

BOOK REVIEWS

The Mind of Africa by W. E. Abraham, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2019, iii-214 pp. including index. GHS 35 (paperback), ISBN: 978-9988-550-58-5.

The title of the book, *The Mind of Africa*, may seem to suggest that there is a definite and distinct mentality, a mind-set, of Africans; it might even suggest that the author offers a telescopic vision into the African consciousness, a lens through which African thought processes can be observed. Well, fortunately, not so! Writing from outside Africa but with a sensibility and an in-depth knowledge of Africa, William Abraham explores the common and fundamental cultural underpinnings of African societies as the furnace to forge out the African personality – the African personality that is the harmonious complex of the moral, social, political, religious, and aesthetic elements of Africa. His motivation is to examine the prospects and potentialities of Africa vis-à-vis Africa's problems and challenges in a bid to fashioning out a solution. The ultimate arena to shape the African personality – in its fully developed form – is African unity, pan-Africanism. The furnace is the African culture, fuelled by its rationalist humanism, egalitarian and communalistic principles. But more crucially, in extending the imagery, the smith or metal worker is *the African*. *The Mind of Africa* is, therefore, a critical reflection on, and a passionate appeal to consider the integrative traditional African cultural values that has withstood the onslaught of colonialism and the loss of independence, as instruments for both national and continental development and unity.

Two central themes are prominent in the book: one, that Africa is capable of shaping her own destiny and solving her own problems; in other words, the African has the ability to manage his/ her own resources for development. Secondly, Africa's development ultimately resides in an urgent pursuit of African unity, pan-Africanism. The two themes are underpinned by two philosophical conceptions – the essentialist view of man, and Rational humanism. While essentialism recognizes a constant and irreducible element in being human, rational humanism identifies this element as rationality or reasoning. Possession of reason is fundamental to the nature of humanity, and it is this view of the essence of humans that inspires the position that *the African* has the capacity to, not only manage *her* own affairs, but articulate solutions to the problems of the world. These two themes and their philosophical grounding are given expression in an integrative account of culture; the pursuit of self-rule, national development, African socialism, and African unity, should be authenticated in the African traditional culture and experience.

The account of culture Abraham articulates, and the focus on the African culture he recommends for national and regional integration, is admirable. Culture provides the basis for the understanding of Africa's history and evaluation of the experience of colonialism and the loss of independence; it is the instrument for crystalizing the gains of independence and for battling neo-colonialism to attain national unity. Yet, culture is not merely traditional but contemporary; it is not constricting but free; it is not just transient and changing but a control of change; the focus on culture is not backward-looking but futuristic. As Abraham rightly points out: "Our interest in our own cultures is not historical or archaeological, but directed towards the future. It helps importantly in solving the question not what Africans were like, but how we can make the best of our present human resources, which are largely traditional" (p. 36). This interest in our cultures should motivate Africans "to pose problems, to formulate ideals and national objectives meaningfully with an eye to the cultures of Africa which have in fact continued to be in force" (p. 31).

Abraham, thus, provides a cultural model for the pursuit and attainment of African unity. Pan-Africanism is grounded in, and argued for, by the common cultural values that are pervasive in all the cultures of Africa. The pursuit of African unity should not be premised on economic and political lines but by an appreciation of the cultural links that bind the states of Africa. The disparities in the economies and political situations of African countries is a reason for, rather than an obstacle to, pursuing African unity on cultural lines. The sense of fraternity engendered in the unity of African cultures, the egalitarian and humanist principles underlying traditional African cultures, make it possible for the pursuit of African unity. The seemingly unsurmountable challenges and problems facing Africa today, in contradistinction to the undeveloped vast resources, skill and capital Africa possesses make it urgent for the pursuit of African unity.

