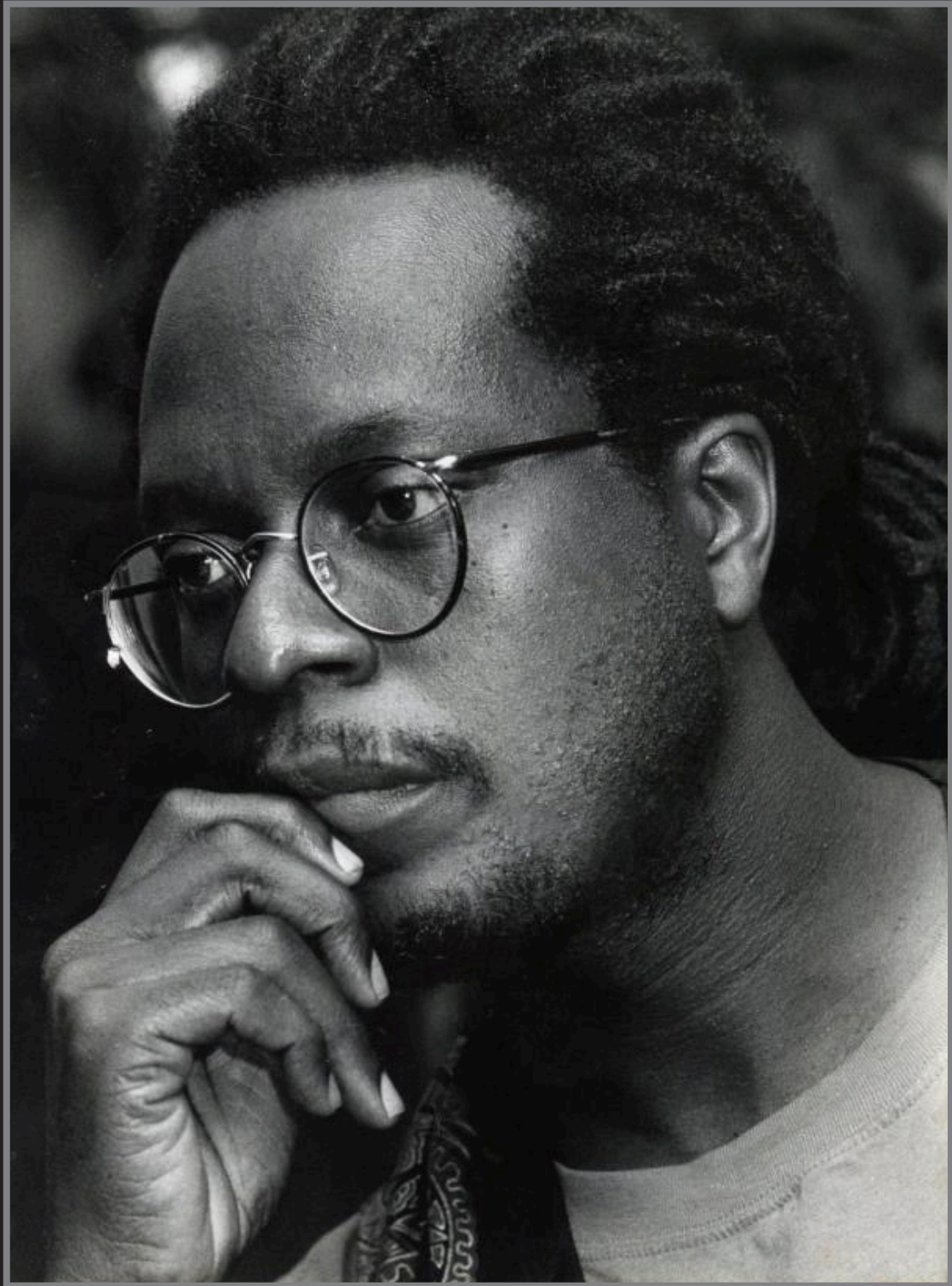


kola

SAMPLE ISSUE

| *Creative Insiders In Focus*



Kwesi Owusu

takes from a creative insider

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Ghanaian Roots of Fela Kuti's Afro Beat



Tony Allen

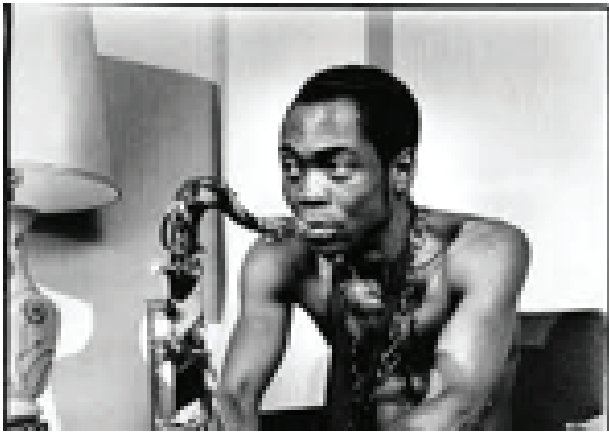
Heard about the ‘wars’ between Ghana and Nigeria? – who cooks the best Jollof, why Twitter chose Accra instead of Lagos for its regional office and more? Well, I discovered the perfect alternative narrative – How Fela Kuti invented Afro Beat, not entirely in Ghana or Nigeria but through seamless synthesis amongst friends and across colonial borders.

I met Tony Allen, Fela Kuti’s original drummer when Panji Anoff and I invited him to perform at Alliance Francaise in Accra in 2010, as part of High Vibes Music Festival. Once described by Brian Eno, the legendary producer as “the greatest drummer in the world “ Tony Allen was at the time involved in several exciting projects. He had released *Secret Agent* (2009) and featured on albums by Ray Lema, Sunny Ade, Manu Dibango and other leading lights of

African music. He had also made a considerable impact on the European music scene. Before he parted ways with Fela in 1979, he had recorded over 30 albums with him.

Uncle Tony, as I came to call him was a man of few words who would rather smoke his thing quietly than engage in idle chatter or banter. However, when I asked him when he was going to visit Accra again, he felt obliged to point out that he was born in Ghana and that his mother was Ghanaian. His band had just flown in from Germany. To prove his familiarity with Accra, he mentioned a few old-time joints that I found out were iconic in the untold story – How Fela and his band, together with Ghanaian musicians cooked up the essential ingredients of Afro Beat from High-life and Jazz in Accra during the 1960s.

I found out his mother was called Prudential Mettle, most likely born in Accra from her family name. As drummer and close collaborator, Tony created the original beats that defined Afro Beat. Fela led the charge by synchronising the indigenous Highlife sound with fusions of Jazz and funk and distinguished the powerful brew with Afro-centric polemics! That was when he transformed Kola Lobitos into Africa 70 and proclaimed himself as the leading light of a new Pan African musical and political movement.



