

**IN MEMORY OF MY FIRST TEACHER IN SOCIOLOGY
PROFESSOR JOHN MAXWELL ASSIMENG**

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Since hearing about the death of Max Assimeng, I have been striving to compose a remembrance to my first professor, because I must confess, I just don't have the verbal skill to articulate the profundity of my sadness. To think that Max Assimeng is gone to the other world is a huge blow to me and I feel that, like me, his numerous students and teaching colleagues, present and past, on hearing about his death will feel the country Ghana, the University of Ghana, and the Sociology Department have all lost an erudite sociologists. As was captured by Kofi Asante, a doctoral student at North Western University in the United States of America, on his Facebook page, the death of Prof. Assimeng *'is a loss to the sociology department at Legon, as well as professional sociology in Ghana'*. So sad, Kofi, that it was through your Facebook comment that I first learnt about the passing of Prof. He was an accomplished sociologist!

Max Assimeng entered the University of Ghana as a student around 1961 and completed in 1964, and comes as the fifth of 'Legon Sociology' students, after K. E. de Graft Johnson, Cyril Fiscian, Ebo Mends, and Godwin Nukunya to have returned to the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghana, after postgraduate training abroad, to teach and research¹. He was the first 'Legon-Oxford' trained and one of Ghana's foremost Sociologists. He was arguably Ghana's finest and one of Africa's learned scholars in the area of Sociology of Religions. And guess what? He rose through the ranks from being a junior staff at the University of Ghana, to student at Oxford, and back to the university to join the faculty.

But be that, as it may (as Prof Steve Tonah would say), death has snatched him away, and here I am, trying to say something about him. For me as his former

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¹ See Darkwah, A., S. Tonah and M. Assimeng (2014). 'The Development of Sociology and Anthropology in Ghana and future trends.' In S. Agyei-Mensah, J. A. Ayee and A. D. Oduro (eds.) *Changing Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Ghana*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 95-112.

student, and briefly as his working colleague, there are scores of reminiscences that I can share. To systematise it, I start from the beginning — my first contact with him, then to his teaching prowess, and finally to his scholarship and contributions to the development of sociology in Ghana.

Throughout my study and career in sociology, I have been fortunate to have had many great teachers. Of these, Max Assimeng was one of the best. I met Prof. Assimeng in person for the first time in August 2001 in my first sociology lecture, which was delivered by him. After the lecture, I felt, like many of my colleagues in the 2001 cohort of sociology students at University of Ghana, that sociology was perhaps not the course I came to the university to read. As an experienced sociology teacher, he picked signals of this, and did what it seemed he had been doing over the years — to stay back for interactions with students for some 10-20 minutes during which he responded to nagging questions. After this first lecture, one student asked what he could do with a degree in sociology and I remember the answer Prof. Assimeng gave: *'society has a place for all of you'* depending on one's career dispositions. I am sure many of my colleague first year sociology students in 2001 and the numerous students, who came under his tutelage before and after, will recall fondly those words. Later we found out that, questions regarding what one could do with a degree in sociology came up very often in first year sociology classes and his usual response was one familiar to every sociology student then. From that response, I started appreciating the utility of sociology as a discipline. His response carried condensed wisdom that I later heard many times from lecturers during my undergraduate days, and I felt proud to be a sociologist.

When in 2011 I was assigned to teach the same course with Rev. Dr. M. P. K. Okyerefo, reminiscence of my interactions with Prof. Assimeng engulfed my thinking and I must confess, I decided to expatiate on Prof. Assimeng's response to our question back in 2001. I remember going to Dr. Okyerefo's office to find out if we could incorporate the relevance of sociology to the world of work into our course outline and to which he agreed. In the process we agreed that, one could develop an intellectual profession around sociology; we identified a number of career paths open to the student of sociology— several professional areas (for example, education, social work, business, law, health and medicine, police and law enforcement, etc.) where sociologists have been employed. A second strand of our attempt to make sociology relevant for the world of work was termed 'applied sociology', that is, the use or application of sociological knowledge. Here too, a number of career paths were identified, including research to evaluate policies/projects or to understand social phenomena. Sociologists engaged in these kinds of research could be found in research institutions or as independent

research consultants. We also opined that, applied sociology could be found in social criticism of important national issues, for example using sociological knowledge to critique issues and appealing to people's rationality rather than superstition.

