Ghana@50

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Celebrating the Nation Debating the Nation¹

On 6 March 1957, Ghana became the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve independence. Ever since, Independence Day has been celebrated, albeit with varying intensity and sometimes overshadowed by national holidays commemorating incumbent military or civil regimes. Since independence was declared in the midst of bitter political struggle between the supporters of the triumphant nationalist party, the Convention People's Party (CPP), and adherents of alternative political and constitutional projects the meaning of 6 March 1957 was contested from the start. For many, Independence Day commemorated the achievements of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first Prime Minister and Life Chairman of the CPP. For Nkrumah's adversaries and victims, who after the 1966 *coup d'État* formed the new government, the holiday primarily symbolised the end of colonial rule and the contested birth of a new nation, a history in which they sought to inscribe the importance of their own contribution towards independence. Up to date,

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the panel "Comparative perspectives on postcolonial nation-building and concepts of nationhood in Africa", organised by Jacqueline Knörr at the biennial conference of the Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde, Halle, October 2007, and the panel "Ghana@50: celebrating the nation" at the African Studies Association Conference, Chicago, November 2008. Thanks go particularly to Isidore Lobnibe, Jean Allman and Boris Nieswand, Nana Akua Anyidoho and Wilhelmina Donkoh, Afra Schmitz, Jan Budniok, Katja Rieck. I am grateful to the VolkswagenStiftung 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 my work in Ghana possible. The W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research and the Committee on African Studies at Harvard University, where thanks to a Fulbright fellowship I have been able to spend the academic year 2008-2009, provided a congenial academic environment for writing. Finally, I would like to thank the Honourable Akua Senah, Honourable Alban Bagbin, Dr Sebastian und Stephen Bemile, Aloysius and Kafui Denkabe, Herbert Kongwieh, Honourable Dr Ben Kunbuor, and all other Ghanaian friends and colleagues who assisted my research on the Independence Day celebrations.

these “two utterly irreconcilable master narratives” about “Ghana’s troubled transition to independence” (Rathbone 2008: 706) continue to coexist. However, the majority of Ghanaians, born after 1957, know about the post-war anti-colonial movements and the early years of independence mainly from school textbooks—that usually support some version of the “Nkrumah” master narrative—and from recollections of older relatives or villagers. For them, the Ghana@50 celebrations commemorated “the culmination of some very distant events which had taken place way back [...] in a distant era of black and white photography” (*ibid.*). However, some of these “age-old”, but by no means forgotten political controversies resurfaced in the run-up to the fiftieth anniversary of independence. And while many Ghanaians apparently appreciated the occasion for a magnificent party, the Jubilee also provoked heated debates about national history and current politics.

That Ghana@50 had to be celebrated, was beyond question. A half a century of independence is too significant a milestone to ignore. And no commemoration of 6 March 1957 can entirely avoid acknowledging Nkrumah’s role, even if the organisers stand in the political tradition of the one-time Nkrumah opposition, as the 2001 to 2009 governing president John Agyekum Kufuor and his New Patriotic Party (NPP) do. Many of the official events of Ghana@50 may therefore be understood as exercises in a more general practice of “forgetting” that is central to national commemorations generally, and may be interpreted as attempts to depoliticise the festivities, without the reigning government entirely forgoing a bit of self-congratulation. After all, Independence Day celebrations not only address a local public, but also showcase the country in an international political arena (Fricke 2013; Lentz 2013a).

“Championing African excellence”, the celebration’s official motto, was ubiquitous, printed on numerous flags, festival cloth, t-shirts, coffee cups and the like, and reflected Ghana’s self-confidence *vis-à-vis* other African nations. Ghanaians were to be proud that their country was once 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 is playing a pioneering role in the New Partnership for Africa’s Development initiative. And when Ghana’s president Kufuor was elected Chairman of the African Union in January 2007, this was interpreted as yet another tribute to Ghana’s pre-eminent standing on the continent.

