AU).

Throughout the city, large billboards and customized State Transport vehicles featuring pictures of Ghana's current president, John Agyekum Kufuor, and its first president, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, in imagined dialogue began to appear. As if to comment on the contrasting political spirits of 1957 and 2007 Ghana—the former strident, the latter conciliatory—one prominent image juxtaposed Nkrumah's rallying cry of *Forward Ever, Backward Never!* with Kufuor's tentative assurance that Ghana was slowly but surely moving toward its development goals.

The transformation of public spaces was followed by the influx of memorabilia. The flags arrived first—in mini, midi, and maxi versions—in no time becoming fixtures on the windscreens and bonnets of private cars, taxis, and tro-tros, as an infectious patriotic spirit filled the streets. Ringtones of the national anthem and patriotic songs of the 1950s sneaked



Photo courtesy of Emmanuel Akyeampong



Photo courtesy of Emmanuel Akyeampong

their way into the noisy repertoire of soul, hip-life (a distinctly Ghanaian blend of high life and hip hop), reggae, and gospel so beloved to mobile phone-obsessed urbanites. Shops, wayside kiosks, markets, and the vending trays of street traders were soon filled with anniversary cloth, T-shirts, fashion accessories, mugs, baskets, and even foldaway garden chairs. Accra was swathed in the national colors of red, gold, and green, and filled with an air of anticipation and jubilation.

The atmosphere of jubilation was reminiscent of the euphoria that marked the independence celebration of March 1957. As the first black sub-Saharan African country to gain independence, Ghana's accomplishment had enormous international significance. Because Western powers viewed Ghana's strong economy in the 1950s as a sign of the economic potential of an emerging Africa, those with little or no experience on the continent began to accelerate their intelligence-gathering activities. Nkrumah was noted for his commitment to pan-Africanism, and people of African descent around the world were ecstatic about this beacon of "black pride." Many African Americans flocked to Ghana

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in the 1950s and 1960s to assist the Nkrumah government in the new experiment at nation building in black Africa. In 1951 Nkrumah formed the first African government in Ghana when his party, the Convention People's Party, won the February 1951 elections in convincing fashion. In June 1951 Nkrumah was invited to give the commencement speech at his alma mater, Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He used the occasion to invite African Americans to return to Ghana and aid in the development of the nation. Many responded to his call. The American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., later attended Ghana's independence celebrations in March 1957 and was profoundly touched by his experience. He returned to the United States to preach a sermon on his visit and the lessons he had drawn, "The Birth of a New Nation." In this sermon, King added his voice to Nkrumah's invitation, encouraging African Americans to go and assist Nkrumah in this novel and important experiment of building a modern African nation in sub-Saharan Africa.

Countries still under colonial rule were also inspired by Ghana's independence, the international significance of which was underscored by the celebrations of 1957 throughout the African diaspora. Lord Kitchener, the Trinidadian-born calypso singer, composed a song in honor of Ghana's independence. Among other Caribbean Africans and African Americans who attended Ghana's independence celebrations in 1957 were George Padmore, who lived and died in Ghana, and after

whom the George Padmore Library is named; Norman Manley, who later became the prime minister of Jamaica; U.N. official and Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche; Lucille Armstrong, representing her husband Louis Armstrong; and labor leaders and educators from historically black universities such as Howard University and Lincoln University. Then U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon led an American delegation, and Britain, the retreating colonial power, was represented by Her Royal Highness, the Duchess of Kent.

A truncated—relative to the turnout in 1957—but still impressive, lineup of foreign leaders and dignitaries attended the fiftieth anniversary celebration on March 6, 2007. In terms of heads of state, every region in Africa was well represented: from North Africa came Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria; East Africa was ably represented by Yoweri Museveni from Uganda; from Central Africa came Joseph Kabila from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Levy Mwanawasa from Zambia; Southern Africa was represented by Festus Mogae from Botswana, Robert Mugabe from Zimbabwe, and Thabo Mbeki from South Africa; and several West African leaders turned out in full support, including Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia. Though the list of Western dignitaries was not as extensive as in 1957, it included notables such as the Duke of Kent, Prince Edward (representing Queen Elizabeth II), and Baroness Amos, leader of the British House of Lords. Representing the United States were Alphonso Jackson, Secretary for Housing and Urban Development, and civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson. Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary General, was in attendance, as well as the then World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz.