We also argued that, sociologists, particularly those employed by special-interest organizations (e.g. Think tanks, universities and colleges), can serve as free scholars to pursue the truth for the public with their criticism without any expectation of public praise. In addition, they may be involved as advisers to governments on social policies or even as drafters of such social policies², not to mention the numerous sociology graduates engaged in different employment kinds in both the private and public sectors. I owe the motivation behind this thinking to Prof. Assimeng.

Prof. Assimeng was, for me, a great and experienced teacher. He had what seemed like a razor-sharp intellect and unparalleled command of vocabulary in addition to consistent method of Socratic questioning. He was patient with his students and challenged them to be original. There are no words to categorize the aura he carried and the impression he made on me in my first course in sociology. He was the one to introduce me to what it means to read for degree. Of all the courses I took as a first year university student, it was Prof. Assimeng's that pushed me to 'go out there' to search and read. May I also mention Mr Crossland, whose introductory course in Archaeology had a similar impact. Prof. Assimeng not only introduced me to sociology as a discipline, but also to the writings of key Ghanaian sociologists like G. K. Nukunya, C. Abotchie, who incidentally became my lecturers in the second year. Chris Abotchie became my undergraduate long essay supervisor and an associate supervisor in my postgraduate thesis research. My heart goes out to the family and friends and to others who loved Prof. Assimeng and knew him well.

Prof. Assimeng was a teacher who, without any exaggeration, became one of the most intellectually curious people I've ever met. He had a sense of playfulness for his first year students, and this was evident in his inimitable wit and the

² Prof. Assimeng made himself relevant to his country Ghana when he became a member of the now defunct National Commission for Democracy (NCD) with the task to assess how the then Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government was responding to the expectations of the people, to educate the people about the objectives of the PNDC in relation to "real democracy", and above all, to formulate for the consideration of government a programme for a more effective realization of a true democracy in Ghana. See Yayoh, W. K. (2006) 'Resurgence of Multi-Party Rule in Ghana, 1990-2004: A Historical Review'. *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 125-147.

somewhat wacky sense of humour. I will remember the way he made us catch laughter in his class when things appeared difficult to comprehend. He usually would open/stretch out his arms so wide, like he was about to fly, bring them forward gradually and clutch them together as if to say *amen*, and then bow down slowly and in a bit, stretch out his forehead, placing it gently on his own clasped arms before him. After taking two courses from him my awe of his professorial intellect settled down and I could appreciate the humanity of this great man.

Prof. Assimeng had a powerful presence as a scholar in sociology of religions, African social thought, and the development of sociology in Ghana, among others. Within the broad field of sociology of religions, he had interest in a good number of subfields including religious sectarianism, religion and human conditions, religion and social change, the social structure of religion, and witchcraft, among others. As far back as 1968, his doctoral work³ explored the impact and consequences of Christian sects in African countries where he ‘challenged notions about religious sectarianism and cultism that limited its practice to people of low social class’⁴. Following from his doctoral work, a key scholarly interest he developed was the interface of religion and human conditions. His *Salvation, social crisis and the human condition*⁵ reflects this deep interest, but clearly, this interest existed long before this time⁶ and was evident in much of what he wrote even afterwards⁷.

If I were to speak for the many Legon sociology students who passed through Prof. Assimeng’s hands, one text that I am sure scores will remember him for is his *Social structure of Ghana*⁸. This book, at the time of Prof. Assimeng’s death had 149 citations from google scholar⁹. Additionally, the idea of social structure also occupied an essential part of Prof. Assimeng’s scholarship. His works —

³ Assimeng, J. M. (1968). *A sociological analysis of the impact and consequences of some Christian sects in selected African countries*. DPhil dissertation, Oxford University.

⁴ See p. 104, Darkwah, A., S. Tonah and M. Assimeng (2014). The development of Sociology and Anthropology in Ghana and future trends. In S. Agyei-Mensah, J. A. Ayee and A. D. Oduro (eds.) *Changing Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Ghana*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 95-112.

⁵ Assimeng, M. (1995). *Salvation, social crisis and the human condition*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

⁶ Assimeng, M. (1986). *Saints and social structures*. Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation

⁷ See for example Assimeng, M. (2004). Some Reflections on Miracles, Divine Provenance, and Political Economy. *Legon Journal of Sociology*, 1 (2), 117.

⁸ Assimeng, M. (1981). *Social structure of Ghana: A study in persistence and change*. Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation.

