

BOOK REVIEWS

Walk with the devil: My endless struggle against the cunning and traps of the devil

Zakariah Ali, Bloomington, IN, Xlibris Corporation, 2012. pp. 390,
ISSN 978-1-4653-8837-7 (pbk).

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Prominent Ghanaians do not usually write, let alone publish, their memoirs. Indeed, since leaving office in 2001, after him serving 19 years as head of state, Ghanaians are still waiting to read the memoirs of former President J.J. Rawlings. The culture of documenting one's experiences is not popular among literate Ghanaians. The trail blazed by some nationalist leaders including Kwame Nkrumah's *Ghana: The autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* (1957); Joe Appiah's, *Joe Appiah: The autobiography of an African patriot* (1996); Mumuni Bawumia's, *A life in the political history of Ghana: Memoirs of Alhaji Mumuni Bawumia* (2004), among others, was not sustained.

Not many public and civil servants have written about their working experiences either. From this perspective, Zakariah Ali's book is a welcome addition to the few personal memoirs of former public and civil servants. More importantly, Ali is among a handful of first-generation educated northerners to have attempted to write their experiences that transcended Ghana's geographical regions. Zakariah Ali's book is a synthesis which attempts to recount important national moments through a personal lens. Retirement, in most cases, leads to boredom, and it was this problem that Ali used to his advantage. Ali's motive for writing his memoir was to be 'a cautionary tale' for his many children (p. 15). Ali's life history has been beautifully woven into the larger narratives of Ghana's history. The book captures the dying days of colonialism and of the workings of the colonial economy, rural-urban migration, early independence and the promise of national development, and formal education and the opportunities it opened up for the elite in Ghanaian society. The book, which comprises 45 chapters, tells stories which can be broadly categorised as follows: childhood, education, adult working life, marriage and travels abroad. The book dwells much on Ali's personal tragedies – what he calls his 'endless struggle against' the workings of the devil (p. 11) – a struggle which began during his childhood in the village of Nyagli, in the Upper West region.

Zakariah Ali was born in a mining town located in south-western Ghana to Dagaaba migrant workers. His mother was the second wife of his father. When the marriage hit the rocks, Ali's mother, Posaa, took her toddler son and returned to

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African Review of Economics and Finance Vol. 6, No. 1, June 2014 pp. 205–207

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northern Ghana, where she remarried and settled in the village of Nyagli with her new husband. Ali's first encounter with the workings of the 'devil' happened a few months after the birth of his brother, Mwinyebo. Possa brew the local beer (*pito*), and her failure to serve some of the drink to Balegee, a local woman, sealed her fate. Ali saw the poison that killed his mother drop into the pot. Since he shared a room with his mother, he witnessed her agonising and horrible death. This event marked a turning point in Ali's life – he went to live with his grandmother at the village of Duohi, but his stay there was brief because his father, Gornah Ali, who still lived and worked in the south, sent for him. Ali was reunited with his father and his stepmother in the mining town of Bogoso in southern Ghana, where he had his first 'brush with [colonial and/or western] civilization' (p. 43).

Soon after his arrival at Bogoso, Ali was enrolled at the same Catholic school that his elder sister, Cecilia, attended. Education in the Gold Coast colony was provided by missionaries and the colonial authorities. At school, Ali frequently played truant. In his words, he 'was punctual and regular during the first two years at school' (p. 66), but he claims he began 'to slack' in his school attendance due to the 'corporal punishment' that was meted out to underperforming pupils like him. As was the practice in most schools at the time, morning 'mathematics and spelling drills went hand in hand with canning for wrong answers' (p. 66). Ali admits he was 'very slow with the multiplication tables', and as a result, he got caned for providing incorrect answers. To avoid the teacher's cane, Ali started arriving late for the morning sessions and absented himself from most of the lessons. Yet he had a knack for cramming, so much so that he passed the end-of-term examinations and even completed high school. Thereafter, he enrolled for the teacher training programme at the St. John Bosco College at Navrongo.

Ali successfully completed his teacher training and began his teaching career in Tamale in 1961, with the Catholic Education Unit as his first employer. This was to mark another phase of his life as an adult. The late 1970s and early 1980s were generally hard times in Ghana's history, which is when Ali started a family. Surviving and caring for a family presented a challenge to many Ghanaian professionals. Faced with numerous personal challenges as well as economic hardship Ali migrated to the United States, in his own words 'for a better tomorrow' (p. 384). The period coincided with other crises on the African continent, as failing states increasingly dotted the socio-political landscape, forcing many professionals to emigrate to western destinations – a phenomenon recently reviewed for this journal by Thomas A. Bosiakoh (2013). Ali's sojourn in the States was not unproblematic. Initially, much like many other African migrants, he faced an uphill battle, but six months after arriving in New York he got a job as a night security guard (p. 387). Several years later, he secured a more dignified job as a real estate appraisal agent, and later as a public servant in the city of New York.

There are many noteworthy features to this book. The stories recounted here are interesting, if at times tragic. Nonetheless, the main weakness of the publication lies

in the arrangement of the stories: the narrative flow is difficult to follow, at times, because the themes do not follow a logical order. That said, the text makes a notable contribution to our knowledge of important historic developments in Ghana. Ali's efforts at documenting his life history might not be financially rewarding, but the great lesson to be learnt from his memoirs, is that knowledge, for posterity's sake, is timeless.

Biographical note

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