**Many African Americans flocked to Ghana in the 1950s and 1960s to assist the Nkrumah government in the new experiment at nation-building in black Africa.**

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DESPITE THE BARRAGE of images featuring Kufuor and Nkrumah, there was public contention regarding the amount of official attention paid to Nkrumah's legacy. There was very little of what El Shabazz, an African American resident in Cape Coast, or young Ghanaian university students in Accra had expected: the broadcasting of Nkrumah's speeches over the airwaves, or footage from the era featured on television. Nkrumah's family house in Nkroful—where he was born—was reported to be in serious disrepair, and the Nkroful community threatened to boycott the anniversary celebrations. Indeed, some opined that this was an independence anniversary celebration in the Danquah-



Photo courtesy  
of Emmanuel  
Akyeampong

Busia tradition—two figures who had opposed Nkrumah. While Madam Ama Busia, sister of the late Prime Minister Dr. K. A. Busia, was honored with the Companion of the Order of the Volta by the government, and President Kufuor attended a “Dr. Busia is Remembered” event, Fathia Nkrumah, the former leader’s Egyptian wife, only intruded into the anniversary celebrations by her illness and subsequent death. Newspaper reports about the neglect of Fathia during her time of illness eventually elicited government funds for her health care.

Not everyone believed that Nkrumah’s legacy had been officially silenced. Some social commentators pointed out symbolic gestures made by the government to illuminate Nkrumah’s central role in Ghana’s independence, including the formal launch of the *Ghana@50* series of events on September 21, 2006, Nkrumah’s birthday, to show how central he was to the achievement of Ghana’s independence. In fact, the perceived official silencing of Nkrumah’s legacy contrasted sharply with the public memorializing of Nkrumah. The media—both print and radio—produced independence features from 1957 that provided important historical information for a new generation. A pan-African conference was held in February 2007 to honor Nkrumah’s memory and was visibly represented by a revamped Convention People’s Party (CPP), the party that Nkrumah led to electoral victories in 1951, 1954, and 1956. Crucially, official and public sentiment converged at the end of May 2007, upon Fathia Nkrumah’s death. Following Fathia’s lifelong request to be buried next to her husband, the government flew Fathia’s body to Ghana for a

state burial in Accra, and her body was laid to rest next to her husband's at the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum on Accra's High Street.

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AS ONE JUXTAPOSES the independence celebrations from 1957 and 2007, one is struck by the broad inclusiveness of the celebrations in 1957 and the notable absence of certain constituencies dear to Nkrumah's heart on the fiftieth anniversary: women, commoners, and African Americans, to mention only three. A snapshot of the 1957 celebration, reproduced in the March 2007 features of the *Daily Graphic*, recalled:

There were official delegations from 72 different countries. There were 204 journalists, broadcasters, photographers and television men from 25 lands. There were 108 official guests of the Prime Minister. Among these were politicians and educationists, historians and youth leaders, priests and doctors, musicians and landladies. Everyone who had contributed to the making of Ghana was invited. Nobody who had ever given the Gold Coast a lift along the road to independence was forgotten. Never in the history of human emancipation had so many contrasting and divergent men and women converged to honor a unique achievement.

In contrast to the inclusiveness of the March 1957 celebration, the official face of the 2007 anniversary celebration was predominantly male, elite, and Ghanaian. All the public monuments were of the influential "Big Six" and other illustrious male heroes of the independence movement. Speakers chosen for the year-long Jubilee public lectures, which aimed to create an important platform for intellectual and political reflection and discourse, were men, with the exception of Professor Marian Addy, a female biochemist. Women rarely featured in the official *Ghana@50* project, except in the arts. Two plays by Ghana's premier female writers Efua T. Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo were showcased in a Jubilee series of classic Ghanaian plays at the National Theatre. The elderly stateswoman Theodosia Okoh, who had designed the nation's flag, was also given some press.

Women's activist groups and influential women such as Hajia Alima Mahama (Minister of Women and Children's Affairs), Anna Bosman (Deputy Commissioner of the Commission for Human Rights and

Administrative Justice), Professor Florence Dolphyne (former pro-vice chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon), Joyce Elizabeth Villars (MD Camelot Industries), and Joyce Aryee (CEO, Ghana Chamber of Mines) condemned the marginalization of women in the independence celebration. There was a consensus that women—both ordinary and extraordinary—had contributed immensely to Ghana’s independence.

