AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY TO THE YEAR OF GHANA (YoG) AT KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

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Because every country has its own unique confluence of histories and cultures, the Year of Ghana like previous Annual Country Study Programs provides our learning community with an exceptionally rich opportunity to develop a more complex understanding of today’s interconnected world. Intercultural learning is about making the unfamiliar familiar. The study of Ghana is a study of social change and community building as Ghanaian culture continuously re-invents, re-discovers, and renews itself. There is great value in understanding the sociocultural forces of both continuity and innovation in Ghana today. Cultures change not by forgetting the past but by learning from it.

The modern nation of Ghana is both a story of the Western imagination and emancipation from its grips. Ghanaian culture is deeply self-conscious and other-conscious. Ghanaians understand that things change, that no condition is permanent. Still, they venerate their ancestors, connect with their past through traditions and practices, and for a large segment of the Ghanaian community there remains a strong devotion to their mothers and women as the Akan matrilineal system demonstrates. These traditional values and norms emphasize the importance of respect in Ghanaian culture. Much of the traditional knowledge and wisdom of Ghana has been disparaged or discounted. Other aspects have been misattributed and appropriated through the period of colonial rule. The general disruption, destruction, and devaluing of African culture through colonial rule has underscored the importance of values of respect, freedom and open debate in Ghanaian society.

Ghana is about the size of Oregon with a population of approximately 24 million. It is located in West Africa, bordered by Côte d'Ivoire to the west, Burkina Faso to the north, Togo to the east, and the Gulf of Guinea to the south. It has a tropical climate with wet and dry seasons and three main agricultural regions of southern coastal grasslands, central rain forest, and northern savanna. Ghana is also home to Lake Volta, the largest artificial lake in the world by surface area. The Akosombo Dam, built on the Volta River between 1961 and 1965, provides hydro-electricity for Ghana and its neighboring countries.

Evidence of human habitation in the region of modern Ghana goes back over 50,000 years. Evidence of civilizations from the late-stone-age period appears around 12,000 years ago in the modern area of Kintampo. Iron-smelting enters the region around 100 C.E. and the Akan people are present in the rain forest region by 1000 C.E. Akan groups have continuously occupied the region ever since. Along the coast, historians believe that Akan societies were mostly small, diffuse, shifting settlements but recent evidence shows that there were large settled agricultural communities that constructed impressive earthworks requiring substantial communal labor.

Today, the Akan make up the largest ethnic group in the country, the main subgroups being the Asante, the Fante, the Akwapim, the Akyem, the Akwamu, the Ahanta, the Bono, the Nzima, the Kwahu and the Safwi. The next major group is the Mole-Dagbani made up of the Nanumba, Mamprusi, Mossi, Frafra, Talensi and Dagomba. The third largest group is the Ewe, many of whom also live in neighboring Togo. There are many other groups including the Guan and Ga-Adangbe. Ghana’s population is young, with approximately 38% of the population under the age of 14.
Historically, Ghana’s primary trade routes faced north towards the empires along the Niger River and connected to the trans-Saharan caravans. Strong and centralized states existed in central and northern Ghana and vied for power over trade routes that connected the different products of the coastal and rain forest regions with the savanna lands. Islam spread widely throughout West Africa through these trade routes but did not exert much influence within the rain forest or coastal regions. With the arrival of the European maritime powers, attention increasingly turned south towards the coast. And increasing urbanization became one of the most striking changes among Ghanaian societies on the coast during the post-European contact period.⁴

The Portuguese arrived on the coast in 1471 and began construction on the Castle of Sao Jorge da Mina later known as Elmina Castle. The castle, completed in 1482, is the oldest slave trading post in West Africa and in its early days gold and ivory – not slaves - were the major exports, although slaves were purchased there and sold in Europe. The 16th century was the height of the gold rush in the Gold Coast as Ghana was called throughout the colonial period. Enslaved Africans were being imported into the Gold Coast to work the mines, and few were being shipped out. In the 17th century, new military tactics based on European firearms became widely adopted in the Gold Coast. Weapons purchased largely with gold began to arrive in the Gold Coast in huge quantities and lead to large scale displacement of people who sought refuge in the adjoining territories. The majority of Africans exported from the Gold Coast went to Jamaica and Barbados in the 18th century.⁵ By the end of the 18th century, the strongest power in Ghana were the Asante who strengthened their position by trading for guns with the Fante and other coastal groups that traded with, but also suffered from diseases brought by Europeans.

Christopher Columbus was among those to voyage to the Gold Coast with his fleet before setting out to cross the Atlantic. The exchange of plants, animals, and pathogens that followed Columbus’s arrival in the New World vastly changed the natural and cultural environment of the two hemispheres. While the trade in food products eventually improved peoples’ diets the world over, disease and the trade in weapons and alcohol had much more devastating and immediate effects. Across West Africa, first the Portuguese and Spanish, followed by the Dutch, French, and British, bought and captured Africans who were then sold into slavery in the Americas.