Fela



Faisal Helwani, Fela Kuti in Accra, late 1960s

There were critical imperatives Fela had to respond to and quickly. American singer James Brown and Geraldo Pino from Sierra Leone had made a great impact on the local music



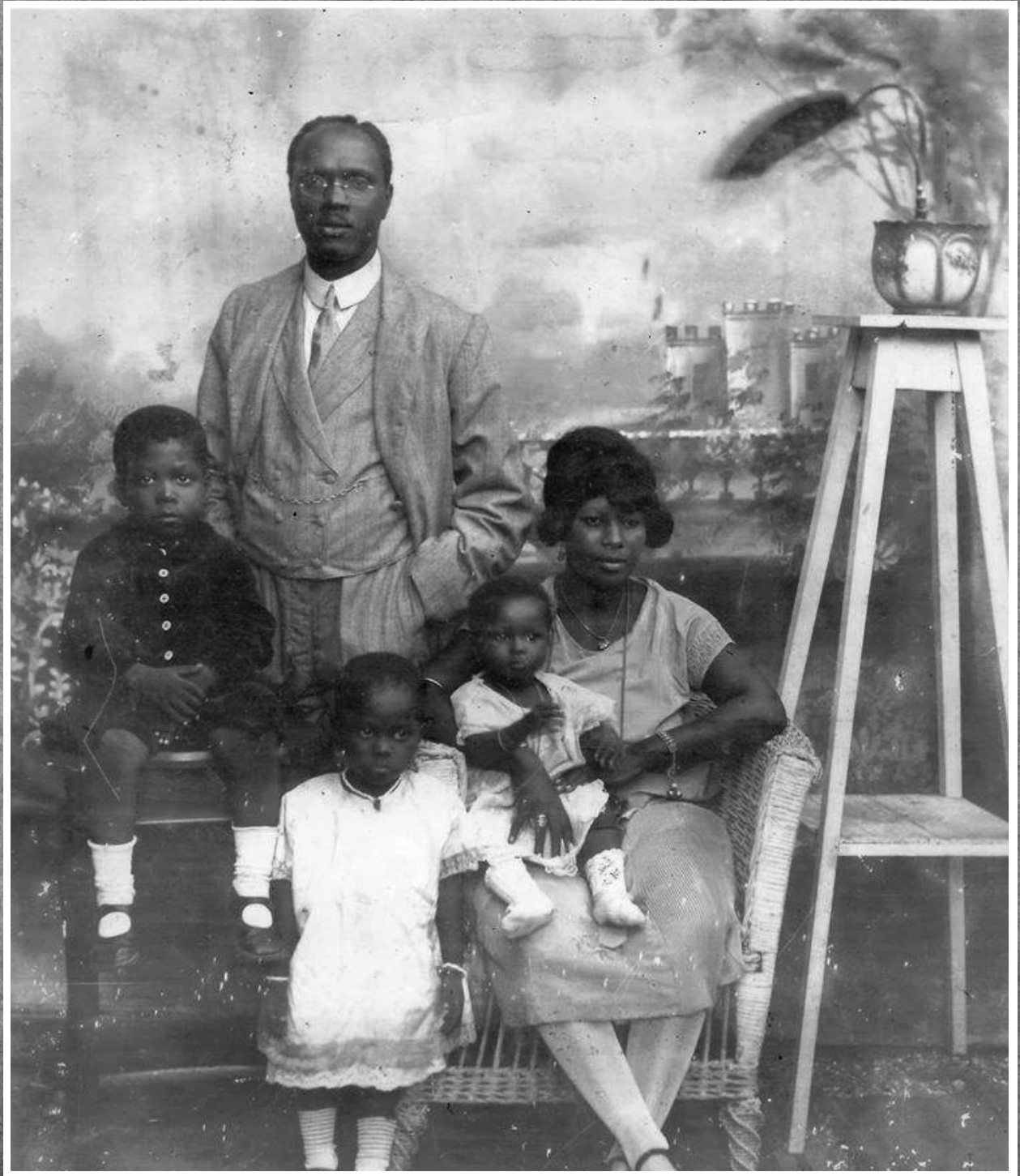
scene. Fans were going crazy over their Soul and Funky songs supported by a mesmerising range of local copycats who were getting things messy by dividing audiences. That did not sit well with Fela, convincing Tony to ‘funkify’ the Highlife beats for the dance floor. He shuffled the sticks over the cymbals alright but made sure his feet never missed the beat. Everything else followed the beat which broke the monotonous structure of Big Band Highlife, then in vogue.

Suddenly, Fela’s Afro Beat shows exploded all over Ghana and across West Africa. Faisal Helwani, then his manager organised all Fela’s shows along the Atlantic Coast. Napoleon Club in Osu, which he owned and managed also became one of the hottest venues in Accra. Fela’s Afro Beat came into its own, adopting call and response patterns and imitating local rhythms. In place of esoteric Jazz solos, Fela for the most part spat more staccato phrases into his saxophone convinced that the emphasis must be heavy on the beat. The beat Uncle Tony Allen created. Fela felt so exhilarated when he called the band to attention for his well renowned “yabbings”

Everybody say yeah yeah!

FOOTPRINTS

I was born in Sekondi



Mr and Mrs Essuman Gwira Sekyi and children, Ma sits on her mother's lap



Mr and Mrs Essuman Gwira Sekyi

I was born in Sekondi, Ghana in the mid-1950s. The coastal town was twinned to Takoradi and sadly living out the last few years of prosperity as a major transit seaport on the West African flank of the British empire. The period also saw the decline and dwindling fortunes of its high living elite lawyers.

Sekondi -Takoradi were originally Ahanta towns but became predominantly Fantse speaking as a result of the influx of affluent emigres, mostly from Elmina and Cape Coast. As it turned out, these educated elites also came from as far as Freetown in Sierra Leone. Fourah Bay, established in 1847, became a college of choice for African elites across West Africa. The lower echelons of society even attracted people from further afield – Yoruba and Igbo merchants, popularly called “Chekri” dominated the tertiary sector as petty shop traders. I vaguely remember Fulani horsemen, some excellent singers of Koranic verses, peddling charms and telling

fortunes. There was also a constant influx of seamen from the Atlantic coastline that gave the twin city a unique Black Atlantic cosmopolitan ambience rooted in the local Akan culture.

The dawn of Ghana’s independence in 1957 changed everything. A new harbour was constructed in Tema in 1962. Even before then, Ghana’s new model town was gradually taking the shine off Sekondi - Takoradi. Tema, only eighteen miles and much closer to Accra, the capital city was the centre of government business and commerce.