In any case, the Ghana@50 celebrations were an important arena in which the state attempted to make the nation manifest in the hearts and minds of its citizens. They were intended to, and indeed did provide opportunities for taking stock, reflecting on past achievements and setting out national aims, although this sometimes took on forms rather more critical than the government would have liked. The entire Jubilee year was marked by manifold commemorative events sponsored by government, civic associations,

and private businesses². However, much as some of these events sparked popular enthusiasm and were applauded by the media, the controversies over Nkrumah's heritage and the historical role of the CPP opposition resurfaced. Political controversies also arose over the question as to who precisely should organise, finance and lead the celebrations—a government body (as was the case), a committee comprised of representatives from all political parties, or a less politicised organisation including, among others, chiefs and representatives from various professional and civic associations. Political history and current politics, however, were not the only fields of disagreement. A second point of contention regarded the celebration's social inclusiveness, *i.e.* the extent to which the symbols and festivities addressed the “grass-roots”, or the (political) elite of male, rather well-to-do Ghanaians. A third controversy, finally, concerned ethnic and regional inclusiveness, *i.e.* how evenly Jubilee events and funds were geographically distributed and to which degree all regions and ethnic groups could identify with the festivities' symbols and slogans.

This paper offers an initial exploration of the controversies around Ghana@50 and how they played out in some of the festive events as well as in public discussions. My analysis is based on observations during various official events in Accra in early 2007 as well as on newspaper articles and contributions in Internet forums. Obviously, this approach focuses on official ceremonies and public discourse, but I would argue that this particular perspective yields important insights into the symbolic, ritual and discursive constructions of nationhood that independence celebrations strive at. At the same time, my work also draws on informal conversations about controversies “behind” the scenes and on the assessments of the impact of the festivities shared by Ghanaians from both the educated “elite” and wider social circles³. Since my research has been engaged with Ghana's Upper West Region most of my interview partners were Northerners, to some extent privileging a Northern perspective. However commentaries provided by “Northerners” actually entail a methodical advantage: because of their

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2. Each month was assigned a particular theme, ranging from “Towards Emancipation” to “Heroes of Ghana”, “African Unity”, and “Service to the Nation”. Activities included the theatrical re-enactment of relevant historical events, inaugurations of new monuments, film presentations, art exhibitions, a “Rally around the Flag” campaign, academic conferences, a “Miss Ghana@50” beauty contest, and much more. An overview of the numerous events was posted, on the official Ghana@50 website, <<http://www.ghana50gov.gh/ghana50/index.php>> (accessed 28 Aug. 2007); however, this website has been closed; for a dossier of various articles on the events, see <<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/dossier.php?ID=119>> (accessed 2 April 2013). For an eye-witness account, including some photographs, of the celebrations in Accra on March 5 and 6, 2007, see LENTZ and BUDNIOK (2007a, b).
 3. On the specific observational strategies and the methodological problems connected with them, see the account in LENTZ and BUDNIOK (2007b).

marginalisation, even discrimination, they are particularly sensitive to the “neutrality” of national symbolic repertoires and therefore are astutely critical commentators of issues pertaining to political or social inclusivity.

National Commemoration in Comparative Perspective

While nation-building undoubtedly depends on the creation of a corps of “national” bureaucrats and institutions, the construction of a material infrastructure that supports nation-wide communication, the establishment of schools and the spread of education, it also involves a symbolic dimension, namely, the creation of cultural emblems and symbols, as well as the (re)writing of “national” history. In these processes of creating “national imaginaries” (Askew 2002: 273), the establishment of national holidays that commemorate formative events of a nation’s history or national heroes plays an important role. Such holidays fix commemoration in the annual calendar; they preserve past events in the collective memory by associating them with annually recurring “holy days”. It is in this way that such holidays achieve some measure of “mnemonic synchronization”, as Zerubavel (2003: 317) has put it, which binds together the commemorative community. Zerubavel’s survey of national holidays identifies “historic watersheds”, marking key moments in a nation’s political history, as a major category of holidays that are typically commemorated. Indeed, 139 countries out of the 191 whose festive calendars Zerubavel examined celebrate the historic moment at which they became independent as a national “birthday” and founding moment.

That official independence celebrations are important to the construction of the new African states was noted quite early in a perceptive essay by the French political scientist Yves-A. Fauré (1978). Since the state’s hold on society was still fragile and conflict-ridden, Fauré argued, the festivals were “a civil cult orchestrated by the state” that celebrated, and thereby strengthened, its very existence and aimed at boosting popular support for the incumbent government (*ibid.*: 384; my translation). Moreover, his perceptive remarks on the celebrations’ requisite elements—the sequence of presidential addresses, displays of national paraphernalia, parades (staging society as a unified and uniformed loyal population), official receptions and popular festivities, as well as the holidays’ symbolic re-enactments of a return to mythical “beginnings”—still provide useful impulses for future studies.