As many as 15 million Africans were taken to the Americas over the 400 years of the Atlantic slave trade. As many as five times this amount died in Africa and at sea. The African Slave Trade financed the Industrial Revolution and spurred Europe’s economic ascendancy. Later, more mature forms of capitalism, along with the cost of enforcing slavery, and a growing awareness in Africa of the devastating conditions in the Americas, helped to destroy this same system of slavery.⁶ It is with the abolition of slavery in the early 1800’s that the colonization of Africa begins in earnest, aided especially by Christian missionaries intent on spreading not only Christianity but also Western civilization, commerce, and education.

British control over the Gold Coast expanded throughout the 1800’s. Although as Kwame Appiah has observed: “the experience of these citizens of Europe’s African colonies was one of essentially shallow penetration by the colonizer...the colonizers were never as fully in control as our elders allowed them to appear to be.”⁷ The British allied with the Fante against the Asante who were allied with the Dutch. The
British eventually bought out the Dutch interests but they were never successful in fully defeating the Asante and suffered many defeats at their hands. The Gold Coast Colony was in effect limited to the coastal regions with the interior “protectorate” under continuous resistance and negotiation. In 1874, the British were able to enter Kumasi, the Asante capital, and burn it to the ground, but the terms of the treaty that followed went largely ignored by the Asante. The British returned in 1900 with the intent of capturing the Golden Stool, a symbol of Asante power and authority. In the process, the Asantehene was captured and exiled to the Seychelles island. The queen mother and warrior Yaa Asantewaa managed to resist British troops for several months after the King’s capture and was herself also arrested and exiled to the Seychelles.

For the next fifty years, new ideas of nationalism (expressed primarily in the colonial language of English) were debated. Mostly coastal communities, the beneficiaries of Western education, attempted to assert their rights and desire to self-rule with British colonial authorities, while British rulers were happy to fuel a growing divide between educated Ghanaian elites and traditional elements of society. People such as T. Hutton Mills, J. Casely Hayford, John Mensah Sarbah, J. B. Danquah, and James K. Aggrey recognized this divide and rule strategy but were effectively unable to overcome it as the British increasingly supported what came to be known as “indirect rule,” preserving the authority of chiefs on whom the British depended to maintain control of the wider country. The role of chiefs in Ghana is perhaps one of the areas most contested and impacted by Western colonial and cultural intrusion. Because Europeans lacked an understanding of traditional Ghanaian political systems and structures, they attempted to supplant these notions and institutions with their own.

Following World War II, the call for independence grew louder and more strident, and its chief spokesperson was Kwame Nkrumah who linked Ghanaian independence with the independence of the entire continent. He was well-educated and a skilled political organizer. He attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, founded the African Students Association of America, served as vice-president of the West African Students Union in London, and was joint secretary with George Padmore at the Fifth Pan-African Congress.

Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism, “Africa for the Africans,” was a direct response to European racism, a racism that evaluated cultures hierarchically and where traditional African culture was viewed as uncivilized, heathen, and savage. Unfortunately, this politics of race that championed African unity against European control, largely failed to develop a deeper understanding of the radically different colonial experiences and conditions of the various emerging African nations. Within Ghana, Nkrumah was a master at using traditional culture and pageantry to promote a sense of nationalism and his power as president but actively discouraged the use of such traditions and ceremonies within regional ethnic communities. Certainly, the focus of Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism emphasized political unification more than cultural. As Appiah critiques: “whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious or conceptual vocabulary...Africans share too many problems and projects to be distracted by a bogus basis of solidarity.”

Following a series of highly contested elections and numerous acts of civil disobedience, the Gold Coast was the first African colony to gain independence from British rule on March 6, 1957 taking the name of
Ghana, one of the great West African empires that had ruled vast territory in the nearby region from the 5th to the 13th century. Kwame Nkrumah was elected the first president of the Republic of Ghana with 57% of the vote among registered voters or about 18% of the total adult population of the country.

Nkrumah was one of the first people to describe the exploitative economic relationships linking Africa to the colonial powers as a form of neocolonialism. During the Cold War, Nkrumah increasingly found himself at odds with the West for his more socialist policies. Nkrumah’s African-styled socialism advocated government-led development while permitting access to and investment by private capital. While African socialism bore little resemblance to Russian or Chinese communism, it still threatened Western capitalism, particularly in terms of its more traditional aspects emphasizing shared land use and communal labor. After surviving a coup attempt and other attacks on his life, Nkrumah increased his tight control on the reins of power becoming autocratic and oppressive.