Abraham, like Nkrumah in his *Consciencism*, recognizes that traditional African cultures exist side by side with Western and Islamic cultural influences. Where Nkrumah thought that the continued existence of these three strands of cultures will plunge the African into a state of schizophrenia, Abraham thinks that it will be "supine madness simply to ape the West or the East, indeed any point of the compass" (p. 28). Nkrumah's cure for the schizophrenia is to achieve a harmony by collapsing or accommodating the other two strands to be in tune with traditional Africa, and this raises a question of what sense of 'harmony' it is if one accommodates the other two strands into the one. This solution implies that there is a pristine and pure form of traditional African cultures. Abraham's view, however, is that traditional African cultures contain digested and undigested Western and Islamic elements and that any synthesis

should take into account these elements. For him, cultural progress implies selection and rejection and these processes should be done subject to African cultural values.

I find a highly persuasive, albeit undeveloped idea in the book, which is that institutions are idiomatic. An idiomatic expression defies the logic of translation from one language into another; indeed the idiomaticity dissipates and their meanings are literalised when translated from one language into another. For instance, ‘to kick the bucket’ into Akan loses its idiomatic meaning ‘to die’, and similarly for, ‘ka nkyini gu’ from Akan to English, although both expressions articulate the concept of death. The point is that same ideals can be served by differing institutions and different institutions can be devised to articulate the same ideals in different circumstances. There is no need, for instance, for the West to foist their style of liberal democracy on Africa, for Africa and its traditional institutions were already democratic.

Abraham asserted that “the tendency in Africa today is undoubtedly towards one-party states”(p. 149). Well, 57 years after the publication of the statement, it is obvious that it was wrong prophecy. But one could balk at his view that “well-organized parties, in the plural, are not essential to democracy” (p. 148). And his reasoning is that “if plurality is essential then strong opposition too is essential” (p. 148). One can accept that a plurality of parties is not conducive for the attainment of independence without accepting that post-independence the norm should be the singularity of parties. Nonetheless, the plausibility of Abraham’s view lies in his emphasis on traditional African cultural practices: in traditional African societies, governance was democratic although there were no political parties.

The importance and relevance of the book to contemporary debates and discourses on Ghana and Africa as a whole cannot be overemphasised. Abraham’s view that the security of our democracy depends on an impartial judiciary, efficient civil service, constitutional government, well-organized parties, pressure groups, and a free press, still rings true. His view on education, for example, is very pertinent to current discussions on educational policies in Africa. In his 2019 State of the Nation Address, Ghana’s president announced a new curriculum for primary schools beginning in September 2019 that is focussed on mathematics and science; he also announced the establishment of 10 science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) centres for introduction of STEM into basic education, and the appointment of a Presidential Advisory Council on Science, Technology and Innovation (PACSTI) to advise the president on science and technology for the nation. It appears that our politicians equate national development and individual success with the progress and development of science and technology. Now, this is what Abraham has to say: “At any time there will be some needs of

the nation which are urgent...But the educational structure of a nation should not be rigidly geared in an *ad hoc* and opportunistic way to problems of the day alone...The educational structure of a nation should be primed to make remedial provisions for changing and even unforeseen needs...If African governments were themselves prepared to pay money for research into art, religion, and thought, a true and integrated picture of the African personality could easily soon emerge”(pp. 197-198).

Although William Abraham is a philosopher, and *The Mind of Africa* is replete with philosophical arguments, it will be wrong to situate and confine the book solely to philosophy. Its analysis of culture and exposition of the cultural traditions of Akan is of interest to the ethnographer and the anthropologist while the systematic interpretation of the numerous Akan proverbs should pique the linguist and the literary critic’s interest. The book’s critical inquiry into the social and political institutions of traditional Africa should captivate the minds of sociologists and political scientists as its presentation and interpretation of the independence struggles in Africa should interest the historian. All in all, this is a systematic and carefully articulated work by one mind for all disciplines.

To the non-African, a journey through *The Mind of Africa* offers one a breathtaking view of the cultural traditions, practices, and conceptions of African societies. Interlacing his exposition with proverbs and sayings, Abraham offers unique perspectives and interpretations of the Akan culture and conceptual scheme – Akan cultural values, social and political institutions, metaphysical conceptions of man and society – as paradigmatic of the culture and conceptual schemes of African societies. But crucially, Abraham reveals, examines, and rejects, a plethora of unfounded notions about Africans and their cultures – some of these erroneous ideas are often repackaged and recited even in present times. In reading the book, one will come to understand and appreciate the theoretical underpinnings and the practical significance of the African experience

The Mind of Africa is a challenge to all African minds to direct their thoughts to the urgent need for African unity, and to work towards achieving that unity on the basis of our shared African cultural values. It is said that it took the United States of America 170 years to achieve unity; I hope that the United States of Africa will not take that long.

