

This week, I've had two occasions to read about Ghana's past. First, my good friend, Betty O., insisted I read an extraordinary book, "The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi" by Arthur Japin, originally published in Holland in 1997 (the English edition in 2000 by Chatto and Windus).

As the author explains, "... it is a novel, but the main characters are based on historical figures. I have reconstructed their lives around the facts I encountered in official and private documents."

In 1836, a Dutch military expedition landed at the Dutch port/fort of Elmina. It waited there for months before permission was granted by the Ashantehene (King of the Ashanti) for the leaders of the expedition to travel to Kumasi to call on the Ashantehene. Negotiations between them resulted in the 'recruitment of 500 Ashanti troops into the Dutch army for an indefinite period and their posting to the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

Although they were technically paid salaries, the Ashanti soldiers were actually in permanent servitude to the Dutch army. Forty of them were awarded medals for valour but when they were too old to serve, they retired to a small town, Semarang, in Java. They never returned to Africa.

They married Javanese women and learnt the Javanese technique of wax printing cloth (batik). The Ashantis, known as the black Hollanders, created a successful batik industry and exported the cloth to the Gold Coast. The new style supplanted the traditional designs and was very popular, so much so that around 1875, Dutch cotton manufacturers responded to the competition by flooding the West African market with Dutch cloths. The Ashanti black Dutch batik industry slumped.

The agreement between the Ashantehene and the Dutch provided for the son, Kwasi and nephew Kwame of the Ashantehene to follow the delegation to Holland. The Ashantehene believed they were going to acquire a Dutch education and then return: the Dutch saw them as surety for the agreement. At age ten, the two cousins were suddenly uprooted from their families, friends, clothes, beliefs, and environment to the capital and royal court of Holland. There, the African princes, as they were called, became the pets of the royal family and received a classical aristocratic European education.

Kwame, as an adult, longed to return to the Gold Coast. He obtained a commission into the Dutch army and was posted to Fort Elmina. There he waited for permission to return to Kumasi and succeed to the kingship but internal politics in the Ashanti Kingdom denied him this homecoming. Isolated in Elmina, torn between two worlds, lonely and introspective, Kwame committed suicide in 1850.

Kwasi, a gifted musician and engineer, deeply distressed by his beloved cousin's suicide and restless in Europe but not sharing his cousin's homesickness, opted to join the Dutch colonial service. Kwasi was posted to the Dutch East Indies, thus following his kinsmen soldiers. Despite discrimination against him, Kwasi settled in Java. When he retired from the service, he was given a plantation by royal patronage and married a Javanese woman. Kwasi Boachi died in Java in 1904, never having returned to Africa. His two children remained in Java until 1948 when Indonesia became independent, and then they relocated to Holland. The author interviewed Kwasi Boachi's granddaughters in Holland.

Readers, after this brief synopsis, I'm sure you'll agree with Betty O. and me that this is an extraordinary tale from Ghana's history.

Secondly, Reuben Abati, in his column in the *Sunday Guardian* (2 December 2001) discussed the decision by the President of Ghana, John Agyekum Kuffour, to hold a reburial ceremony for the former heads of state, Generals Akuffo, Acheampong and Afrifa, who were executed in 1979 by Jerry Rawlings. After analysing the historical and political context in his usual insightful way, Abati concludes that "Kuffour is standing history on its head just to

## Nina' Mba's **Insider / Outsider's** **Account**



# Echoes from Ghana

play an ethnic game." This interesting column reminds me of the politics and drama surrounding the reburial of another former Ghanaian Head of State, their first Prime Minister, then President, Kwame Nkrumah.

My recollection is greatly facilitated by reading the account of one of the persons involved in that drama, Rear-Admiral Nelson Bossman Soroh, in his soon-to-be-published autobiography, "A Sailor's Dream". In 1972, Soroh was appointed by General Gowon, head of a Nigerian delegation to President Sekou Toure of Guinea to persuade him to release the corpse of Nkrumah to the Ghanaian government then headed by Acheampong. Readers may recall that when Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966, he took refuge in Conakry, Guinea with some followers, and died there in 1972. Sekou Toure had insisted that the only honor Ghana could do for its late president was a full national funeral and the return, in peace, of his followers. Sekou Toure felt his late friend would not forgive him otherwise. Sekou Toure also demanded that Ghana send a high-level official delegation to receive the corpse.