As the months wore on, these and other influential women launched subtle and visible counter-discourses on gender and Ghana’s development. The Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs (MOWAC) launched a photo exhibition showcasing women who had been influential over the last fifty years: former first ladies, women who had achieved firsts in public office and academia, and traditional female leaders such as Ejisu’s warrior Queen, Yaa Asantewaa. Three women’s groups—the Network for Women’s Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT), the Coalition for the Domestic Violence Bill, and the Women’s Manifesto Coalition—led ordinary women to the streets on a protest march. Female journalists wrote passionately about influential women who had made a mark on independent Ghana. But these women’s activities failed to discuss ordinary women who had done extraordinary things for the independence struggle, or to consider ordinary women who continue to do extraordinary things in their everyday lives that keep families, communities, and the nation moving forward. Nana Oye Lithur, a lawyer and *Daily Graphic* columnist, bucked the trend in a poignant piece about her grandmother, an illiterate grassroots CPP activist:

My grandmother was called Elisabeth Naryea Mensah of Oyeaduwe, Asere, Accra. She died in 1973. She was popularly known as Addonye Naryea. Though illiterate, she was a staunch CPP member and women’s leader. . . . On the day Kwame Nkrumah was released from prison between 11:00 AM and 12 noon [February 12, 1951], he was carried on the shoulders of Oko “too known,” one of the CPP soldiers, to some houses in the Bukom area, including my grandmother’s. There was a thick crowd following them and when he entered our family house, my grandmother sprinkled some talcum powder [a sign of vindication] on him and then poured libation to thank the gods for his release. He in turn thanked her for the role she played. The procession then went through the Hanson Road, Asafoatse Nettey Road and then towards the Cathedral. . . . My grandmother and her CPP women activists used to visit Nkrumah in prison and also cooked some food for him. She was a



regular at CPP meetings at Palladium, Bukom Square and elsewhere and would be one of the first to be at the meetings.

Lithur's story of her grandmother was poignant because it fixed attention on ordinary—rather than elite—women who played crucial roles in the struggle to secure Ghana's independence. It evoked our (the authors') own memories of ordinary Ghanaians who had made significant sacrifices for their political vision.

Take, for example, Madam Christiana Annan. Auntie Christie, as she was affectionately known, sewed for the CPP. Her repertoire included the iconic *Prison Graduate* (PG) caps worn by CPP activists when they were released from prison during their political struggle in 1950–1951. A native of Saltpond, the historic town in which both the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) and CPP were born, she was often chosen to accompany Nkrumah on his trips to Saltpond and to facilitate his walkabouts across town. Unlike Lithur's grandmother, Auntie Christie was educated at Wesley Girls' High School, the oldest girls' secondary school in Ghana, established in 1836. Married and divorced young, and mother to one daughter, she worked hard through a sequence of demanding jobs throughout her life: as a seamstress; a teacher at the Girls' Remand Home in Osu; a caterer at the YWCA in Adabraka; a baker; and as the proprietor of a drinking bar, Mbem Gardens, where young male and female regulars gathered to talk about life, love, and politics. She was an ordinary woman who never assumed a formal public office, but, like educated financially independent women of her generation, she nurtured her daughter and many young people from her extended family, and she remained independent-minded, strong-willed, and politically opinionated until her death, at the age of eighty-four, in 2000.

Consider, too, the case of Madam Ama Nkrumah, born Ajoa Naba Nyewe, an illiterate Nzima fish seller in Sekondi Market who became a stalwart Nkrumah supporter following their meeting in 1948. For her loyalty, dedication, and oratory, Nkrumah renamed the woman *Ama Nkrumah*, the female counterpart to Kwame Nkrumah. She campaigned all over Ghana during the nationalist era, organizing ordinary women into the female wing of the CPP. When independence was achieved, Nkrumah gave Ama Nkrumah a flagpole and a CPP flag to fly in front of her house in Sekondi and a certificate of merit acknowledging her significant contribution to the independence movement. This national heroine was neglected after the coup that overthrew Nkrumah in 1966, and the nation seemed even unaware that she was alive when we (the authors) encountered her in 1994. Reflecting on her marginalization

since independence in 1994, Ama Nkrumah remarked: “I cooked the food, and when it was ready, others came to eat it.”