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Wiredu). He was the recipient of the 2017 College of Humanities Provost's Publication Award for his article "The Logic of Consciencism" which appeared in *Disentangling Consciencism: Essays on Kwame Nkrumah's Philosophy*, edited by Martin Ajei and published by Rowman and Littlefield. His current research is on a two-year Andrew Mellon funded project on Traditional Akan Conceptions of Consensual Democracy.

Building the Nation: Seven Notable Ghanaians, edited by Dr. Mercy Akrofi Ansah and Prof. Esi Sutherland-Addy, Digibooks Ghana Limited, 2018, xxxv-316 pp. including images, a map, genealogical table, references and index. GHS100, ISBN: 978-9988-8817-6-4 (paperback).

Building the Nation: Seven Notable Ghanaians is the first in a series of biographical studies on some of the unsung heroes of Ghanaian history. This first instalment focuses on seven individual Ghanaians, Justice Annie Ruth Jiagge; Dr. Edward Francis Oku Ampofo; Mr. Saka Acquaye, Alhaji Yakubu Tali, Tolon-Na; Okyeame Kwadwo Bofo Akuffo, Oyeeman Wereko Ampem II and Professor Florence Abena Dolphyne. These notable Ghanaians collectively led lives that transcended official obligations and served without counting the cost. They contributed immensely through their professional pursuits, public service and philanthropy to building the nation Ghana.

The genre of biography belongs to a special category of knowledge production which has an integral relationship with history as it deepens and textures historical accounts. It serves as a junction between academic and popular writing while linking up the public and private in people's lives. Yet, biographies have not been actively pursued in the academe. This is because biographies are seen as documenting the life cycle of individuals from the cradle to the grave with the individual as the sole intellectual and analytical centre of the argument. This approach negates the historical context of which the individual is rooted. *Building the Nation: Seven Notable Ghanaians* overcomes this challenge as the historical context and the individual's agency intersect to illuminate one another.

Recent efflorescence of biographies in Ghana such as *Hilla Limann: A Biography* by Ivan Addae-Mensah, *Sam Okudzeto: A Life of Service to God and Country* with Franka-Maria Andoh and *Unfinished Business: the Life and Times of VCRAC Crabbe* by Kwesi Amoak have some academics speaking of a biographical turn. This is a positive development that focuses on class formation in the colonial and post-colonial period and highlights the ways in which Ghana has changed, although not always for the better. Thus, enabling Ghanaians to retrace their steps and recapture the ideals that made Ghana the land of opportunity and social mobility.

These seven biographies are written without academic jargon, beautifully expressed and profoundly moving in places. Their importance comes from the content and the historical context as well as the bravery of the authors of each biography to document the controversial moments in each of these seven distinguished lives. Attending wholeheartedly to the

seven life histories and their kindredness and at times strangeness enables *Building the Nation* to draw sustenance and offer an education in Ghanaian history rendering the past more vivid and connected to the current and future generation.

This collection of biographical essays opens with a masterful forward from Emeritus Professor of Chemistry and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Professor Ivan Addae-Mensah. The forward captures the essence of the collection and situates each of the seven legendary Ghanaians in their milieu. It is followed by a thorough documentation and acknowledgement of all the informants and sources that contributed to making each biographical sketch come alive. There is an introductory essay that comments on biography writing and the challenges associated with it. Finally, a methodological section in the introduction showcases the interdisciplinary nature of the book with the use of a wide range of research methods encompassing observations, oral traditions, interviews with family and non-family members, focus groups, archival records, official and unofficial documents and a host of personal photographs. This section underpins the academic rigour of the research process.