Nkrumah was deposed in a military coup in 1966 ushering in a period of military rule, with brief periods of democratic civilian rule (1969-1972, 1979-1981). Between 1982 and 1989 there were more than 20 reported coup plots and attempted coups in Ghana. The fourth republican constitution came into effect in 1993, and in 1996, the first elected government to complete its first term was elected to a second term, under the former military ruler Jerry Rawlings. Rawlings, an air force lieutenant who first took power in 1981 surprised many people when he stepped down following elections in 2000. The next president, John Agyekum Kufuor, also respected the constitution’s term limits and stepped down at the end of his second term. The current president, John Atta Mills, won an extremely close run-off contest in the last elections over Nana Akufo-Addo, with few incidents of violence or unrest.

Ghana has been recognized for its democratic choices, good governance, and economic management in recent years. The government has generally increased accountability and transparency while reducing corruption. Real GDP growth rate in Ghana has been between 4 and 6.5% annually since 2000. Until recently Ghana’s economy has tended to rely primarily on three main export commodities, gold, cocoa and timber. The country is among the world’s top gold and cocoa producers.

Agriculture, including cocoa, is a mainstay of the economy, accounting for more than one-third of GDP and about 55% of formal employment. Ghana’s industrial base is relatively advanced compared to many other African countries. Industries include textiles, apparel, tires, flour milling, cocoa processing, beverages, tobacco, simple consumer goods, and car, truck, and bus assembly. Industry, including mining, manufacturing, construction and electricity, accounts for about 30% of GDP.

In 2006, the average annual household income in Ghana was US$1,327 and the average per capita income was US$433. As an emerging middle income nation, Ghana faces many difficult challenges especially in alleviating poverty, providing adequate infrastructure, health care and schools, and generally providing better opportunities to its diverse citizenry.

Education in Ghana is highly valued. At the same time, it has also acted as a force that separates people into distinct social classes more than a force for uplifting the masses. However, women’s education has been given greater importance in Ghana compared to many of its neighboring countries in West Africa. Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey’s famous statement: “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you
“educate a woman, you educate a nation” speaks both to the importance of education in Ghana as well as to the importance given to women in Ghanian society. The matrilineal culture of Ghana, where children belong to their mother’s family lineage, and found mostly among the Akans, has perhaps been less antagonistic to women than that of other more patriarchal African countries and resulted in a larger role for women in the life of the nation. Ghanaian feminist writer, Ama Ata Aidoo’s stories tell of the objectification of women and how they are used by a male dominated modern society but they also show how these women “are not victims, they resist oppression.” Her stories often emphasize the importance and strength of a mother’s love to endure and overcome hardships.

Ghana has also played an important role in the imagination of African-Americans who longed to return to “Mother Africa.” Over the years, many prominent black leaders and scholars including people such as W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, and Barack Obama have visited Ghana. “Roots tourism” to Ghana is a major source of income for the country. The symbolic return to Africa, to mourn the ancestors, and recognize the strength of spirit needed to over-come the horrors of the middle passage and lives in bondage, is for many a sacred pilgrimage. Although diaspora blacks see themselves as returning to the homeland, when they return to Africa, most Ghanaians often call them abrofo, a term with dual meanings, racial and/or cultural (i.e., ‘white’ people or foreigners). Nonetheless, Ghanaians welcome their African-American brothers and sisters to the country and have developed favorable policies to attract them to live and invest in Ghana. The more recent Ghanaian diaspora has also proved to be an important resource aiding national development.

Beyond its borders, Ghana is very engaged in West African affairs and on the world scene. It is the largest African peacekeeping contributor nation to multinational peacekeeping operations and the sixth-largest among all peacekeeping contributing nations.

We will learn in much greater detail about all of the topics above as well as many others throughout the Year of Ghana. Our goal is to bring Ghana to our campus. Students, faculty, staff, and community members learn about and share their knowledge of Ghana. Faculty involvement in planning and implementation of the YoG program is extensive. It results in new research projects, new courses and curriculum, new education abroad programs, and new global partnerships focused on Ghana. The weekly lecture series plus art exhibits, performances, film festival, and an academic conference anchor the learning experience. We will produce a special issue of the Journal of Global Initiatives as well as a bibliography on Ghana and purchase new works for our library collection. We will host visiting Ghanaian faculty from our partner institutions in Ghana. And we will engage students in all aspects of the programming, especially our visiting Ghanaian students, as well as offer study abroad to Ghana.

KSU invites you to participate in and take advantage of the Year of Ghana program to learn about Ghana and expand your understanding of today’s increasingly global society.

Additional information on Ghana can also be found on the official Ghanaian government website:
www.ghana.gov.gh
4 Christopher R. DeCorse and Sam Spiers, “A tale of two polities: socio-political transformation on the Gold Coast in the Atlantic World,” *Australian Historical Archeology* (Vol. 27, 2009), 32.
12 [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2860.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2860.htm)
15 For a rich description of the variety of responses to and experiences of African Americans in Ghana see Maya Angelou, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (New York: Vintage, 1986).