Western Show Boys – Elite lawyers and scholars

Daniel Essuon Gwira, my grandfather, originally from the Gwira Royal household in Elmina, settled in Sekondi and set up a successful legal practice after reading law at Cambridge University in 1910. He was called to the bar at Kings Inn in Dublin, around the same time as William Essuman Gwira Sekyi, his close relative. He is popularly known as “Kobina Sekyi” in the history books.

With the publication of “The Blinkards” in 1915, Kobina Sekyi became the first Ghanaian playwright in English to satirize the blind adaptation of European customs and mannerisms and spoke against the cultural excesses of British colonialism. Kobina Sekyi walked the talk by always dressing in African cloth, even in court, refusing to wear the lawyer’s wig, at the risk of expulsion from the bar.

Kobina Sekyi later became President of Aborigines Rights Society, the organisation that advocated for Ghana's independence before United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) and Kwame Nkrumah's Party, Convention Peoples Party (CPP) that eventually led Ghana to independence in 1957.

Edwina Ewurafua Gwira (nee Mrs Owusu), my mother was the third child of Daniel Essuman Gwira Sekyi. She caught the bug for education and creativity early and trained as a teacher at St Monica's Training College in Mampong, Ashanti. She taught for a few years before an opportunity came up to study nursing in the United Kingdom.

During the war years from 1939 and its aftermath, an acute shortage of nurses in the United Kingdom led to a recruitment drive across the British empire. Sponsored by her parents, Ma arrived in London in 1948 and enrolled at Aylesbury Nursing Training College.



Ma on the wedding day. Ebo Gwira on our right

Ma met and married Edwin Owusu, a law student and spent memorable days in Dublin and London, together with her older brother, Daniel Ebo Gwira, also studying law and Caroline his newly wedded wife.



Ma – Edwina Owusu. Nee Efua Gwira

Back to Ghana

Ma gave birth to Maame Akoto, my older sister in London and returned to Ghana in 1951. She had two other children – myself (Paa Kwarteng) and Yoofi (Charles).

It is fair to say that the Gwira family, especially my grandmother was not particularly enthused about her daughter's marriage to a less than financially stable law student. Ma probably made matters worse when on the marriage registration day, she wore cloth printed with traditional symbols that made it clear her right to choose whom she wanted to marry. The symbols are called "Konkonsa ni be br3" ("Backbiters /gossipers will suffer").

She was a natural beauty and once crowned a beauty queen. Same age as

Queen Elizabeth of England, she took particular interest in the British royal, especially the queen. Growing up as a child, her mother used to order most of the household items from London stores like Oxendale and Bakers of Kensington. This included fashionably designed dresses made popular by the British royals. Daniel Ebo Gwira, Ma's oldest brother used to collect the valued items from Sekondi post office, near the railway Station.

Like her mother, these optics of colonialism did not detract from her deep love for African culture. She always received visitors at home in her tailored African gowns and headgear. On special occasions, you could trust Ma to step out in the most dashing African designed clothes.

Embarrassment at Takoradi Harbour

Ma and Daddy came back from London with literally nothing. The arrival at the harbour told the whole story. Due to lack of communication maybe, Ma's parents sent big truck to Takoradi Harbour, a good 10 miles or so, to collect their luggage. Apparently, the truck returned with only two or three suitcases.

Grandma was a "sharp tongue" lady and made sure they never forgot this embarrassing episode in a hurry. Difficult times followed and the young couple had to move out of the family house and spend time in Accra and Oda. That was where Daddy's relatives lived, even though he originated partly from Kumasi and

Berekum. They returned to Sekondi but Daddy left again.

School

Much of my early life revolved around school. Actually, wherever Ma was teaching. Unofficially, I skipped nursery and started primary school when I was about 3 years old. Slightly older, much of my week-ends and holidays were spent running around with the boys, mostly from Asafo Street down the hill, from the family house.

Asafo Street was one of Sekondi's famous miles of tarred road with a public water pump strategically placed at the top end. People had to wait for their turn to pump the water, so petty traders quickly gathered to sell local candy and Kelewele (fried plantain). Popularly called "Pipe Ano", the spot became well-known for seasoned gossipers, petty thieves and secret lovers.

Asafo Street

'Pipe Ano' location was strategic. It was at the intersection of Asafo Street and George Street. The Gwira family house stood majestically above it, separating the interpreters of King George's law from Asafo Street, the colourful street where poor families eked out a living - as petty shop keepers of all sorts - bus and taxi dressers, washermen and photographers of the elite and others prepared to suspend large chunks of their monthly incomes on wedding photos. Asafo Street was the magical world of

my childhood, inhabited by fascinating characters living out their dreams in colourful, revolving prisms of life. The people were ever-changing – dancing in the streets to car horns, not forgetting inebriated ladies telling fortunes, hawkers in intellectual spats with shop owners over customers, retired footballers playing “totals” and “gutter to gutter” with aspiring youngsters, and boxers knocking out imaginary opponents. There were lots of musicians; good drummers, bad drummers, players of tuneless accordions, magicians, and some fraudsters.

Dangerous Encounters at European Town

I also have vivid memories of dangerous, near-death encounters that send shivers down my spine. One particular event still gives me nightmares. The day wild dogs nearly chewed me up in European Town, the restricted suburb for white colonial civil servants. Most had left Ghana by the early 1960s but the place was still out of bounds to most Africans and patrolled by guards with wild dogs. The attraction was mango, juicy mangoes that we felt must not go to waste.

That morning, I slipped out early. As soon as I was out of the family house, I removed my shoes, hid them and raced barefooted down the hill to Asafo Street. Kojo Mensah was waiting with Bashiru at her mother’s provision shop. Maame Alata was Bashiru’s mother. Well, so-called because Alata was an alias for every

Nigerian. She was really kind and loved Bashiru to bits even though she knew the rascal frequently stole the sweets in the shop for his friends. She asked if we wanted some bread and margarine but we were gone before she finished serving a customer.

European Town was a few miles away. We climbed the hill and took a detour to get to the mango trees. Bashiru led us and with a great idea to outwit the guards. He knelt down in the grass to get a good view of the bungalows a hundred yards away. He pulled his homemade catapult and shattered a glass window. We laughed as the guards released their dogs, barking hysterically in the wrong direction but we were in for a rude surprise.

Halfway up a mango tree, I heard a loud scream which could only come from one of the guards. My heart sank when this was followed by a dog barking. I looked down and it was a vicious-looking dog desperately jumping as high as possible to grab my legs. “Get down!” the guard screamed. I pleaded for mercy but that seemed to have infuriated him even more. He released his dog, which tried to grab my leg by shaking the tree and jumping as high as it could. Kojo Mensah disappeared. And to think this was all his idea.

Bashiru stood his ground. He had explained before that the dogs were fed once a week to make sure they were hungry enough to chew any intruder alive. What followed was incredibly bizarre. He took out a cramped newspaper from his pocket and threw it in the direction of the dogs. I could vaguely see him through the foliage of trees.