Each of the seven national treasures, from diverse fields, dedicated their lives to building the Ghanaian nation and a close reading of each biography demonstrates key characteristics in answering the current overarching question in Ghana's national discourse: what does it take to build this nation? The text under review defines nation building from the perspective of the role of the Arts. This framework is an all-inclusive one that does not ascribe the making of the Ghanaian nation to one individual but gives voice to a plethora of multifaceted and multidimensional individuals whose collective efforts crafted the nation Ghana and span the gamut from western education to traditional knowledge systems. These individuals are not adequately acknowledged. Yet their epic journeys give a rare insight into the Ghanaian rural setting and highlights the patriotic spirit within that made each personality locate a place to contribute their skills in the nation building enterprise.

For Justice Annie Jiagge (nee Baeta) the first female Justice of the Appeal Court, first female judge in the Commonwealth, member of the Council of State of Ghana between 1993 and 1996 and champion of gender equality and equity as Chairperson of the National Council of Women and Development (NCWD), her contribution to building the Ghanaian nation transcends the judiciary with her advocacy against the unjust world order of her time by serving as moderator of the Commission of the Programme to Combat Racism from 1984 to 1990. Remarkably, there was controversy surrounding her appointment as High Court judge in terms of how to address a lady justice. This is a fascinating read and epitomises the gender environment

of her time.

Professor Florence Abena Dolphyne, the second female biographical profile in *Building the Nation*, refused to be limited by convention or context. As the first female full Professor and Pro-Vice Chancellor of any university in Ghana, Professor Dolphyne contributed to the development of Phonetics and Phonology, especially as it relates to dialect studies. She is also a staunch beacon in the discourse on women's empowerment serving as Vice Chairperson in 1975 and then Chairperson of the NCWD in 1980. Under her tenure, the NCWD ensured that every statutory body that was set up in Ghana had at least one woman as member. NCWD's advocacy led to the promulgation of the law that banned widowhood rites and the passing of the Intestate Succession law which saved widows and their children from becoming homeless on the death of their spouse. Yet, it is her humanity and philanthropy through her sponsorship of girls every year through secondary education at the Akyenakrom Day Senior High School that captivates and stays with the reader.

Oyeeman Wereko Ampem II, an economist, public and international civil servant, first Ghanaian, non-head of state to be Chancellor of the University of Ghana and traditional leader of Amanokrom is a man of many parts. He demonstrated his love for country, by returning home after his western education to augment the manpower needs of the new nation of Ghana. As statesman, his legacy challenges the view that westernised Africans are estranged from their traditional roots as his unparalleled contribution to the Akuapem traditional area exemplified by his impressive development projects, enrichment of the stool regalia and paraphernalia and creation and installation of female counterparts to all male traditional offices in the town of Amanokrom.

Another traditional leader who served as a trailblazer and is well captured in the book was Alhaji Yakubu Tali, Tolon-Na. As an educationist, philanthropist, politician extraordinaire and traditional ruler, Alhaji Yakubu Tali immensely contributed to the political and social development of northern Ghana. As a veritable national figure, his philanthropy with the Ghana Society for the Blind and his extensive political service are worthy of acknowledgement and emulation and serve as a template for current and future generations that the nation-building enterprise is an inclusive process and a shared endeavour incorporating multifaceted individuals from diverse ethnic, geographical and occupational spheres.

Building the Nation firmly grounds its narrative and highlights the role of traditional knowledge systems in the making of the nation Ghana, by incorporating the biographies of two colourful statesmen, Okyeame Kwadwo Bofo Akuffo and Dr. Edward Francis Oku Ampofo. Okyeame Akuffo was an exemplary orator and a walking encyclopaedia of Akan proverbs and

witticisms. Using immense knowledge from traditional courts, Okyeame Akuffo enhanced the institution of chieftaincy and the spokesperson as well as contributed to the documentation of Akan sociolinguistics and oral literature despite his limited formal education. An intellectual in his own right, Okyeame's oratory skills fashioned out a national identity and ethos for the fledgling nation Ghana.

