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Carola Lentz/Jan Budniok

Ghana@50 – celebrating the nation: an account from Accra¹

Ever since Ghana became the first country in Sub-saharan Africa to achieve independence in 1957, March 6th has been celebrated. But 'Ghana@50' is regarded as a particularly special occasion evoking both pride and critical reflection. 'Championing African excellence', the celebration's official motto, reflects Ghana's self-confidence vis-à-vis other African nations. Ghanaians are proud their country was a leading advocate of African independence and pan-Africanism, that it is currently one of Africa's few stable multi-party democracies and that it plays a pioneering role in the New Partnership for Africa's Development initiative. And when Ghana's president J. A. Kufuor was elected Chairman of the African Union in January 2007, it was yet another tribute to the nation's pre-eminent standing on the continent.

Celebrating such events provokes discussion regarding national values, shared experiences and socio-political unity. The celebrations become an important arena where the state makes the nation manifest in the hearts and minds of its citizens. The entire Jubilee year is marked by commemorative events sponsored by the government, civic associations and private businesses.² However, the jubilee's organisation has also provoked heated debates about how 'national' the official celebrations are and how the nation's fiftieth anniversary should be appropriately commemorated. Controversies

1 An extended version of this paper has been published as Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, no. 83 (2007) and can be accessed online under <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/working-papers/Arbeitspapiere.html>. We would like to thank the Volkswagen-Stiftung for their financial support of the research project 'States at Work: Public Services and Civil Servants in West Africa: Education and Justice in Benin, Ghana, Mali and Niger' that made our work in Ghana possible. Thanks also go to the Honourable Alban Bagbin, Honourable Akua Senah, Dr Sebastian und Stephen Bemile, Honourable Dr Ben Kunbuor, Aloysius and Kafui Denkabe, Herbert Kongwieh and all friends and colleagues from Northern Ghana who assisted us in our research on the Independence Day Celebrations. Finally, thanks go to Katja Rieck for her competent services in copy editing (and shortening) the text.

2 The official programme can be accessed at the web-page of the Ghana@50 secretariat: www.ghana50.gov.gh/ghana50/index.php (accessed 28 Aug. 2007). Many foreign institutions, too, participate in Ghana's independence celebrations; for the German contribution to the festivities, see the Jubilee web-page organised by the German Embassy, <http://www.ghana.diplo.de/Vertretung/ghana/en/Startseite.html> (accessed 5 Sep. 2007).

centre on three main issues. First, political inclusiveness, which concerns who should organise, finance and lead the celebrations – a government body (as was the case), a committee comprised of representatives from all political parties, or an ‘a-political’ organisation that includes chiefs and representatives from professional associations. The second issue regards the celebrations’ social inclusiveness, i.e. the extent to which the symbols, performances and festivities address the ‘grass-roots’ or the political elite. Finally, the third controversy concerns ethnic and regional inclusiveness, i.e. how evenly Jubilee events and funds are geographically distributed and whether all regions and ethnic groups can identify with the festivities’ symbols and slogans.

In this paper we present our first-hand observations on March 5 and 6 in Accra, where we attended some of the official (and unofficial) celebrations. Since it was impossible to observe ‘the’ festivities in a comprehensive way, we selected the events to be observed according to the itineraries of Ghanaian ‘informants’, whom we followed closely. In order to gain a more nuanced perspective, given the political nature of the celebrations, we followed one member of the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and one member of parliament from the opposing National Democratic Congress (NDC). Because we felt it would be difficult for strangers to accept our company on such a special day, we asked Ghanaian friends and adopted family from the Upper West Region. Although this approach bore a potential ‘Northern’ bias, given the debates on regional inclusivity, we felt this perspective would prove interesting.

In the end, however, things did not work out as planned. Due to a falling out between the NDC and the government, Rawlings withdrew his participation from the official festivities. As a result ‘our’ NDC parliamentarian had to support Rawlings in attending to the visitors and international journalists who wanted to hear his views on Ghana’s anniversary and political future. In this setting our presence was not opportune. What we were ultimately able to follow will be explained below. However, it is interesting to note how the limitations to which our research was subject in practice are indicative of the on-going debates.