The Ghanaian government had not accepted these conditions and an impasse ensued which General Gowon tried to resolve, hence the delegation led by Rear Admiral Soroh. It took three trips to Conakry and complex tripartite negotiations before the mediation finally resulted in the release of Nkrumah's corpse. At one point, it seemed Nigeria would have to do more than mediate. As Rear Admiral Soroh recalls:

"The president asked me if I was prepared to accept the corpse for onward transfer to the Ghanaian government. Without giving too much thought I was prepared to say yes. However, we considered the implication of the offer. If on arrival in Ghana, the Ghanaian government refused to receive the corpse, I could not return the corpse to Guinea as it was apparent that President Sekou Toure would have nothing further to do with the corpse. The question now was, would the Nigerian government accept the body?"

"Finally, on 07 July all was now set. The day, however, started with very heavy thunderstorms and rain as if President Kwame Nkrumah was bidding Guinea goodbye. The special flight with the body of the late President Kwame Nkrumah, his wife and family, 50 Ghanaians, including Kodja Botsio, some Guinean officials, Ambassador Afolabi, and myself, took off from Conakry airport for Accra. At the airport to meet the body were senior military officers, including Ma-

gor General Afere. A military guard was present.

The corpse was removed from the plane by the military and transferred into an ambulance to the military hospital. The Guinean officials who accompanied the corpse to Ghana refused to disembark. This must have been in protest against the refusal of the Ghana Government to send a delegation to Guinea. After Madam Nkrumah and family, and the other 50

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Ghanaians disembarked, the Guinean plane taxied back to the runway and took off."

### Postscript

Although two columns ago I concluded my series on volunteer-based organizations in Nigeria to highlight the U.N. International Year of Volunteers, may I add a postscript.

One of the organizations in Nigeria, Braille Book Production Centre, recently formally opened its computer training center at its new site at the King's College Annex, Victoria Island. As I explained earlier, the center produces school textbooks in Braille from primary to tertiary levels and sells them at a highly subsidized price of the print books. The training programme is designed for blind university graduates to qualify them to work in a sighted environment.

According to equal opportunity codes, employers must employ qualified blind or otherwise disabled persons. The opening ceremony's special guest of honor was the wife of the Lagos State governor, Chief Mrs Oluremi Tinubu. Frankly, I did not expect her to be present in person, because on that date, Lagos State received Miss World. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised by Mrs Tinubu's arrival in good time with minimal fanfare.

As the Patron of Nigerian Braille Book Production Centre, Professor Vincent Chukwuemeka Ike, said in his address at the occasion, "the Lagos State 'First Lady' has set an exemplary model of responsibility and commitment."

In her speech, Mrs Tinubu stressed how important she considers voluntarism and how much she has done to promote it in Lagos state as the coordinator for the International Year of Volunteers, Lagos State. Her speech was business-like, her presentation professional and her presence at a low-profile event which clashed with the Miss World reception dramatized her prioritization of voluntarism and her respect for the dedicated work of the Niger-wives Braille Book Production center.

In addition, I was pleasantly surprised by the attendance of a director in the Lagos State Ministry of Education. Kings College is a federal institution and one which has a relatively high proportion of blind students (several were present) but the Federal Ministry of Education was not represented. In education, Lagos state has its priorities right.

My sketches of voluntarism in Nigeria could not begin to do justice to the sterling achievements of professional associations and religious bodies. In closing this postscript, an unusual, inspiring alliance between health professionals and the Catholic Church has been brought to my attention.

In November, a ten-kilometre health walk from the National Stadium to the Costain roundabout in Lagos was undertaken by over five hundred members of the public who had heard about it on NTA. They each paid five hundred naira: in return, a team of doctors from LUTH provided basic check ups before and after the walk. Several persons were diagnosed with acute hypertension and diabetes fortunately before the walk. The affected persons were referred for follow up treatment and the money raised went to the Catholic chaplaincy of the Lagos University College of Medicine and Teaching Hospital which organized the event. Plans are underway to repeat the health walk in partnership with Muslim and Protestant bodies:

Walk the (health) walk and talk the (peace) talk.