Dr. Oku Ampofo was a world renowned medical practitioner and pioneer in herbal medicine as well as an internationally acclaimed sculptor (*Asase due*, located in the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC), musician and artist who made a remarkable contribution to the history and repertoire of African art. He established the Akuapem Six group, who promoted arts, culture and Akuapem history by researching into Ghanaian art forms and their significance in Ghanaian traditional culture and religion. A visionary leader, Dr Ampofo's foresight led to research on the antimalarial plant (*Cryptolepis sanguinolenta*), the establishment of the Centre for Scientific Research into Plant medicine and an arboretum at Mampong Akuapem which serves as a means of conserving Ghana's plant biodiversity. Interestingly, little is made of his humanitarianism, but it leaps out at you in this biography as Dr Ampofo remained in Ghana during the tough military years when Ghanaian academics fled for greener pastures. He charged nominal fees and on many occasions provided services for free to his rural patients as well as personally drove critical patients to hospitals in Accra. Dr Oku Ampofo also established a vocational project for rural youth. His selflessness, love for rural folk and passion for African culture lingers with the reader.

Mr Saka Acquaye an accomplished sculptor, painter, musician, dramatists and lifelong promotor of the arts is the last patriotic Ghanaian captured by the text. His phenomenal contributions to the development of the Arts ranges from his service at the Ghana Institute of Arts and Culture (Ghana Arts Council) to his pioneering of the burgeoning landscape of folk opera. Mr Saka Acquaye's artistic legacy includes over a hundred monumental works such as bronze statues of J.B. Danquah and Governor Guggisberg, the busts of Fraser and Aggrey at Achimota School, Accra; inlaid panelling at Cambridge University and a carved wooden door at the African American Heritage Association Lecture Hall, Wayne State University, Michigan, USA. Mr Saka Acquaye's life also exemplifies key ingredients required in building the nation, notably speaking truth to power epitomised when Mr Acquaye challenged the ineffective administrative oversight and interference in his work at the Arts Council. Another quintessential feature to consolidate the making of the nation Ghana was the willingness to keep Ghana's needs paramount as demonstrated by Mr. Acquaye's recommendations to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs on the way to improve and promote the creative industry during the latter years of his life .

Reading *Building the Nation: Seven Notable Ghanaians* is to engage with seven beautiful minds. These seven biographical profiles leave the reader with a broad, strong, deep and empowering narrative that gives hope that Ghanaians have what it takes to build and consolidate the nation. For subsequent biographical volumes the chapter contributors may want to look beyond the focus of their subjects' gaze and achievements to the meanings and possibilities they did not recognise or pursue in their lifetimes and what potential avenues that could open for future nation-builders in Ghana.

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Remarks by Professor Ivan Addae-Mensah at the book launch of *Building the Nation – Seven Notable Ghanaians*, 27 February 2019

Today is an auspicious day for the Institute of African Studies. At long last a project that has taken them several years to accomplish is being out-doored. To me this exciting and lucidly written set of biographies, entitled *Building the Nation – Seven Notable Ghanaians*, is long overdue. There have been attempts in the past to produce similar works, dating back to even the 19th century. One can mention Rev. Attoh-Ahumah's *Memoirs of West African Celebrities*, Dr I.S. Ephson's *Gallery of Gold Coast Celebrities* and J. Africanus Horton's *West African Countries and their People* (1868). Between 1952 and 1966, the Graphic Corporation published annually, a booklet called *Ghana Year Book*. The last section covered the biographies of a broad spectrum of selected Ghanaians. It was a rich source of information about those who were playing prominent roles in the service of Ghana. That publication became one of the casualties of the 1966 coup.

Nowadays if one wants to find something reliable about any Ghanaian, prominent or otherwise, one's best bet would be to look for their funeral brochure if they are dead, or go to the internet, information from which is often rather unreliable.

In the recent past two books of a genre similar to what the Institute of African Studies is launching today have been published. These are:

- i. LEGEND GHANA – (..A good name is better than riches...) 1600-2000, by Stephen Opoku- Tontoh, published in 2011.
- ii. GHANA'S PRIDE AND GLORY – Biography of some eminent Ghanaian personalities and Sir Gordon Guggisberg, by Aidoohene Blay Chinbuah, published in 2017.

The first book consists of 84 pages and covers 64 selected personalities while the second one covers 68 personalities and is 386 pages in volume.