⁹http://scholar.google.com.au/scholar?hl=en&q=Social+structure+of+Ghana&btnG=&as_sdt=1%2C5&as_sdtp=

Saints and social structures and *Rawlings, Charisma and Social Structure*, are testaments to this. Beyond these, there are other works that exuded this interest of his¹⁰.

Prof. Assimeng also had love and interest in matters of social change, but holding on so tight to his love for religion, he could not do anything without it. He therefore, somehow resolved to make something out of a simultaneous love for both religion and social change. Three of his publications radiate this dual love¹¹. Of these three, *Religion and social change in West Africa* appears towering. In a review of this work, Friday Mbom of University of Calabar observed that, the book 'will remain for some years to come a useful handbook in introductory courses in the sociology and anthropology of Ghanaian and Nigerian religions'¹². Three other works deserve mentioning when it comes to Prof. Assimeng's love for sociology of religions in Ghana¹³.

In the field of African social thought, Prof. Assimeng also had a lofty reputation. He was perhaps the vanguard in the attempt to incorporate African social thought into sociological theorising. Some African sociologists have bemoaned the lack of African contribution to sociological theory and among these scholars Assimeng is monumental. In curing this dearth, two of his works can readily be mentioned. The first is his *Foundations of African Social Thought*¹⁴, which despite the fact of inadequate materials available on the subject, makes a bold attempt to introduce students to the field. The other work in this area is his

¹⁰ See for example Assimeng, J. M. (1996). *An anatomy of modern Ghana*. Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

¹¹ *Assimeng, M. (1989). *Religion and social change in West Africa: An introduction to the sociology of religion*. Ghana Universities Press. **Assimeng, M. (1973). *Religious Values and Social Change: Paradigms in Theory and Research*. Institute of African Studies: *Research Review* Vol,9 (1), 7-19. ***Assimeng, J. (1970). 'Aladura: a religious movement among the Yoruba.' *African Affairs*, 69(275), 191-192.

¹² Mbom, F. M. (1992). 'Religion and Social Change in West Africa by Max Assimeng'. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 62, No. 4: 581-583.

¹³ *Assimeng, M. (1971). 'Sociological perspective on Christianity in Africa.' *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 1(2), 43-52. **Assimeng, M. (1978). 'Crisis, Identity and Integration in African Religion.' *Identity and Religion: International, Cross-cultural Approaches*. London: Sage, 97-118. ***Assimeng, M. (1977). 'The witchcraft scene in Ghana: a sociological comment.' *Ghana Social Science Journal*, 4(1), 54-78.

¹⁴ Assimeng, M. (1997). *Foundations of African Social Thought: a contribution to the sociology of knowledge*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

*Presuppositions in the study of African Social and Political thought*¹⁵ published in the Institute of African Studies *Research Review* in 1986.

If there is any scholar who has made any attempt to articulate the development of sociology as a discipline in Ghana and what may be described as the ‘Legon Sociology’, that person must be Max Assimeng. As far back as 1976, his work on *Sociology in Ghana*¹⁶ appeared in *The Universitas*. This was followed by what he described as *The sociology of Kofi Busia*¹⁷ in 1978 and in 2005, he wrote on the history and theoretical perspectives of Legon sociology during the 1950s and 60s. The last in this concerted effort to systematise the development of sociology in Ghana just appeared in an edited book by Samuel Agyei-Mensah, J. A. Ayee, and A. D. Oduro titled ‘The Development of Sociology and Anthropology in Ghana and Future Trends’.¹⁸

Added to these, Prof Assimeng also contributed an introductory text for beginner sociologists.¹⁹ In the preface to the book, *Social Anthropology for Beginners*²⁰ Ansa Asamoah recollects a long time discussions he had with Max Assimeng on the need to produce one handy introductory reader on sociology/anthropology for African students. When in 2006, Assimeng came out with his book *Understanding society: An introduction to sociology for African students* for beginner students in the field of sociology, Ansa Asamoah thought that was a huge step in bringing the dream embedded in their discussion into reality, albeit, it fragmented the single book vision. But even in this fragmented manner, Assimeng’s work appeared to be among the first of its kind to be published by Ghanaian sociologists with direct focus on the subject matter of sociology for Ghanaian/African students.

There is a certain sense of devoted interest from Max Assimeng for political leaders of his time — Kwame Nkrumah, K. A. Busia, and J. J. Rawlings. This

¹⁵ Assimeng, M. (1986). ‘Presuppositions in the study of African Social and Political thought.’ Institute of African Studies: *Research Review* Vol. 2(2), 167-200.