However, Fauré’s suggestions for further research into African national holidays have remained largely unmet, with a few notable exceptions. Leslie Witz (2003), for instance, has explored the construction of Afrikaner nationalism through the 1952 commemoration of Jan van Riebeeck’s arrival in South Africa and the controversies that surrounded these festivities. Andrew Apter’s (2005) work on the 1977 Nigerian Pan-African Festival of Arts and Culture has shown how these celebrations reshaped diverse regional

“traditions” into an “idealized vision of ethnic equality and harmony” (*ibid.*: 9), and how this image of the Nigerian nation as a federation of diverse, but equal regions propelled fierce political competition. With respect to Ghana, some studies have examined official policies of building a “national culture” through the establishment of institutions such as the Arts Council (later renamed Commission on National Culture) (N’Guessan 2009), the National Dance Ensemble (Schramm 2000) and the National Museum (Crimson 2001) as well as through cultural festivals (Lentz 2001; N’Guessan 2008), architecture and artistic displays (Hess 2000, 2001), and, importantly, through cultural education in schools (Coe 2005). However, African independence celebrations as arenas of creating, redefining or contesting the “memory-nation” (Olick 2003: 4) have not yet received much attention, neither in Ghana nor in other African countries⁴.

Outside Africa, national holidays and commemorative celebrations have become a rich area of research, from which Africanist research can draw some inspiration. Most importantly, scholars of the politics of memory have insisted that “collective memory” and “memory-nation” should not be taken for granted and reified, but that research should rather focus on “mnemonic practices” and also study cases in which “memory-makers” fail to make their visions of the past collectively binding (Olick 2003: 6-7). Important here, so Charles Turner (2006), is the study of the institutional anchoring and the social organisation of commemorative practices and its contextualisation in a wider ethnography of “nationhood”. National holidays and commemorations of independence should be understood, therefore, as objects of state policies and as sites of societal contestation over images and practices of nationhood. They are “recommitment holidays”, to use Etzioni’s term, that can serve as “socialization agents”, “seedbeds of virtue” and mechanism of societal integration (2004: 10-11), but the boundaries of the group to be integrated may well be contested, and national holidays can spark heated debates about what should be remembered or forgotten, how the commemorations should be organised, and who should be involved. It is these debates that can reveal important fault lines running through the nation under construction.

An important theme that can be identified from historical studies tracing the development of a country’s festival calendar over a longer period concerns precisely the political conflicts that surround the introduction and celebration of national holidays. What Waldstreicher (1997: 2) observed for American independence celebrations, holds for the history of many national days: they are the outcome of a process marked by both “divisive politics and unifying nationalism at the same time”. Rather than a coherent

4. For a discussion of existing studies of African independence celebrations, see LENTZ (2013a, b); for examples of research on the celebrations of independence jubilees that a group of doctoral researchers from Mainz University has conducted, see FRICKE (2013), N’GUESSAN (2013), and SPÄTH (2013).

ideology or set of ideas, nationalism, Waldstreicher (1997: 6) contends, is “a political strategy, developed differently at different times by specific groups responding to the strategies of other groups”. As Spillman (2003) argues, nations tend to commemorate continuously particularly those historical moments and periods that are relatively vague, abstract and “multivalent” and that therefore are able to accommodate differing interpretations, even critical counter-interpretations. Drawing on the centennial and bicentennial celebrations of the American revolution Spillman shows that these had broad appeal, because “the revolutionary period provided rich grounds for the arguments of commemoration critics” while commemoration planners could “appeal to the shared’ founding moment in order to transcend salient differences” (*ibid.*: 185). In contrast, the bicentennial of the arrival of the British in Australia did not have “enough symbolic power to resist critical claims” (*ibid.*), particularly with regard to the aborigines, to whom this historical event offered no positive associations⁵. I would argue that African independence celebrations, and certainly the Ghanaian Jubilee, fall into the first category of robust festivals that commemorate historical periods with sufficient latitude for divergent, and even competing, interpretations.