The golden jubilee sitting of parliament, 5 March 2007

Historically Parliament always played a central role in the independence celebrations. Under Nkrumah’s regime, however, the constitution was changed in favour of a presidential system, which also characterises Ghana’s current government and presents new challenges for the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches. One controversy during the Jubilee was how to re-enact the 1957 final session of the Legislative Assembly and the first sitting of the new Parliament in the absence of a prime minister,

and how much decision-making power Parliament would retain over the staging of the commemorative session when this session was, in reality, largely planned by members of the executive.³ This controversy – an example of debates regarding political inclusivity – was forcefully brought home quite early in our research when we attempted to secure admission to the event.

We had, quite well in advance, applied for and gotten press accreditation. But the press pass did not automatically award access to restricted events, such as the parliamentary session. Our parliamentarian friend, not aware of these regulations, fumed when the head of Parliamentary protocol told him that the ‘Castle’ was in charge of matters of procedure.⁴ However, in the end, after countless phone calls and with assistance from the Minority Chief Whip, he was able to arrange two invitations.

At 4:00 p.m., according to the official Jubilee programme, a well-known Ghanaian actor, was to re-enact Kwame Nkrumah’s declaration of independence. We were puzzled by the rather ‘unhistorical’ time, and, in fact, there was no performance that afternoon. When we arrived at the site, numerous helpers were setting up for the gala and rock concert that evening. A Dutch water engineer explained he and his crew would probably not be able to fill the pools and fountains at the mausoleum in time, even though the water supply to several parts of the city had been cut to ensure sufficient water to do so – an example of the above-mentioned tensions between the ‘grass-roots’ and the elite during the Jubilee’s planning.

Generally, many preparations were tackled at the last minute. Although television spots had been running since the beginning of the year, there was not much further evidence of a festive atmosphere. Only in early March was Ghana@50 paraphernalia available for purchase. In the capital and in Kumasi the national flags along streets and on public buildings were put up only hours before the arrival of the international guests of honour, and people complained that the streets were ‘bare and free of Ghana flags until March 5’.⁵ The National Disaster Management Organisation explained that flags were hoisted only at the last minute since most were soon stolen.⁶ However, for the NDC this was simply proof that the people really saw no reason to celebrate.

3 For more details on the 1957 organisation of events, see e.g. Ayensu and Darkwa 1999.

4 The offices of the Presidency, Vice-Presidency and some cabinet ministers are housed in one of the old slave castles on Accra’s shore, and the term ‘Castle’ is often used as a nickname (like ‘White House’, etc.).

5 ‘Ghana@50 – Time to believe in ourselves’, *Daily Graphic*, 24 May 2007.

6 ‘Ghana flags being stolen’, [http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/GeneralNews/4 March 2007](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/GeneralNews/4%20March%202007) (accessed 18 Sep. 2007).

Nevertheless, we did witness a display at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park: Nkrumah's son, accompanied by his family and a few journalists, placed a wreath at the statue of his father. That this personal act of commemoration was of little public or official interest seemed to confirm the 'real' Nkrumahists' critique that the NPP-Government, politically rooted in the former Nkrumah opposition, was only half-heartedly paying tribute to Kwame Nkrumah. So who are the 'heroes' to be honoured for their efforts towards Ghana's independence? Who is the legitimate heir to the Nkrumah legacy? A common view is that it certainly is not the NPP. Ideological claims to this heritage were in any case made against the NPP as well as the NDC by the smaller Nkrumahist parties. These controversies constitute the subtext of many publications, lectures, conferences and commemorative speeches, and it was also manifest in the almost private nature of Nkrumah's son's wreath-laying.

The debate over the heroes of independence also involved the rift between the marginalised North and the politically better represented South. This became apparent in the furor following the speech of the leader of the opposition, Alban Bagbin, from the Upper West Region, at the end of the commemorative parliamentary session. For various reasons the NPP is generally regarded an 'Akanised' party, while the opposition is predominated by Ewe and Northerners.⁷ During the commemorative session of Parliament these differences were reflected in dress: most government MPs wore colourful *kente* cloth, and most of the opposition the blue or black and white striped smocks (boubous) worn by Muslims.

