

**Arts Council of the African Studies Association**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Triennial Symposium**

Theme

Promoting Greater Understanding  
of African Material and Expressive Culture

Speech by the Minister of State for Tertiary Education

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## **Invocation**

I am privileged to be invited today to be part of this historic event: the 17<sup>th</sup> triennial symposium of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association. This being the very first time ACASA is holding a meeting on the African soil, I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of our indefatigable President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, to welcome ACASA to Ghana, and to the continent of Africa.

Your choice of Africa this year and none other continent, and Ghana this year and none other country, evokes crucial antecedents to the historic struggle for the liberation of Africa, when this country made a historic move, on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1957 that had a ripple effect on the total liberation of the entire continent.

This year being Ghana's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a modern nation state, we bask in the joy of representing the continent in hosting a global dialogue on the arts of our Africa. The event brings nostalgic memories of the state of Ghana's arts at the birth of independence and the role of material and expressive culture in fashioning the African identity and promoting selfhood.

This symposium also takes place at a time the world celebrates Ghana at one of its finest moments in history, when we have further consolidated our democracy not sailing in high winds, but cruising in fair weather. The choice of Ghana then must be a vote for peace,

stability, and democracy--- indeed a vote for an auspicious climate, in which the arts are bound to flourish.

It is not surprising that soon after the new President, Nana Akuffo Addo, was inaugurated he commissioned the former seat of Government as a new museum for Ghana's past heads of state. That museum when completed, will be one of the 60 legacy projects identified by Government to mark Ghana's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

### **Arts and National Identity**

But the entire agenda was set when in consolidating independence, Ghana's First President, Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah earmarked the arts as a major instrument to promote our national identity and the African personality.

In 1962, he took the first step by proudly elevating Ghana's ceremonial Kente cloth to world stage: gifting it to the United Nations, and making Kente a point of convergence at the UN, that depicts a carefully woven unity from a diversity of nations. More than 50 years thereafter, the luster of Kente still sparkles as it adorns the auditorium of the UN General Assembly in New York.

Thereafter, not only was Kente adopted as Nkrumah's official wear; material and expressive arts in general set the tone for national events, making national heroes of praise poets, dramatists, musicians, dance artists, and sculptors. Institutions like the National Theater

Movement, Ghana Dance Ensemble, Uhuru Dance Band, the Arts Council of Ghana, became key drivers of nationalism and the African identity.

In several ways then, attempts were made by Kwame Nkrumah in the immediate aftermath of independence, to safeguard Ghana's cultural heritage by nurturing artistic institutions that would harness Ghana's rich and diverse traditions for nation building. Saka Acquaye, composer, sculptor, dramatist and playwright, and progenitor of Folk Opera in Ghana, was one of such composite artists fired by Nkrumah's vision of using art to foster a nationalist ideology.

### **The Academy**

It is not surprising that among the 20 foundation members of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences Nkrumah established in 1959, the eminent musicologist J H Kwabena Nketia, then in his thirties, and now 95 years old, was chosen as a member. The foundation membership represented a broad spectrum of professions, in which the arts were represented. The spread of professions selected, demonstrated the multiple needs of the new nation state, and the variety of manpower needed to champion the nation's development.

Notably, icons displayed on one of Ghana's currency notes include the notable cultural nationalist, composer and musicologist Ephraim Amu; and then is an Efua Sutherland Children's Park, immortalizing

Ghana's ace playwright and dramatist. Similarly, Ghana's state insignia, state emblem, and other paraphernalia, have been sites for the display of cultural symbolism since independence. Not to forget the emblem of Ghana's premier University, elegantly embroidered with cultural symbolism denoting strength, endurance and wisdom.