A second theme regards the relationship between state initiative and control of national commemorations, on the one hand, and civic or popular contributions to and participation in these festivals, on the other. Some national ceremonies developed out of regional or local festivals that were only eventually homogenised into one centralised holiday; other festivals have been from the outset planned “from above”, *i.e.* the political centre⁶. In the case of African independence celebrations, the very historical moment that later came to be commemorated was staged by the departing colonial powers, together with their African heirs to power. Cannadine’s (2008) analysis of the pomp, pageantry and partying during independence declarations in the British Commonwealth shows how India’s independence in 1947, carefully crafted to display consensus while concealing tensions and paradoxes, served as a model for the African celebrations. But even if orchestrated by political power-holders, celebrations could be contested, subversively re-appropriated, or more or less “boycotted” by the broader population, while family—or community—oriented festivities associated

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5. For a fuller discussion of the (North) American and Australian centennial and bicentennial celebrations, see SPILLMAN (1997). For an example of the factors affecting the degree to which organisers of national holidays are able to mobilise mass participation, see SCHNEIDER (1995). Various contributions in BEHRENBECK and NÜTZENADEL (2000) discuss the difficulties that festival organisers face in creating consensus and suppressing, or accommodating, dissenting visions of the nation.
 6. SCHNEIDER (1995), for instance, demonstrates how local civic “patriotic associations” in Germany sometimes challenged state administrators’ ideas of what constituted proper festive organisation; BEEZLEY’s (2008) study highlights the contribution of a local community-based popular festive culture to the growing sense of belonging to one nation.

with the official holiday sometimes came to overshadow the public political ritual (Behrenbeck & Nützenadel 2000). Whether this tendency can also be observed at African independence celebrations, remains an open question, but the co-existence of numerous events such as official state ceremonies, the independent initiatives of specific institutions (in Ghana the university, the Bar Association, the Cocoa Marketing Board and many others organised their own Ghana@50' celebrations) and apolitical public celebration seems quite typical.

Finally, a third theme emerging from historical research is the relationship between regional and ethnic or other group loyalties and national identifications. For America, this has been most prominently explored with respect to the legacy of the Civil War, and commemorative fêtes of African Americans that eventually developed into nation-wide festivals (Blight 2003; Kachun 2003). Ethnic parades and other immigrant festivals, increasingly popular since the latter nineteenth century, could be both "divisive" and "integrative" with regard to national unity, serving as "forums where claims were made, grievances voiced, social justice and inequalities or mistreatment exposed, [and] new ideas and strategies tested" (Fabre *et al.* 2001: 13). Thus, national holidays *per se* do not necessarily reinforce national unity and integration; they can just as well intensify debates about what vision of the nation and which future course should prevail.

The following sections offer an initial exploration of how these three themes—political controversies about what, whom and how to commemorate, the tension between official and popular celebrations, and the grappling with regional and ethnic heterogeneity—played out in the Ghana@50 celebrations. To be sure, further research is needed, both on Ghana's national days and the jubilees that African countries have celebrated recently or will soon celebrate. They present a unique opportunity to engage in comparative research and tap their potential for providing insight into on going processes of nation-building⁷.

Debating Political Inclusiveness: Party Competition and the Struggle Over Kwame Nkrumah's Legacy

The irony of Ghana's Jubilee celebrations was that the Kufuor government that organised them traces its origins back to what was once the Nkrumah opposition. At the same time, independence cannot be commemorated without reference to Nkrumah. Party political competition, including bitter

7. On the doctoral researchers' group of five doctoral students at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Mainz University, that explores the poetics and politics of national commemoration in Africa, see <<http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/info/PRODoktoranden.html>> for more information; for first results of the group's fieldwork, see footnote 4.

struggles and incidences of violence, has characterised much of Ghana's political history, and the Ghanaian electorate generally regards all parties as in some way heirs to one of the two political traditions formed in the run-up to independence—the more liberally oriented United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) of J. B. Danquah and others, and Nkrumah's more radical nationalist CPP that broke away from the UGCC. The very question which course towards independence the country should steer was a central point of contention. It was virtually at the last minute that the CPP made concessions to some of the opposition's constitutional demands so that in the final session of the colonial legislative assembly, the Deputy Minority Leader S. D. Dombo supported the majority motion to adjourn and reconvene the next morning as the new independent parliament. However, as Rathbone (2008: 713) aptly put it, "away from the photographers lenses government and opposition remained utterly unreconciled, an impasse which was soon to be addressed by the CPP government in draconian ways—imprisonment, exile, deportation—in the first years after independence". When the opposition's old leader Professor Kofi Busia became Prime Minister after Nkrumah's overthrow, he and his government (1969-1972) discredited the CPP and expunged Nkrumah's image from the public sphere wherever possible. It was only in the early 1980s, under the long rule of J. J. Rawlings, that Nkrumah's memory was eventually rehabilitated by a Ghanaian government, a development climaxing in the reburial of Nkrumah's remains at Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park in 1992. However, "national" history has remained a highly sensitive matter, and unsurprisingly this came to the fore again during the Golden Jubilee.