The event was quite exclusive since sufficient room was needed in the public gallery to seat the VIPs. On the dais to the right of President Kufuor were the Queen of England's official representative, the Duke of Kent (one of the sons of the self-same Duchess of Kent who addressed the first session of the Ghanaian Parliament in 1957), and the African guest of honour, the Nigerian President. To the left were seated the Speaker of Parliament and the Vice-President of Ghana, as well as the President of the Pan-African Parliament. After the Speaker opened the session, short addresses were given by these dignitaries and finally by President Kufuor, congratulating the nation on fifty years of independence and a long, stable democratic tradition. When the Majority Leader moved to adjourn, Leader of the Opposition Bagbin seconded the motion and used his control of the floor to deliver a long statement, which elicited much commotion from the majority party. Bagbin noted that the motion to prorogue Parliament fifty years previously was seconded, not by the Asante politician K. A. Busia, whom President Kufuor had acknowledged in his commemorative speech, but by S. D. Dombo, a chief and

7 On this cf. Nugent 1999 and 2001.

politician from the Upper West Region. Moreover, Bagbin, in a populist move indirectly accusing the NPP Jubilee organisers of elitism, thanked ‘all Ghanaians for their patience and mandate for us to be here to represent their interests’. The rest of his statement was drowned out by the NDC faction’s tumultuous applause, and a number of NPP members waved their flags in agreement. They were possibly also grateful to Bagbin for indirectly protesting the executive’s co-optation of Parliament.

After the historic session we were too exhausted to battle our way to Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, and returned to the university campus to watch the midnight fireworks from Legon Hill. The next day we read the newspaper reports about the re-enactment of the Declaration of Independence in the presence of the President and international guests.⁸

Our NDC ‘informant’ told us that night he would assist Rawlings in meetings with the former Head of State’s foreign friends. He recommended one of us ‘shadow’ the Leader of the Opposition, Alban Bagbin, instead, who, along with other members of the faction, was to participate in the Golden Jubilee Parade.

The golden jubilee parade, 6 march 2007: the official celebration at independence square

At 7 a.m. I (Carola Lentz) met the Leader of the Opposition at Parliament to set off for Independence Square, where the parade was to commence at 9:00 a.m. Because the street was blocked by traffic, Bagbin’s official car left us to make our own way through the crowd to Independence Square. It was clear to Bagbin and other members of the NDC that the ‘enthusiastic masses’ had not assembled of their own accord, but had been bussed by the Jubilee Secretariat from the surrounding provinces to avoid the fiasco of half-empty stands that would belie the government’s unpopularity.⁹ Unsurprisingly, ruling-party supporters disagreed, and descriptions of the enthusiastic masses filled the media. Nevertheless, many official guests were only able to find seating with difficulty, the exception being ‘VVIPs’, who had invitations to sit in the Presidential Arch at Independence Square.

Bagbin assumed he would sit with the guests of honour, along with the highest government authorities and members of Parliament. However, Jubi-

⁸ See, for instance, ‘Independence Declaration re-enacted’, *Daily Graphic*, 7 March 2007.

⁹ This however did not correspond to the official press statements later made by the NDC, in which the NDC Chairman, for example, criticised the inadequate organisation of events, but then went on to expressly praise the ‘impressive nature of the large crowd which attended the parade’; ‘Reactions to Jubilee celebration’, *Daily Graphic*, 12 March 2007.

lee staff only let upstairs those with an invitation, which Bagbin did not have. His insistence that as Leader of the Opposition he did not need an invitation did not impress them. Did their recalcitrance have to do with his disregard for the government's staging instructions during the commemorative sitting of Parliament the night before? Yet we were not the only ones turned away: other prominent politicians, too, tried to negotiate entry or complained loudly about the organisation. Bagbin remained calm: the security guards were not responsible for this. But in his eyes this was a government ploy to humiliate the opposition party, and Rawlings was right not to attend the Parade. As for himself, he would return to Parliament and get some work done. According to NDC critics Bagbin was only waiting for an excuse to accuse the NPP of humiliating the NDC and to boycott the event.