The dog under me run off. It went straight to the cramped newspaper, sniffed it and took a bite. Then it ran off, howling. The other dog did the same, howling even louder. In a few minutes, they were all gone. The security guard followed them, not sure what was happening.

Back at Asafo Street, Bashiru claimed the newspaper was soaked in a magical liquid his older brother brought from Lagos. We believed him. He mentioned the name in Yoruba but I was too shaken to remember it.

Bashiru, “Bash” or “Bash Bash!” as we called him after our miraculous escape was born in Sekondi and spoke impeccable Fantse. His two older brothers managed the sweet stall at the local Rex Cinema. Kojo Mensah and I got free passes to watch our favourite cowboy and Indian films. His father was also well connected. He was the driver for Sekondi Eleven Wise football club, the town’s favourites even though Hassacas spared no effort to beat them every time they locked horns.

Eleven Wise was once relegated from the national league, depriving us of free entry to Gyandu Park. The gates were opened ten minutes before the final whistle but that was frankly not good enough for us. There must be other ways to enter the stadium earlier. Bashiru came up with a plan which I supported. Kojo Mensah, ever the skeptic agreed but we were sure, with a contingency plan. Bashiru warned him to forget. There will be no escape this time. if things went wrong.

We formed a football team by recruiting boys of our age group, mostly from Asafo Street. Our stadium was the stony pitch above the family house. I was captain and nicknamed “Dealer”, for what reason, I can barely remember. I kept an exercise book of newspaper cuttings, of famous Ghanaian footballers like Aggrey Fynn, Baba Yara, Osei Kofi and Kwasi Owusu of Bofoakwa Football team.

Golf and Horse Racing

Uncle Ebo, my oldest uncle gave me a taste of the social life of the Sekondi elite. I learnt how to hold a tee at Sekondi Golf Club and enjoyed wonderful days at Takoradi Race Course cheering my favourite horse. I didn’t do well with the binoculars but I soon got hang of it. Ma used to go to the Aden Club at European Town with her siblings and friends. Apparently, Daddy was not too excited about Waltz and foxtrot. Previously, the club had catered exclusively to white colonial civil servants. Come independence, Aden club was transformed into one of the hottest social clubs for Highlife, the sounds of the new Ghana.

Many Rivers to Cross

In the midst of all the excitement, my early childhood was plagued by serious challenges relating to my parents, their marriage and the difficult transition from the United Kingdom back to the Gold Coast.

Ma was determined to start teaching again but could not find a permanent position in Sekondi or Takoradi. The only option was a position outside the twin city. Most well-trained teachers refused to take up teaching appointments in remote villages. Ma said yes and with three children in tow went to teach in isolated villages beyond Takoradi – villages like Hotopo, Apawine and others not on the map.

We all lived in a single room with a kitchen, fetched water from the muddy rivers and used the same dugout latrines as the villagers. There was no electricity, no safe drinking water and other basic amenities. As children, we cried and fell ill frequently but Ma never gave up. We enjoyed other experiences, of course – playing freely in the unspoiled environment and developing social consciousness from an early age. There were many dangers accounting for the high mortality in these villages. Scorpion and snake bites were common – and it was always tempting to swim in the rivers, as most of the village children did. This gave Ma near heart attacks whenever I disappeared with my friends.

Looking back, she helped us to broaden our horizons and to better understand, what for most people at the time was the real world – Experiencing it first-hand gave us a humbling spirit and as Ma used to say, “never take anything in life for granted.”

At night, with no electricity – sometimes the lantern would run out of kerosene – she told us amazing stories in the dark, mostly her own stories,

emphasizing her life’s vision – “Most things have happened before”. “In spite of the odds, always strive for excellence and dedication always pays off, if not now, definitely in the future. Ma always sounded prophetic and it was clear she drew her strength from powerful spiritual energy.

The Joy of Teaching

Teaching was a great joy for Ma. In those days, teaching went with immense respect and reverence. Even in the villages where people had little, we always found bundles of foodstuff left at our doorstep. Ma always asked around who put them there but no one seemed to know. Parents would send their children to help with our domestic chores. What she never got over was why the villagers always asked why a nice ‘Akataasia’ (educated lady) was doing in those sort of places.

Ma’s eyes always lit up when she received compliments for her work. She felt a deep sense of satisfaction when children who had ‘passed through her hands’ go on to achieve great things in life. She met many and we were always proud when ‘big people’ we knew thanked her or expressed gratitude for helping shape their lives.

Apart from the villages close to Takoradi, Ma taught in Accra, Kumasi and Tamale, where we continued to learn about the beauty of different cultures and joy from diverse people living together.

Tema. Harbour City

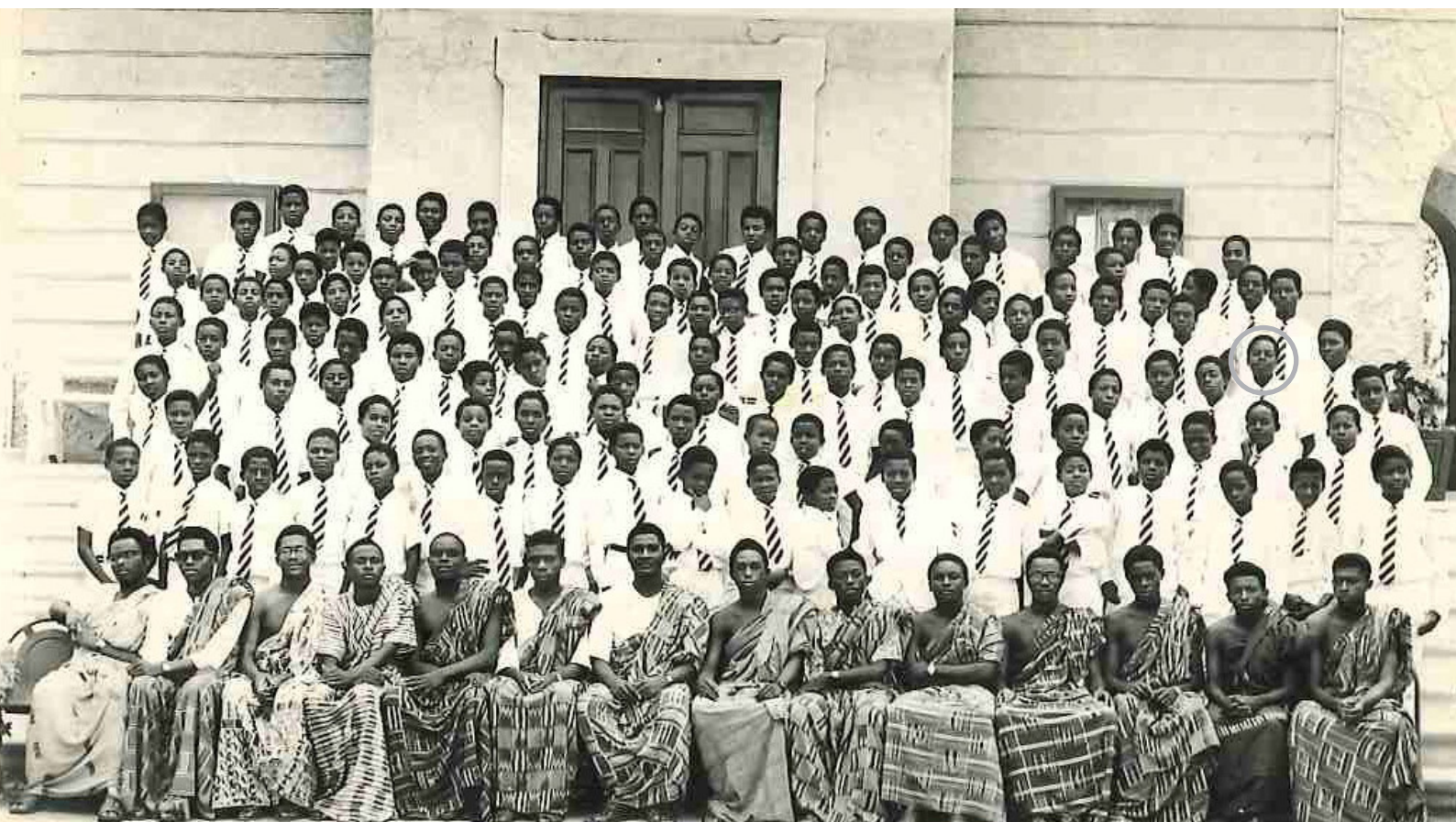
Ma's final days as a teacher brought us to Tema, during the mid-1960s. It was a model harbour city built from scratch. Tema was connected to Accra, Ghana's capital by a 20-mile modern motorway – That was when many motorways around the world had not been constructed. Tema transformed into a vibrant cosmopolitan city that attracted people from all walks of life in Ghana and beyond.