The enigmatic figure of Kwame Nkrumah continues to be an important locus of public debate concerning what and whom the Jubilee should commemorate. Nkrumah's vision of independent Ghana was originally not a nationalist one. How then to fit Nkrumah into the mould of creator of the present-day nation, is a somewhat difficult task, even for the most fervent Ghanaian Nkrumahists. Such attempts tended to manifest themselves as a debate over what development and democracy really meant in Nkrumah's vision. While many Ghanaians celebrate Nkrumah as "courageous, inspirational and visionary leader of unparalleled selflessness, commitment and dedication to the cause of the oppressed and the exploited in Ghana, Africa and elsewhere on Mother Earth"⁸ and as "illustrious Founder of our nation"⁹, others, as a member of parliament put it, "are still hurt and embittered by the human rights abuse suffered under Nkrumah's presidency"¹⁰. The Kufuor

8. Dr Kwabena Adjei, National Chairman of the NDC, quoted in "Ghana@50: Prof. Mills storms Independence Square today", *The Democrat*, 6 March 2007.

9. President Evans Atta Mills, in his "State of the Nation" address to parliament, 19 Feb. 2009, <http://ghanadistricts.com/home/?_=&sa=5591> (accessed 2 April 2013).

10. *The Ghanaian Journal*, 22 Feb. 2009, in <<http://www.modernghana.com/news/203528/1/npp-tp-crash-dr-kwame-nkrumah-founders-day-initiat.html>> (accessed 17 Nov. 2009).

government's strategy for dealing with Nkrumah's heritage was one of neutralisation by selective forgetting and co-optation on the one hand, and by an expansion of the family of Ghanaian "founders" to include leaders of the UGCC and later UP tradition, on the other hand.

That Kufuor's Jubilee Secretariat placed the official launching of the Ghana@50 celebrations on 21 September 2006, Nkrumah's birthday, was certainly an attempt to avoid criticisms that Nkrumah's legacy was not being duly honoured. Furthermore, across the country, there were large billboards and newspaper advertisements showing Kwame Nkrumah and President Kufuor, standing left and right of the Ghana@50 logo and the "Championing African Excellence" slogan, both clad in *kente* cloth, their right hands extended towards each other, as if in greeting across time and space. But the iconographic intimation that Nkrumah somehow endorsed the incumbent President's service to Ghana was criticised by quite a few. The Independence Day front page of *The Democrat*, a private newspaper close to the opposition, for instance, carried a prominently highlighted header reading "let us remember how Kufuor and his political tradition [...] fought against independence", and complained that "[...] The NPP did not see anything good in Kwame Nkrumah, but now they are robbing the CPP of this magnificent glory of the 50th year anniversary"¹¹. An indicative incident that I witnessed coincidentally when visiting the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park on the afternoon of March 5 was the secluded way in which Nkrumah's son, Dr Francis Nkrumah, accompanied by his family and a very small group of journalists, placed a wreath at the statue of his father. That this act of commemoration was of little outside interest and that it took place in absence of government officials seemed to confirm that the NPP government was only half-heartedly paying tribute to Kwame Nkrumah. An editorial in the government-friendly *Daily Graphic*, however, insisted that the Kufuor government was "not playing down Nkrumah's contribution", and that "any truth-loving Ghanaian will testify that Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah is really at the centre of the year long celebrations, except those hypocritical ostriches who see nothing except party colours"¹².

The NPP and the NDC were, of course, not the only ones to lay ideological claims to Nkrumah's heritage. The smaller Nkrumahist parties (CPP, PNC and other splinter groups) presented themselves as the only faithful guardians of the Nkrumah legacy. The CPP, for instance, insisted in commemorating not only independence, but also the anniversary of the coup in 1966. Only a CPP government truly inspired by Nkrumah's ideals could put an end to "the hardship, suffering, deprivation and poverty that Ghanaians experienced

11. *The Democrat*, 6 March 2007, No. 57, pp. 1-3.