At 8 a.m. Bagbin left. That afternoon, he was to attend a meeting with representatives of the US Congress's Black Caucus and political friends from abroad at the home of the NDC flag-bearer Atta Mills, a meeting to which I was not invited. Thus, like the press and television crews, I followed subsequent events from the stands.

At the entrance to the VVIP area I met the chairman of the CPP (the Convention People's Party), Dr Delle, an old acquaintance from Upper West Region, complaining stridently that he too was barred from the grandstand. However, shortly thereafter the Minister of State, who was responsible for the festivities, appeared, and Dr Delle along with several other of the minister's 'acquaintances' were hushed up to the grandstand. I remained below and, like the journalists, dodged the security guards to get the best view as the Ghanaian Armed Forces, the police and the fire brigades, the cadet schools and other parade participants filed in.

Following the entrance of President Kufuor and his guests the national pledge was recited, the guards inspected and the 'perpetual flame' lit at the Independence Monument. Splendidly dressed chiefs filed past the podium on which the President stood, offering their greetings. With the traditional pouring of libation Ga elders invoked the protection of local deities, and 'unity in diversity' was enacted with the recitation of Muslim and Christian prayers, a religious display integral to all such events in Ghana.

Ultimately, with the help of a friendly policeman and Atta Mills' special assistant, I, too, found seating in the stands. Finally sitting with the NDC's presidential candidate and his associates, I introduced myself and recounted what happened to Bagbin that morning. They, too, had tried to enter the grandstand without avail. However, eventually they found their way to the seating reserved for parliamentarians. According to Akua Dansua, even NPP members of parliament had been barred from the grandstand, but this should have applied only to normal MPs since 'it's very wrong for the Minority Leader to have to beg for a place'. All the same, she was thrilled by the display of national pride and unity.

However, the enthusiasm expressed by Akua Dansua and NDC members sitting near us hardly extended to the speeches. The Nigerian president in particular, whom Kufuor addressed as 'my brother' and who a few days later received the nation's highest honour, the Order of the Star of Ghana, was subject to biting criticism.¹⁰ Quite a few felt he should have been uninvited, since the Nigerian government had expelled several Ghanaians the week before. During President Kufuor's long speech, which mostly praised his government's accomplishments, the members of the audience listened politely, but left the enthusiastic waving of flags to the NPP faction. Where the masses sat, the speeches were drowned out anyway by Mexican waves and constant cheering.

As the official programme ended, young people gathered where Atta Mills and the rest of us were sitting, and cheered him on. After the event, many of the NDC and NPP members of parliament, who had been sitting in separate sections, greeted each other warmly, extending wishes of a happy Independence Day. 'This is like in Parliament', commented Dansua, 'we fight each other fiercely during sittings, but afterwards we are quite friendly ...' – like the night before, it was apparent that parliamentarians share a sense of community, which to some degree crosses party lines.

Shortly after 1 p.m. everyone jostled towards the parking lots and buses. I was impressed how Akua Dansua ploughed through the masses. Akua wanted nothing more than to go home, rest and most likely not attend the state banquet, like practically everyone else from the NDC. With her I drove back to Parliament, and then received a phone call from my original 'informant' that we might be able to meet that evening.

I then visited my Ghanaian brother from Upper West and his wife. They spent the morning at a Catholic Independence Day mass, and then watched the end of the parade at home on television. Now they were sitting in their garden, dressed in Jubilee t-shirts, drinking beer. Later, they would drive around the city to look at the street festivals. Together we rang up Alban Bagbin, who knows my brother quite well, as all prominent members of the educated elite from Upper West know each other. Although my brother once ran for the NPP, he congratulated Bagbin on his speech during the Commemorative Sitting the night before. Regional affiliation is often more important than party membership, and the two of them joked about the events that morning and wished each other a happy Independence Day.

¹⁰ See the report 'Ghana honours Obasanjo', Daily Graphic, 8 March 2007.