¹⁶ Assimeng, M. (1976). ‘Sociology in Ghana: Context and institutionalization.’ *The Universitas*, 5(2),100-125.

¹⁷ Assimeng, M. (1978). ‘The sociology of Kofi Busia.’ *Legon Observer*, 2(September), 31-33.

¹⁸ Darkwah, A., Tonah, S., & Assimeng, M. (2014). ‘The Development of Sociology and Anthropology in Ghana and Future Trends.’ In Agyei-Mensah, S., Ayee, J. A., & Oduro, A. D. (eds.) *Changing Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Ghana*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 95-112.

¹⁹ Assimeng, J. M. (2006). *Understanding society: an introduction to sociology for African students* (Vol. 87). Woeli Publishing Services.

²⁰ Asamoah, Ansa (2012). *Social Anthropology for Beginners*. Saarbrücken, Deutschland/Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

view is demonstrated by a series of publications on them. The first of these, published in 1972 in the *Legon Observer*, was on Kwame Nkrumah titled *Kwame Nkrumah, the incredible Messiah*²¹. The second work, which appeared in 1978, also in the influential *Legon Observer* Magazine, was titled *The sociology of Kofi Busia*²² and then in 1986, his work on *Rawlings, Charisma and Social Structure* appeared in the *Universitas*²³.

There are other publications which also established Max Assimeng as a versatile scholar. He moved away from his sociology of religion to writing on a wide array of topics including the integration of women in socio-economic development in Ghana,²⁴ funeral customs in Ghana,²⁵ the pursuit of the good old days within the context of status anxiety and cultural revival,²⁶ family planning,²⁷ and problems and aspirations of Ghanaian children.²⁸

He was arguably the longest serving head of the Sociology Department at University of Ghana. I recall the several contributions he made to the development of the Sociology Department and the University of Ghana generally. First I remember his contributions at departmental/graduate seminars and his peculiar manner of questioning. I also remember his efforts at getting the *Legon Journal of Sociology* (LJS) and the Ghana Sociological Association (GSA) running. I cannot number his students — undergraduate and postgraduate. Until his death, Prof. Assimeng was on the editorial board of the Institute of African Studies *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* (published previously as the *Research Review*²⁹).

²¹ Assimeng, M. (1972). 'Kwame Nkrumah, the incredible Messiah'. *Legon Observer* 8(9), 205-206.

²² Assimeng, M. (1978). 'The sociology of Kofi Busia.' *Legon Observer*, 2(September), 31-33.

²³ Assimeng, M. (1986). 'Rawlings, Charisma and Social Structure.' *Universitas*, 8.

²⁴ Assimeng, M. (1990). 'Women in Ghana: Their integration in socio-economic development.' *Research Review*, NS, 6(1), 57-67.

²⁵ Fiawoo, D. K., Nortey, D. N., Mends, E. H., Assimeng, J. M., & Twumasi, P. A. (1978). 'Funeral Customs in Ghana: a preliminary report.' Unpublished Paper, Department of Sociology, University of Ghana, Legon.

²⁶ Assimeng, M. (1969). 'Status Anxiety and Cultural Revival: Pursuit of the Good Old Days.' *Ghana Journal of Sociology*, 1, 8-14.

²⁷ Fiawoo, D. K., Nortey, D. N., Yangyuoru, Y., Twumasi, P. A., & Assimeng, J. M. 'Traditional attitudes and change receptivity in family planning. Interim report submitted to the Ghana National Family Planning Programme.'

²⁸ Twumasi, P. A., & Assimeng, J. M. (1987). 'Problems and aspirations of Ghana children.' *Accra: The Ghana National Commission on Children*.

²⁹ <http://www.ug.edu.gh/index1.php?linkid=265&sublinkid=95>

I am proud to have been Prof. Assimeng's student at the University of Ghana. I join his many admirers in wishing his family well and I hope this remembrance would partly atone for this awful loss. Indeed, it has been with my deepest sympathies that I mustered courage to spew out these few words as a memorial to my first Professor. My condolences to the family of Prof. Assimeng. My condolences to his generational colleagues — Prof. Nukunya, Mr Ebo Mends, Prof. Chris Abotchie, etc, who no doubt, have had the longest acquaintances and comradeship with Max Assimeng. And my condolences to Prof. Assimeng's many students and finally, my condolences to ALL OF US. May the gentle soul of my first sociology teacher rest in eternal peace.