### **The Diaspora**

But Nkrumah was all inclusive in defining the geographical scope of his African agenda. In his speech inaugurating the Institute of African Studies at this University in 1962, he called on research fellows to study the experience of Africans in the Diaspora, and seek to maintain close ties with their scholars, so there is a cross fertilization of ideas between Africa and the Diaspora. He indeed called for such a cooperation at both intellectual and artistic levels. It is Nkrumah's vision for a Pan-African action plan, that triggered a mass movement of scholars from the Diaspora to Ghana in the early 1960s. I speak of such personalities as Sinclair Drake the famous sociologist, whom I met at Stanford University in 1988 before he passed on; novelist and poet Naval Dawdes of Jamaica; Mcneil Stewart a poet from Trinidad; the poet Moriseau Le Roy from Haiti; W E B Du Bois, whom he brought to embark on an Encyclopedia Africana, and also the great dramatist Paul Robeson.

The idea was to stimulate public interest in Pan-African arts and culture, and mainstream these as catalysts for development.

## **Patronage**

But the agitation to earmark the arts, as a stimulus for nationalism at Ghana's independence was not by happenstance; it neatly dovetailed with the pre-independence mainstreaming of the material and expressive arts in Africa.

How else can one explain the observation that chiefs in Africa are Patrons and Overlords of the arts. Royal palaces are often venues for the best exhibition of both visual and verbal arts; and even for those who have limited access to such privileged spaces, festival processions provide ample opportunities for unrestricted public viewing of rare relics, artefacts and material art.

Here, heritage items otherwise privately conserved, are worn, held or carried in royal processions as mobile heritage, to showcase the splendor of art history in motion.

The need for the continued renewal of artistic traditions is such that chiefs are expected to enrich the royal arts in one way or the other during their reign, and are partly assessed by the sum total of material art they contributed, preserved or carelessly depleted while they ruled by way of musical instruments, swords, material art, adornment, etc. Other times, achievement may be partly measured by one's impact on the performing arts through patronage or spontaneous engagement in performance during ceremonies.

It is not surprising that during the confinement of new chiefs ahead of formal outdoorings, the orientation process includes training in artful dancing, oratory, as well as drum literacy: the ability to understand and artistically respond to drum or surrogate language. It is an open secret that the endearment of the current King of Ashanti to his people, is partly due to his artistic skills in traditional dance, indeed the impact he has made on the finesse and elegance of Ashanti royal dance. Indeed watching Otumfuor Osei Tutu II, the current Asantehene dance as he did on his mother's death, is a rare spectacle to behold.

### **Sites of Memory**

But Africa has responded to the arts in even more meaningful ways. Towns and settlements have been named after drum sounds and instruments, drawing attention to the significance of the musical arts in settlement histories. The Ancient town of Gao, in Mali was named after the sound of a musical instrument.

Ghana here is replete with examples of family names, human settlements, suburbs and townships, named after one musical instrument, drum ensemble or the other. Family names like Akyene, meaning Drums, exist among the Akan; towns such as Tin Kon, in the Volta and Eastern regions, are ideophonic representations of the sound of the talking drum. Towns and suburban communities in

Ashanti, such as Bombaa, and Apirede, represent drums. Asokwa is the name of a suburb in Kumasi, but also refers to the ensemble of ivory trumpets in the royal palace. We may add the name of the town, Nkofe, which also refers to one variety of ivory trumpets. Even the famous town Kete Krachi in the northern Volta region, is appropriately named after Kete, royal drum and dance of Ashanti, then associated with the Juaben people that migrated and settled in a particular suburb of Krachi, where the sound of Kete always filled the air.

Similarly, early concentrations or settlements of poets, drummers, and orators, material artists at specific sites, attracted commemorative naming. The town Abrafo among the Denkyiras in the Central region of Ghana is a settlement for praise poets *Abrafo*; Tsiamé, is a place name for the king's orators *akyeame*. Akyeremade is the original settlement for drummers of the talking drums, called *akyerema*, and remains so named.

Residential sites or settlements then have been named after specific artistic traditions that have thrived in specific locations for several generations. These sites, which were ancient settlements for classes or families of artists or craftsmen, then permanently came to be identified with the artistic practices they epitomized.