Ma taught in a couple of schools and was appointed a headteacher. I first attended Oninku Primary School and then Akodwo Middle School. In my second year, I passed the Common Entrance examination and gained admission to Adisadel College. Ma did

not let me go so I sat for the Common Entrance again the following year and got admitted to Adisadel. During the year I was at Middle School, I got promoted to standard 7 and sat for the School Leavers Certificate, passing with distinction.

Adisadel College Days

I spent 7 years at Adisadel College, from 1969 to 1976, and sat for my O and A levels. At the interview held at Achimota College in Accra, the headmaster of Adisadel, Orleans Pobee, a benign tyrant made me aware that my father taught him at Adisadel. I was too timid to ask him for any details. Mr Orleans Pobee was larger than life and intimidating. He certainly was not a person to indulge in what he might think were



Adisadel College '74 Group. Circled, Kwesi Owusu

trivial distractions. Ma later explained that was just before daddy left for England. It was a known tradition for young scholars to earn extra money teaching at Adisadel before they boarded Elder Dempster at Takoradi Harbour for England.

The Exciting Days

My days at Adisadel started with excitement during the very first week. Dubbed “Homos Week,” this was an anachronistic public school ritual during which freshers were allowed to be bullied, made to sing profane songs, ridiculed and humiliated – all in the hope of toughening them up for college life. The most popular profane song was called “Swinging” (X rated) with call and responses sung by freshers organised into groups. A quick audition of voices divided us into those suited for the high notes and bass parts.

Essay writing was another key feature of Homos week. All freshers were obliged to write – “The last night with my girlfriend”. As it turned out I was told I wrote one of the best stories. The fact of the matter is that I didn’t have a girlfriend or ever before and was an innocent virgin. Sooner than later, I was reading my salacious story to entertain the seniors.

Love Letter Writer

It got me thinking. I could actually earn some extra cash from my creative talent. I had come to school with my little pocket money and “provisions,” – tin milk and sardines in my “chop” box. I started to write love letters for a fee. Some paid me in kind; tins of sardines and milk.

Tuesdays were my busiest days. The letters had to be posted on Wednesday to get to the girls Friday. The boys could then visit them on Saturday. The girls schools in Cape Coast; Wesley Girls High School and Holy Child were run by strict white nuns but the girls were allowed to receive visitors on Saturday afternoons, for a couple of hours..

Aggrey Memorial Secondary School was also a mixed schools in Cape Coast but it was deemed more prestigious to have a girlfriend in Wesley Girls or Holy Child. The competition for boys was between Adisco boys (Adisadel) and those from Mfanstipim. During my heydays, the impression from Wesley Girls was that Adisco boys wrote better love letters.

Incidentally, the first letter I wrote professing love to a girl at Wesley Girls ‘bounced’. I later found out a university guy was involved, so maybe I had no chance in the first place. That let down however sharpened the tools of my trade, so to speak.

The psychology of teenage love

Reflecting on my own middle school experience, it became clear to me that girls of my age group were more matured than the boys in matters of romantic love and relationships. Thanks to, Mills and Booms and other romantic novels. Most of my male friends were complete greenhorns and used very limited “love vocabulary” I was a greenhorn too but I used my

imagination to impress. My friends would start love letters with phrases

like “You’re my oxygen. if you don’t love me, I’ll die.” My job was to replace such nonsense with some love poetry, well-placed jokes and romantic flattery.

Invariably, I had some bad clients. Some boys simply would not pay but I had the perfect antidote. It always worked like magic. I would single change the name of their sweetheart in the letters. Instead of Dear Mary, I would write Dear Grace. The guys never spotted it. Come Saturday, I would wish them luck and send a friend to Wesley Girls to observe how well they do.

At visiting time, the boy writes down the name of who they want to see. The girl would then be called and they would meet at the assembly hall. Most girls who have received letters with wrong names would refuse to come. The most aggrieved ones would actually keep the boy waiting for the entire duration of visiting time or just appear just before closing time, usually with a rude note – “My name is Mary, not Grace, you two-timing, cheat !” My accomplice would come back with graphic details of the exciting encounter. Pity there were no camera phones in those days.

I was of course very sympathetic when they returned. Some of the ‘fiasco’ boys would lie and say they met the girl but no longer interested. The story would change when I tell them exactly what happened. The

die-hards will stick to their stories but most would settle their bills quietly and discuss next steps.

It was not easy to win back aggrieved sweethearts. I charged extra for those ‘do or I’ll die’ letters because it was not an easy job. . It was tough explaining how Mary became Grace! Bruised teenage egos were the worst to assuage but the girls usually start coming around after two or three letters. Carefully chosen phrases of regret and flattery also helped with a nice card or photo of the lover boy taken by Astral. He was a professional photographer who also did a brisk business in the teenage love business. Year after college, I was invited to the wedding of one of my bad clients. He never paid his bill on time. I had to change the name of her girlfriend several times. At the reception, the bridegroom was telling me how lucky my friend was. Still giving him a chance after addressing her with so many different names. We all laughed about it.