The golden jubilee parade, 6 March 2007: celebrating Ghana 'unofficially'

Around 9 a.m., my (Jan Budniok's) friend met me at a bar, accompanied by his children – all of us were dressed in Northern smocks. Since this would be a family outing, the day promised to be less politically charged than I had hoped, although my friend's phone conversations with politicians and relatives did provide insight into his political involvement and gave glimpses of the festivities in other regions. But as it turned out, celebrating Independence Day as thousands of Ghanaians did – going on family outings, visiting bars, watching events on television or listening to the radio – provided insight into discussions amongst friends and strangers and the networks which were mobilised in the exchange of congratulations and news.

Our first destination was Independence Square and the Golden Jubilee Parade. Hundreds of people flocked towards Independence Arch, waving Ghanaian flags, dressed in Ghana@50 t-shirts and caps. My friend pushed ahead, holding his children tightly. Behind Independence Arch an impenetrable crowd frustrated our attempts to catch a glimpse of the parade. What we could see was the platforms surrounding the square cramped with revelers all donning variations of the Ghanaian flag: some waving small flags, others draped in large versions and yet others body-painted as human banners.

While trying to manoeuvre to the left side of the square, the crowd surged, forcing some one hundred people into the gutter. We noticed not only the stands were filled to double capacity, but also the space between them. This, too, was packed with crowds. We were told that the happy few who had secured seating in the stands had done so early in the morning. Finally, we headed towards the back of the square, walking behind the stalls selling food and water. From there we spotted the press box surrounded by people struggling to catch a glimpse of the parade. Since I had a press pass, I tried to enter with the children, but security would not let them in. Entering alone, I took a few pictures and rejoined my friend. We walked along the back of the square, behind the Presidential Arch, where we met the NPP member responsible for youth activities in the Accra Region dressed in jeans and a Ghana@50 T-shirt. We shook hands, exchanging congratulations for such a splendid day. From our new position we could see several dignitaries seated in the grandstand at the Presidential Arch high above the crowd, and my friend tried to explain to me who-is-who.

We left the arch, heading towards the beach, which on this special day was protected by armed soldiers and tanks. Some ten thousand people had come here, only a few hundred metres from the parade, perhaps because they were unable to see it. The navy was patrolling the coast, and on hundreds of carts vendors sold food. Finally, we bought some Ghana@50 badges.

At 11 a.m. we returned to Independence Arch. From afar we could hear bits of the presidential speech. At the construction site of the new football stadium we saw Imorou, a filmmaker, happily giving money to some children. Meanwhile, the Ghanaian air force flew overhead, sky-painting stripes in the national colours. We threaded our way through the crowded street carnival peppered with vendors selling Independence-Day paraphernalia, souvenirs, food and drinks. Around Independence Arch, people hosted their own spectacle, a hundred metres away from the official parade, some in 'patriotic' outfits, others dressed as devils, many dancing with joy. Some spectators climbed trees to better see the colourful goings-on, others positioned themselves atop nearby ministerial buildings, and even the top of Independence Arch was packed with people.

We left around noon. While driving, the conversation turned to the President's dress, a matter also extensively discussed in the press. My friend sided with the President who regarded his suit a fitting symbol for modern Ghana, arguing that on similar occasions other heads of state also wore 'modern suits' and that it was more comfortable than the cumbersome cloth. But President Kufuor's suit at the Jubilee Parade also attracted scathing criticism. Although his predecessor Rawlings did wear Ghanaian dress, he was also criticised for his inability to wear the Akan cloth with the required dignity. Yet in retrospect, his preference for Ghanaian clothing is praised, as is his versatility in alternating between the Northern smock, the Muslim boubou, the kente cloth, etc. Kufuor, often seen in a Western suit, compares poorly in this regard. During the Commemorative Parliamentary Sitting, Kufuor did wear a boubou. Although criticised for being too simple for the occasion, at least it was 'Ghanaian'. The intensity of the debate over the President's dress provoked some critics to ask whether the topic really warranted so much discussion, whether there is anything uniquely 'Ghanaian' about the kente, and why the President should be criticised for wearing Western clothes when ordinary Ghanaians have no qualms about driving Western cars or putting permanents in their hair. However, the matter is hardly trivial, since clothing has become an idiom to debate the role of 'tradition' and regional identity in the modern nation.