What we are launching today, *Building the Nation*, covers only seven personalities but is 316 pages in volume. This presupposes that the entries are much more comprehensive than the earlier publications mentioned.

As I said in my foreword to this book, "if there is one common feature that can be discerned from the lives and works of the seven persons described in this book, it is selfless and dedicated service to Ghana and mankind. All of them led a life that transcended well beyond their normal professional duties, and they served without counting the cost". Sometimes we think that only politicians build a nation. This book, and the others before it, seem to

be conveying a different message to us, that nation-building is a task for all, and that the non-politician also matters. The refreshing aspect of the selection of personalities for the African Studies book is that just one of the selected persons could be considered as a professional politician. But even in his case, his contribution to social development, tradition and culture, and philanthropy may be considered to be far more significant than his political career. In Stephen Opoku-Tontoh's book, he categorises his selected personalities into six different categories. He starts with businessmen and entrepreneurs, then public servants, then men of God, then traditional rulers, then scholars, and ends with "Other Listings". It is in this last group that he talks of the politicians; only six of them out of ten persons covered in that section, and the 64 in the entire book. They are Kwame Nkrumah, Paa Willie Ofori Atta, Hilla Limann, Edward Akufo Addo, K.A. Busia and Victor Owusu. (It is in this book that the author describes my late father-in law Mr Patrick K. Anim-Addo as "The Emperor of Business after Independence in the 20th Century".

The choice of personalities in these books are as interesting as they are fascinating. Talk of Okeame Boafo Akuffo in the African Studies book. How many of us know of the first Ghanaian to be a cinematographic and television cameraman, Mr Jacob Bob-Lamprey? He was a cameraman for CBS News, ABC Network, Hearst Metronome, and was a member of the Motion Picture and Television Engineers in Hollywood, before independence, and long before Ghana even had a Television station. I have had occasion to ask some of our youth of today whether they know of Mabel Dove, who was the first woman parliamentarian in the Gold Coast (1954), and belonged to Kwame Nkrumah's CPP while her husband the famous Dr J.B. Danquah belonged to Dr Busia's Ghana Congress Party. She is covered in Chinbuah's book. Which of us here know of Mr Emmanuel Kwasi Kyeremateng, the first Ashanti businessman to open a bank account?

Let me end this address with an appeal. The book we are launching today is said to be the first of an envisaged series. When Kojo T. Vieta published his book *The Flag-bearers of Ghana: Profiles of One Hundred Distinguished Ghanaians Volume I* in 1999, he described it as the first volume of a series. Twenty years on volume two is yet to appear. I sincerely hope that the Institute of African studies is not going to fall into the same post-publication limbo, and that Volume II will follow very soon. This is particularly important since in their case they are concentrating on depth, on fewer people, not on breadth and several people.

These books are very important historical documents. They will serve contemporary Ghanaians, especially researchers, future scholars and others. Accuracy and authenticity of information are therefore of paramount importance. Very often some of these writings are replete with inaccurate information or misrepresentations. Let me give one example. In 1998 Professor

Mariano Pavanello and his team of archaeologists and historians from the University of Pisa published a book entitled *An Italian Tribute to Ghana, Nzema Studies*, and dedicated it to then President J.J. Rawlings. This is one of the most comprehensive studies on the Nzemas, ironically undertaken by Italians. In the foreword to that book it is said and I quote;

Furthermore, the University of Pisa and the National Commission on Cultured of Ghana had signed a convention for developing the studies and exchange programmes which enabled Prof Nana Arhin Brempong, the Omanhene of the Western Nzema Traditional Area and other Ghanaian scholars to participate in conferences, congresses and lectures at Italian Universities.

Nana Arhin Brempong was once the Director of IAS. But he was a Chief of Barekese in Ashanti, and not the Omanhene of Western Nzema. That title is for Awulae Annor Adjei III, who I know also visited Italy during those studies. I would therefore plead with the Institute, that in embarking on its second volume of this series, they should pay close attention to these seemingly minor but absolutely important details, which become and remain historical facts once they are committed to print.

Let me congratulate the Institute for this bold initiative. I wish them every success in future endeavours in this direction.

Thank you.