End.

To be continued in the next issue of the Kola Magazine. Visit Biography at Kwesinews website



Kwesi Owusu

Hugh Masekela.

The Kelewele Story



Hugh Masekela: Photo Credit – Jak Kilby

This photo by Jak Kilby is my favourite. Many to choose from, I must admit because Masekela is one of the most photogenic musicians of his generation. It must have been taken at one of the Free Mandela concerts in London during the 1980s.

Masekela is flying high on the high notes, completely absorbed in the music. At the same time, his eyes are fixated on a side attraction – possibly a stunningly beautiful attraction.

The photo captures for me an important aspect of Masekela's unique musical talent. What inspired his creative genius were the things he felt and saw with his own eyes. It kept alive his love for life which often turned a serious and meticulous performer into a funny and gregarious man. Masekela

was in that mood when I first encountered him in Accra during the 1970s.

Accra's Swinging 70s

It's midnight at Keteke, one of the hottest discos in Accra, if not the Atlantic coastline. Certainly, the place to be, even for an impressionable underage boy like me.

Keteke was a stone throw from my cousins' place on 'Abbey Road', so I followed a couple of their older friends to 'dig the scene'. To get in, I tried my usual trick – which was to pose with a lighted cigarette and stroll in with confidence in my oversized Dashiki and bell-bottom trousers. I got past the bouncers at the door but the one at the entrance to the chilled disco blazing a hot track from Kool

and the Gang would not be fooled. He rudely blocked my way and told me to 'gerrou!' His huge hands insinuated a slap so I did exactly as I was told. Nobody argued with Tornado. He was a well known 'herbs' General and thought to be slightly deranged.

I decided to go home but I had to wait because one of my cousins had the keys to the house. He came out with a new girlfriend to buy PK gum and winked at me. It was obvious he wasn't going home anytime soon. Suddenly, Tornado rushed out of the disco yelling "Masakila,! Masakila! Glazing, glazing. That was when this funky looking dude stepped out with two of the hottest girls God ever created. They were in tall platform shoes dangling their Coca Cola bottle-shaped bodies beautifully. Masekela maybe also

needed slightly taller platform shoes but that didn't matter. He was the man! I stepped up to shake his hands as his slightly inebriated girls chatted with friends and shaking their booties to an imaginary boogie track, at the same time.

After midnight

"Nice dashiki. What are you doing here? " I tried to explain but Tonardo drowned me out with "Mesikila ! Mesikila !" He conveniently backed off when Masekela spoke. "Nerr, take this. Buy Kelewele," he said and dropped a 10 pesewa coin into my dashiki pocket. The girls got his attention again and they were off with Tornado in tow. I was tempted to dash into the disco but my cousin luckily appeared and took me home.



Masekela and Orlando Julius

SE-4475

sounds great in STEREO

Hugh Masekela's next album



ALONG COMES MARY • CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' • NORWEGIAN WOOD • ELUSIVE BUTTERFLY • SOUNDS OF SILENCE • IT'S NOT UNUSUAL
LOVING YOU IS SWEETER THAN EVER • SHE'S COMIN' MY WAY • FROM ME TO YOU • ACTIN' LIKE A FOOL • LITTLE STAR • IF I NEEDED SOMEONE



100 Club, London

The next time I saw Masekela was in the late 1970s, at London's 100 Club on Oxford Street. I was then a student at the London School of Economics which was only a few bus stops away. 100 Club was not as exciting as Keteke and operated as a live venue for an older crowd. Age rarely affected my tastes in music or the creative arts for that matter but I was glad to be a grown-up and not having to sneak into clubs.



Most of the crowd were South Africans and fans of African Jazz. Africa Centre was not far from here, where most of the African creative arts happened with a popular disco night on Fridays. Those were the days London functioned like the cultural capital of Africa. 100 club was run by Julian Bahula, a South African drummer and his white wife. It was a small basement mostly jammed packed with exiled South Africans and British lovers of African music, as well as intellectuals sympathetic to African Liberation movements.

The musicians mingled freely with their fans and the running joke was that they included spies of the Apartheid South African regime who could not stay away from the great township Jazz music. The roll call of artists was legendary – Dudu Pukwana, Louie Moholo, Lucky Ranku, Mervyn Africa, Masekela, Vicky Mhlongo, Graham Morgan, Mogotsi Mothle and the other leading lights.

One night, I spotted Masekela at the bar and quickly made a beeline for him. He was surrounded by fans and admirers, including some eye-catching girls. Not as sensational as the Accra Keteke girls. I waited and the more I waited, realised I had to do something special

to catch his attention.

“Ahh Chale”, I called out.

“Yes Chale” he replied instinctively, turning around. I might as well have called his name.

“Hey, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine” I replied “But I want some Kelewele.” He laughed.

“From where are you getting Kelewele at this time?”

“Keteke”

“Ahh, Accra boy!”

I nodded and told him about our Keteke encounter. He struggled to remember but enjoyed every bit of it. Some of the girls were cutting their eyes as if I was getting too much attention but I paid no heed.

“So did you buy the Kelewele?” he finally asked. I shook my head, he stretched his hand.

“It’s only 10 pesewas, less than a penny.”

“Naa, It’s a very simple matter, my brother. You get me a cold beer or my money back!”

I called the barman to order but he slapped a ten-pound note on the counter. “Oh Chale!”

I met Masekela a few more times. The last time was at Goethe Institut in Accra. That was a few years before he passed on. Masekela remembered me and asked for his Kelewele money. We laughed.



Dudu Pukwana



The Moment I Nearly Betrayed Arsenal



It's always been intriguing to guess what song Drogba, Essien and Mikel, then stars of Chelsea were dancing to. Shatta Wale's "Forgetti" or "Joro" by Wiz Kid come to mind but both were released much later.

It was 2012 and Chelsea had just won the UEFA Champions League Cup, after a nail-biting penalty shoots out.

Bayern Munich missed their kick! I snatched a cool drink from the fridge to calm my nerves. What I couldn't do was still keep my eyes on the TV screen. The tension was just too much! Inside the stadium, I would guess the anxiety could catch fire if a lighted match was thrown at it from the terraces.

Drogba stepped forward to settle matters. God knows what was going on in his mind but he seemed calm and composed – oblivious to the weight of responsibility he carried on his shoulders? He was one

of the top strikers in the world but at that moment that had zero significance. Was he going to score or miss. That was the question. I turned down the volume on my TV and closed my eyes.

Did I start counting? When I opened my eyes, my friends were screaming like absolute maniacs into the streets. At the stadium, it was total pandemonium.