Certain places of domicile then are virtually celebrated as centers of excellence in specialized art forms. Through the process of naming,

they have become indelible sites of memory that constantly remind residents of their responsibility as custodians of a rich artistic heritage, which needs to be sustained and augmented.

But the named sites are also flashpoints of life, energy and vitality available for deployment in the service of national development.

A new Africa thus emerged from liberation struggles, which was partly founded on expressive and material traditions. Art then comes to Africa as a natural catalyst for national development.

### **Missed Opportunities**

The resilience of African arts within the public sphere, however, appears not to have kept pace with the times. Not only has art (traditional or modern) suffered attrition from colonization and globalization. African governments currently fighting economic wars have partly sacrificed public arts, allowing its fortunes to plummet along with economies. I have a few annotated observations and laments to share.

- State festivals of arts and culture are still on, but have waned in steam and frequency
- Patronage of Art as a subject is suffering in the high school curriculum
- Even though national museums abound, national art galleries are

uncommon in sub Saharan Africa, a point Professor Ablade Glover the celebrated Ghanaian Artist has lamented time and again.

Ghana indeed has not quite lived up to Nkrumah's dream of a national art gallery, where we would stock a wide collection of masterpieces by nationals and other great works of art.

- African countries with active, well-run national art galleries include Zimbabwe, South Africa, Senegal and Mali.
- Visual art, sculptures and monuments in public spaces, except a few, are mere shadows of realities in our great artistic heritage.

A few sculptures and monuments on the High Street in Accra are phenomenal. But we have a long way to go in telling our great story, narrating our history with monuments that are colossal enough to befit titans. *We are probably better in storytelling than in history telling.* We have a big story which we have only succeeded in mumbling with diminutive sculptures in public space, flattening the sweet in our epic narrative. For this we are sorry.

We miss the giant and majestic public sculptures and monuments, the imposing historical landmarks, that otherwise inform and lubricate the consumption of proud histories. In the absence of a certified national script, we seem to be too busy vacillating and contesting, more than representing our glorious past.

But all is not lost. The majestic public monuments at every corner in Kumasi, Ashanti region, make Ghana proud. Monuments and

sculptures in Kumasi show the way, and tell the nation what it means to be united by history and heritage.

*Ashanti indeed is a big story that has been told by big fontomfrom drums, rather than rattled by the slim sticks of apentema.*

We here even forget the artist in the naming of streets, compelling the great trumpeter, Mac Tonto, who noticed the tragic omission, to indulge in self-worship. He took the law into his own hands, and named the street on which he lived, after his own group Osibisa, when authorities were not watching.

Elsewhere, Bob Dylan, the celebrated American folk singer at long last, accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature 2016, ‘for having created new poetic expressions with the great American song tradition.’ This way Dylan has succeeded in putting folk songs in the top bracket of America’s foremost aspirations in literature.

### **Way Forward**

But there are opportunities ahead, beginning from the classroom. Among several plans, the Government of Nana Akufo Addo has added on to the basic school curriculum. To the three R’s of Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic, a fourth R, cReativity, has been added, leaving room for the nurturing of the creative arts early in life.

Early this year, the Government unveiled a plaque for the construction of a museum for heads of state as said earlier.

But we also need to celebrate the artists (traditional, popular and modern) not just with state funerals, but in monuments, material arts, and halls of Fame where their works would be properly displayed, and achievements recorded in permanent form.

In popular culture, great popular artists like Mac Tontoh of Osibisa fame, who promoted African rhythms around the globe, pass on uncelebrated by his homeland. Elsewhere Mac Tontoh's famous trumpet and flugel horn, Victor Owaifo's guitar, plus Jerry Hansen's tenor saxophone, or the drumsticks of the legendary Kofi Ghanaba, would be on display in a public gallery, to tell the story and inspire the young.

On the occasion of Ghana's 60 anniversary, we shall continue to make bold statements with the arts, and their role in our collective experience.

In collaboration with practitioners, Africa should move the arts from obscure alleys to conspicuous Broadways, to drive national development.