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THE YEAR 2007 posed several challenges. Ghana was plunged into an energy crisis as prolonged drought drastically reduced the water level in the Akosombo Dam, thereby compromising its ability to provide electricity sufficient for the entire nation. As the country went through phased power rationing, Ghanaians reflected openly on this state of affairs fifty years after independence. Regular comparisons of Ghana with Malaysia—independent around the same time and with comparable GDPs—and the very different outcomes fifty years later, raised questions of where Ghana should have been by 2007. Media and public debate on the significance of the anniversary began almost a year prior to the event and continues to rage a year later. A key theme of the debate has centered on whether Ghana is truly independent. For some, and especially the ruling political elite, the answer is a categorical *yes*. Ghana has fared much better than other African countries. Ghanaians enjoy peace, political and macroeconomic stability, relatively good health, and growing respect from the international community as a poster country for sustained development in Africa. The president’s official visit to Britain in March 2007 to meet with Queen Elizabeth II, proudly displayed on billboards in strategic public spaces throughout Accra, and his courtship by British royals, politicians, and academics while there, constituted a concrete manifestation of Ghanaian independence. As some media commentators observed at the time, the president’s horse-drawn carriage ride with Queen Elizabeth II through Pall Mall publicly and symbolically underscored the end of a master-servant relationship and heralded a new era, with Ghana and Ghanaians standing as equals to the West and to Westerners.

For other commentators, such as the former diplomat K. B. Asante, who gave the eighth Jubilee public lecture, independence is a mirage. Ghanaians may have thrown off the physical chains of colonialism, but they remain ideologically and economically dependent on their former colonizers. Ghanaian statutes and laws are predominantly British, public policies are produced by Euro-American development experts, the country’s rich natural assets are being sold off to foreign investors, the exodus of skilled labor has reached a crisis point, and almost half of the country’s population is living in extreme poverty, on less than \$1 a day, with a quarter living in slums. Skeptics ask: what kind of independence is this that prevents Ghanaians from thinking for themselves, learning from their own mistakes, and doing what they want with their own resources?

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STILL, DESPITE THE critical interrogations over what has been gained in fifty years of independence, it was difficult to shake the spirit of celebration. The business community outbid itself in monetary and material gifts to the anniversary committee in a spirit of infectious patriotism. Anniversary memorabilia manufactured largely in China and India—and India had achieved independence just a decade before Ghana—sold fast and were proudly displayed even as the government was criticized for ignoring local manufacturers. Teeming crowds gathered at Independence Square in Accra and at major parks across the country on March 6, 2007, to chant, sing and applaud their way through formal speeches and party till midnight. And the spirit of national pride lingered on for much of 2007, reinforced by a series of unexpected and expected fortunes: the conferring of the AU chairmanship on J. A. Kufuor, Ghana's hosting of the AU meeting, the (re)discovery of oil in the western region, the arrival of rains and restoration of uninterrupted electricity, and the anticipation of the 2008 African Cup of Nations on Ghanaian soil.

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So GHANA IS independent, and Ghanaians would have it no other way. Perhaps instead of looking at Malaysia and South Korea, and troubling our minds over where we should be fifty years after independence, Ghanaians should evolve a distinctly Ghanaian template for development that takes into consideration Ghana's human and natural resources within the framework of Ghana's history and cultures. After all, that is the essence of independence. It is also important to recapture what independence meant in the 1950s and 1960s, as newly independent African countries took their places in the United Nations and in other international arenas. Kevin Gaines, in his recent book *American Africans in Ghana* (2006), reflects on how the revolutionary era of African independence seems to have been obliterated from African American consciousness:

Who remembers Nkrumah and the "African personality" or recalls the images of African diplomats holding forth at the United Nations when African Americans were still violently barred from voting throughout the South? Perhaps such memories still stir within a few Americans of a certain age. It is as if

the appearance of new African nations on the world stage never happened.

Immersing oneself in the spirit of the time reveals how momentous African independence was in the mid-twentieth-century period of imperial rebirth and the intensification of the Cold War. In a way, Ghana's year-long anniversary, however imperfect, has evoked collective and individual memories of Ghana's place in the African independence movement fifty years ago and may inspire a new young generation to appropriate Nkrumah's confident assertion on independence that the black man was perfectly capable of managing nation-states.

Happy fiftieth anniversary to Ghana! 🌐