I had a problem as an Arsenal supporter.

I had boasted. Chelsea was no match for Bayern.

Essien, Drogba and Mikel had converted me for a few thrilling hours. My senses were not restored but what do I say?

My phone was ringing off the hook.

<https://youtu.be/jPqZZsQ-IHE>

KANYE WEST IS NOT CRAZY



Kanye West loves Donald Trump and thinks slavery was a choice. We certainly can disagree with him about the choice of a people, shackled and forced unto ships that sailed to a place where they worked for free as property of their enslavers.

Kanye is the bull in the china shop, he shoots from the hip and scatters the pigeons. But does that make him crazy? “I don’t want to say crazy because I also want to change the stigma of crazy. I want to change the stigma of mental health”, says Kanye West, trying to make sense of a crazy world. His struggles with mental health are well documented. Less known is his fight against the diabolical impact of stigma. It raises issues not only pertinent to his career but opens for us a

unique window through which we can discuss and recalibrate our understanding of the vexed relationship between creativity and mental illness.

Are artists any crazier than other people?

Historically, the notion that talented artists are crazy is strong in the public domain. There are of course artists battling with mental illness. My life as a creative in both performance and literary arts certainly provides sad experiences of artists suffering from severe depression and the dire consequences. In the middle of a show, the guitarist simply put down his instrument and walked off the stage never to be seen again. A brilliant singer jumped out of the window of her sixth-floor

apartment to her death. There are many other less dramatic but equally sad stories to tell. That said, the impact of stigma is so powerful that many people live in denial of their mental illness, scared about what society would think about them. Seeking support or help is usually put off and often comes too late.

Stigma and Creative Lives.

More generally, the stigma of mental illness undermines our acceptance of creative arts as a justifiable career option. This impacts badly, especially on young people who may be thinking of turning their creativity into careers. Unfortunate stories or reports about talented artists who die as a result of say, drug overdose or suicide travel faster than the speed of light. Anybody else and the connection between their misfortune and what they do would not be so fixated in the public's mind. The media perception definitely gets worse when the spectre of drugs, sex and alcohol abuse are thrown into the toxic mix and seen as essential to a creative lifestyle and career.

Strangely enough, the consumption of creative goods made by supposedly "crazy artists" does not seem affected by stigma. On the contrary, the world needs some 'crazy' to cope with what most people experience as "normal". Creatives are no "crazier" than other folks we know but the creative process requires a different working of the brain. Being naturally talented is a blessing but the rest can also be hard work. A flair for creating words, visual imagery or a song may not exempt you from taking up a whole day to do what usually takes a few minutes. Many

talented writers have skipped breakfast, lunch, and dinner cracking their brains for that elusive word!

The Power of Visualization

Most of what artists create is by imagining and visualization. To make a film, it is helpful I see it first, literally. I need to 'see' the storyline in my mind, sometimes frame by frame in order to tell it to others. 'Seeing' the film and telling it helps others interpret it, which is the basis for effective collaboration.

If the creative output is music, improvisational methodologies can work equally well. Once the creative core has been invented, others can interpret the song and pass it on. It can go through cycles of creativity and cross several aesthetic boundaries.

Power of creative Adrenaline

In performance, the artist is usually driven by high doses of creative adrenaline. This can be compared to climbing a mountain. Takes a lot to reach the top. That could be the easy part. How you come down may be harder. Paradoxically, the applause is loudest if you are very talented. I have seen some top artists do four or five encores every night on a two-month tour. How do they come down each night?

The scourge of drugs

A performer who relies on drugs to manage pendulum swings of adrenalin is in trouble. What about support from the music industry that is constantly refuting claims that executives make more money from dead artists. This has

been persistent because there are few safety nets for artists stigmatized as “troubled”. Many have sadly died from mental illness, drug addiction or tragic incidents – Jimi Hendrix, Jean Michel Basquiat, Janice Joplin, Marvin Gaye, Phil Lynott, Donny Hathaway, Peter Green, Brian Wilson, J Cole, Kendrick Lamar, Sam Cook and many others.

Kanye West Matters

He is brilliant and a hugely influential artist whose impact has been phenomenal. “Love Lockdown” got me hooked to his creative vibe and blown by the video featuring African warriors.

Kanye West - Love Lockdown

The video “Jesus Walks” was also mind-blowing. A powerful precursor to his controversial album “Jesus is King”.



Jimi Hendrix

Kanye West - Love Lockdown

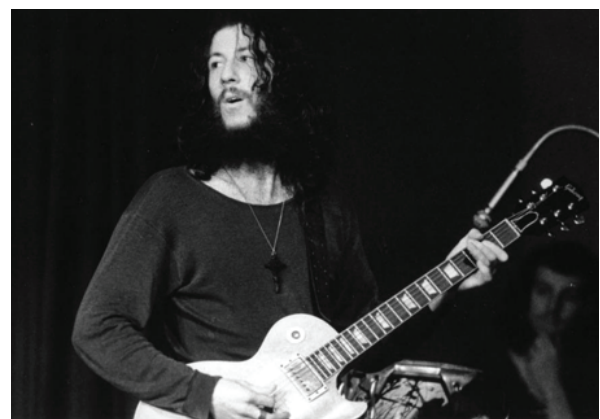
The video “Jesus Walks” was also mind-blowing. A powerful precursor to his controversial album “Jesus is King”.

This album and Kanye’s conversion raised highbrows. Older tracks like “Jesus Walks” however point to an underlying attraction to Christian gospel and deliverance. Nothing new there. The church was key to the birth of African American music. Many artists still straddle the divides. Most times they cross over to secular music but retain close ties. Like Al Green, they sometimes return to play key roles.

In a society where incredibly talented artists are rewarded with thrills of money and fame, your own life can become your worst nightmare.



Jean Michel Basquiat



Peter Green

Cyril Regis.

A Bullet For England



Cyril was a famous Black British footballer.

Powerful striker with great pace

In 1978, he was selected to play for England

A fan sent him a bullet through the post

He laughed.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/20/-no-win-race-a-story-of-belonging-britishness-and-sport-derek-bardowell-review>

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2082344.Pitch_Invaders



Credit - Bobpixel RIP

A Place Women Are Not Allowed To Give Birth



Women are not allowed to give birth here

How did I feel when I was told? Stunned into silence, I guess. The incredible story of Dove, a village in the Volta Region of Ghana where women are not allowed to give birth. Once a woman is pregnant and about to deliver, she must leave the village and go deliver somewhere else.

Righteous indignation filled the silence. Words like "cruel", "senseless", "discrimination", "callous", "wicked" agitated my mind. Strangely enough, these words lost their power when I visited the village. Experience teaches that the vilest people can appear the kindest and most courteous. I'm also aware that evil practices can be normalised over time, especially if they are ritualised through custom and religion. I never felt I was in an evil place.