At 12:30 p.m. we returned to the bar from where we had set out. The barkeeper was still listening to the coverage of the celebrations on the radio. We examined the photos we took, while my friend telephoned with colleagues, politicians, friends and kin. I learned many members of the elite without official functions at the events in Accra attended festivities in their home towns or followed them on television. They exchanged their impressions, congratulated each other and talked about national and local politics, by-elections and the election of the NPP presidential candidate. A brief chat with a former minister of finance was followed by calls from district chief executives, conversations with NPP regional secretaries, the NPP Vice-Se-

cretary of the Upper West Region and a young member of parliament who had travelled to his constituency and attended a function in Tema stadium. Calls were also made to family, friends and acquaintances in his home region.

At 2 p.m. we left for the Ghana International Trade Fair, only to be caught in a traffic jam where at this time there was normally no traffic at all. We again passed several luxury cars with foreign dignitaries. When we arrived at the fair grounds, hundreds of people queued at the main entrance. Festive Trade Fair streamers, designed in a style evoking the Ghana banners, in some instances even sporting both logos, were hung across the streets. Not far from the parking lot we drank cocoa at the cocoa industry stand, which was celebrating Cocoa 60. Here we listened to a lecture detailing the varieties of cocoa beans and their economic value – having been the one cash crop on which Ghana's early wealth was based and which was intimately related to the achievement of independence, it is commonly regarded as a symbol of the nation's wealth.

Visitors crowded vast grounds and exhibition halls, admiring the stands displaying various goods bearing the nation's colours. On this day the trade fair was not just a trade show and an exposition of consumer goods, but a festival. Schoolchildren and families roamed about. People met friends and family, ate and drank beer and soft drinks, wearing Ghana clothes, enjoying Independence Day. The grounds thus had become a less crowded extension of the festivities at Independence Square, and so more convenient for families. Next we joined the cheerful crowd resting under a tent in enjoying another generous round of beer, kebab and popcorn while sharing pictures on our digital cameras. Some people from my friend's home region joined our group and began to discuss the work and progress of their fellow people. Then, to my surprise, my friend introduced me to the actor who had played Nkrumah the evening before on the Old Polo Grounds, who apparently is an old acquaintance of his.

At sunset we joined the cars inching their way home. Judging by the traffic the better-off too had celebrated the day out and about in Accra; and families, in particular, had opted to enjoy their day at venues other than Independence Square, such as the trade fair.

Final reflections: Chilling at 'Tina's Cool Spot'

That evening, regional friendships prevailed over political loyalties. We met our 'informants' and friends at Tina's Cool Spot, a popular hangout for Upper West-erners and the place where our two friends from the NDC and NPP meet to discuss politics. A number of acquaintances spent the day here watching the festivities on television. It was a normal evening, except that some customers were wearing patriotic t-shirts or Jubilee-cloth smocks and that it was a bit noisier than usual.

Events were now discussed less heatedly amongst the parties during the previous weeks. Whether Ghana @50 had been an Accra event or whether the grass roots and the regions had been sufficiently included remained contentious. It was debated too whether an organisation like the Ghana@50 secretariat was effective and transparent and whether it should not have involved the opposition parties right from the outset. In any case, everyone was relieved that no one had donned party logos and that national symbols predominated. Thus, most felt the festivities ultimately bridged party lines and strengthened national unity.

Controversies notwithstanding, the debate was clearly governed by a number of shared understandings and conventions that define Ghanaian-ness. These commonalities rest not on substantive symbols, cultural traits or other 'objectifiable' characteristics. Rather, Ghanaians agree on the importance of the issues at stake and on the rules of the debate, defining Ghanaian-ness as the respect for these basic rules of civility. The desirability of political and ethnic diversity ('unity in diversity') and multi-party democracy is part of the consensus that should define the nation's future. More importantly, Ghanaians agree that disagreements should not lead to violence. Precisely how this maxim should be realised is controversial, but the debate itself strengthens national consciousness and deepens a sense of commonality.

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