### **Rallying Cry of Heritage**

Ladies and gentlemen, in the next few days, as you highlight the material and expressive arts for discussion, I expect you to dispassionately examine issues as much as you can, but by all means discuss how Africa can optimize deployment of its arts, to enrich the development agenda and avoid being overran by the forces of globalization.

In today's world of globalization, where indigenous cultures stand the risk of being overrun by dominant cultures, it is heritage around which subjugated cultures should converge, and forge strategies of resistance. Among leaders that seek to mobilize in situations of adversity, a single cultural or artistic symbol, a war cry or historical episode evoked, may be all that is needed to rally nationals in defense of sovereign rights.

This has been proven from the times of the slave trade, when the talking drum was effectively used to mobilize slaves spread several miles across plantations, to converge and fight for liberation. In contemporary times, it finds expression in the rallying symbolism of national anthems and national flags in world sports, as well as school anthems, which often have an evocative effect on nationals, and spur them on to common causes. In local terms, the lack of sensitivity to such unique icons of heritage is often times interpreted as a sign of self-alienation.

## **Identity**

A true national is expected to know, and be sensitive to icons that define a group's identity. An Akan proverb conveys this more vividly: 'If you forget the melody of your state trumpet, you lose your sense of direction in a carnival crowd.' In other words, if you get lost among carnival crowds, during a festival of chiefs, you can only retrace your steps by moving in the direction of the royal horn blowers of your king. Not knowing your royal anthem or the distinctive melody of your state anthem, may be a sign of self-alienation, and you may lose out on rallying cries for mobilization in defense of sovereignty.

## **Resistance**

Perhaps the best known theater of resistance against the obliteration of heritage, was during the Arab Spring in Egypt 2011, when both Pro and Anti Government forces momentarily put aside guns they had held in each other's throats, and held hands 24 hours a day, to protect the famous Egyptian Museums and monuments which hold their unique valuable heritage. It was a most dramatic act of resistance, that sought to vividly drum home the message: *when it comes to our national and artistic heritage, we resolve ideological differences, and unite to defend it at the peril of our lives.*

When ideology divides a nation, it takes the symbols of national heritage to restore unity.

The Akan proverb says it all: ‘When two fowls peck at each other in a brawl, and they notice the hawk advance, they suspend the combat and escape along the same path.’

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, with these words, let me formally welcome you to Beautiful Ghana, where our hospitality is rolled out 365 days in a year, and where birds in combat unite to sing, to welcome home the stranger.

I wish you fruitful deliberations at the great University of Ghana.

Akwaaba! Thank you.

**Professor Kwesi Yankah**

*Kwesi Yankah is the Minister of State for Tertiary Education in Ghana. Until he was appointed to the position this year, he was the Vice Chancellor of Central University in Ghana, and had previously been the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs at Ghana’s premier University, University of Ghana.*

*Yankah is also Associate Director of the African Humanities Program of the American Council of Learned Societies. The Carnegie-sponsored project has since 2008, given fellowships to young African scholars doing groundbreaking research in the Humanities..*

*He was for several years a professor of Linguistics at the University of Ghana, where he had also been Dean of the Faculty of Arts.*

*Kwesi Yankah was educated at the University of Ghana and Indiana University in USA, where he did a doctoral degree in Folklore, with a minor Linguistics.*

*He has been visiting professor at University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan, and University of California at Berkeley, and has held several fellowships including Ford Foundation fellowships (tenable at Stanford University, and Northwestern University, USA) Cadbury Fellowship, tenable at University of Birmingham UK, Fulbright Fellowship (Indiana University), and others at Smithsonian Institute and Indiana University.*

*Dr Yankah, a notable public intellectual in Ghana, is a fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.*

*His book publications include:*

*Okyeame: The Language and Politics of Akan Royal Oratory, Indiana University Press; The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric, African Diasporic Press, and African Folklore: An Encyclopedia, published by Routledge, which Yankah co-edited with Philip Peek.*