The test for making such documentaries is to ensure that it's objective and non-judgemental. Of course, the story would be highly intriguing if indeed Dove was evil. The question to answer then would be; how has this small, sleepy village remained evil for so long?

It was great to note that throughout making the Maternal Health TV Series, no matter where people stood on matters of tradition and custom, everybody was agreed that the needless deaths of women from giving birth must stop.

We found it necessary to make a woman the central focus of the story. You might think that was obvious. Well, certainly not from the many sensational videos posted on YouTube.

Most were packed full of male experts, pontificating about customary history and religion, rather than trying to understand and find solutions.

We were lucky to meet Dzigbordi. She was nine months pregnant and just about to leave the village because her time was up. She spoke very little and brief in her responses, as we followed and filmed her around. She was extremely solemn on the day of departure and barely said a word. We tried hard to get her to express her thoughts more but she only said what she really felt important to say.

It was touching to see her get on the back of the motorbike that took her to the river, where she crossed into temporary exile.

What could be the reason?

Off-camera, she told me that, according to legend, so many women died giving birth in Dove. She did not say that was the reason why the women supported such a discriminatory practice but I went away thinking. Did it make sense as a strategy to avoid further maternal deaths in the village?

After she gave birth, we invited Dzigbordi to the studio in Accra. She came

with Dove's traditional leader who initially refused to come because he had enough of the sensationalist videos about his village. In the discussion, he gave his usual rundown of Dove customs and traditions but it was great to hear him say that he did not object to a maternal health clinic in Dove. His only caveat was that the location had to be beyond a certain point. And it seemed every person in Dove, including even the children knew exactly where to locate the demarcation. When the matter was further interrogated, he confirmed the facility could be anywhere, if some rituals were performed. After the show, off-camera, he said there were three crucial rituals. When I asked him why three he said one may be enough. That quickly took my mind back to what Dzigbordi told me. Dove had a history of high maternal deaths. If that was stopped, there would be no need to leave the village and deliver elsewhere.

A week or so after the show, the chief sent us a big thank you. He had already started discussing the construction of a maternal health clinic with the District Health Director, who was also on the show.

We were chuffed to receive the Health Advocacy Award!





Etika Commits Suicide



His real name was Desmond Amofa, son of a Ghanaian politician who settled his family in the US. Online, his name was Etika, Nice alias. Can work for a rapper, pop star or even a porn star. Outlandish. Hip. Certainly cool for the captain of a far-flung space station circling Jupiter. Name

for an exceptional online personality? Maybe not, why not. That was my mood when I was watching his first video. The shock on his face. The outrage, the hysteria. A schoolmate had just made the news killing a cop in cold blood and he just could not get over it.



ETIKA TELLS A STORY ABOUT HIS IN COLLEGE FRIEND THAT BECAME A CRIMINAL

Sensational? Yes.

Completely over the top? Yes.

Sanitised opinions? No. Swears a lot - Uha

This kid is a genius.

A multitasking genius

Spontaneous and as funny as hell.

Come to think about it, Etika must have been born wearing headphones with and a mouse dancing mouse in his hands

I was caught up in his timeless twilight zone

An insomniac hooked to his s** like a fried up junkie.

G



ETIKA PLAYS THE MOST CURSED GAME (SEPTEMBER 1999)

Then Meltdown

It came as a big surprise. That evening, Etika looked unwell, off colour and pale.

Instead of his infectious humour, he sounded like scrambled eggs burning on the fire

Scats as bad as a Jazz man struggling on cold turkey.

I thought it was a prank. I wished it was but sadly not.

The demons have taken over and frying his brains

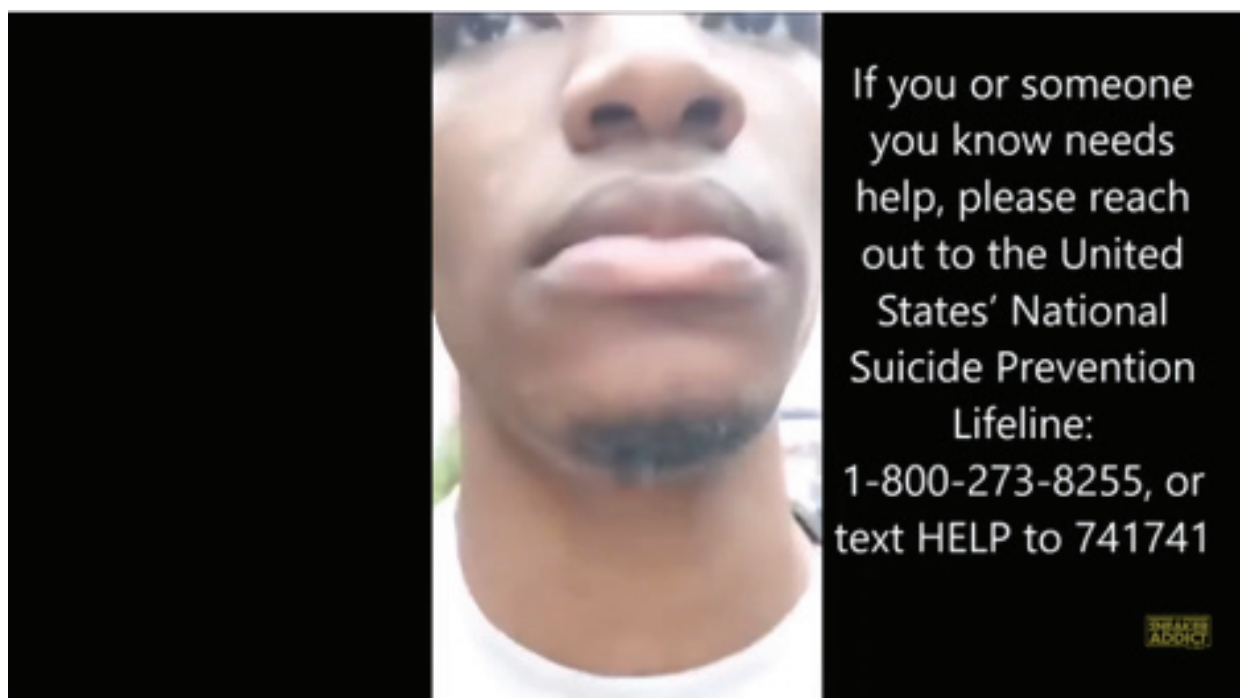
Twitter yanked him off

Others followed. That was when it started to sink in. We watched on helplessly, millions of us.

145 million views on YouTube alone. Over 1.3 million subscribers and nobody noticed?

Did nobody knock on his door or call emergency?

Not even when he wandered the streets broadcasting his suicide video, live?



<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7bxuz8>

19 June 2019

30 years old.