12. "Govt not playing down Nkrumah's contribution", *Daily Graphic*, 3 March 2007. For earlier articles in the same vein, see "Accord Nkrumah honour and recognition", *Daily Graphic*, 27 Feb. 2007; editorial "Nkroful on board", *Daily Graphic*, 27 Feb. 2007; and "Foundation to rescue Nkrumah's heritage launched", *Daily Graphic*, 1 March 2007.

daily”¹³. What precisely Nkrumah’s legacy meant in political terms—a socialist call for fighting against neo-colonialism, social-democratic politics of redistribution and investment in health and education, or massive state interventionism—remained as controversial as the question of who else was to be remembered and honoured for their efforts towards Ghana’s independence¹⁴.

More Debates Over Political Inclusiveness: Politicisation of the Official Jubilee Festivities

The wrangling between opposition and government over the Independence Day celebrations was not, however, limited to national history or to the nation’s political heritage. It also involved the organisation of the festivities themselves when the media and the general public began to ask whether the Jubilee celebrations were organised in a politically inclusive fashion, or whether they were being “hijacked” as party-political platforms. A few examples of this pervasive suspicion, which was voiced both “on-stage” and “off-stage”, in newspaper comments, television talk shows, radio features and Internet blogs as well as many informal conversations, must suffice here.

Discussions about the Jubilee’s political inclusiveness centred, among other issues, on the question of the NDC’s participation, or boycott, of the official celebration on March 5 and 6. The opposition had boycotted the parliamentary sessions for nearly two weeks in February, including the day of the President’s “State of the Nation” address, as a gesture of solidarity with Daniel Abodakpi, an NDC Member of Parliament and formerly Minister of Trade, who had been accused of corruption and was convicted to ten years in prison. The NDC castigated the trial as “a travesty of justice”¹⁵,

13. “Nkrumah’s overthrow dashed our hopes-Delle”, *Daily Graphic*, 26 Feb. 2007.

14. It is indicative that the efforts of the Ghana Historical Society, which offered to compile “a comprehensive and authoritative history of the country” and organise a series of panels on the nation’s past and future, were sidelined by the Ghana@50 Secretariat, as one of the Society’s leading members complained (DONKOH 2008). The ongoing political competition makes the construction of such a comprehensive official national history a challenging undertaking, and one that may remain unfinished for perhaps still a very long time to come. The male elite bias in commemoration has been discussed by AKYEAMPONG and DE-GRAFT AIKINS (2008). See also, “Africa, not Ghana’s independence@50: what Africa’s heroines did not fight for”, *Daily Graphic*, 6 March 2007. Regarding demands for monuments that honour women’s contributions to independence, see, 8 March 2007, on <<http://www.ghanaweb.com>> (accessed 23 Oct. 2009); *Daily Graphic*, and other newspapers also published articles on the biographies of various “makers of history”. See, “Makers of history”, *Daily Graphic*, 5 March 2007.

15. “Reconsider decision to boycott sittings”, *Daily Graphic*, 9 Feb. 2007. See also, “Minority boycott test of democracy”, *Daily Graphic*, 9 Feb. 2007.

and it was only after a number of reconciliatory meetings that the NDC finally agreed to participate in the Golden Jubilee parade¹⁶. Only Rawlings himself remained adamant that he personally would not participate. He felt compelled to ask “What is being celebrated?” and, as he put it, did not want to risk, after all that had happened, any further humiliation¹⁷.

Although the NDC presidential candidate Professor Atta Mills and his associates, as well as the minority parliamentarians had decided to attend the Independence parade on March 6, suspicions that they would be sidelined by the official programme remained. This was forcefully brought home to me when I accompanied Leader of the Opposition Alban Bagbin from Parliament House to Independence Square, where the Jubilee parade of March 6 was to take place. Bagbin assumed he was to sit near the presidential dais on Independence Arch, together with other guests of honour, since the highest government authorities, including the Speaker of Parliament and the Majority Leader would no doubt also be sitting there. However, permission to go upstairs was only granted to those with an invitation, which Bagbin did not have. His response—“I don’t need an invitation, I am the Leader of the Opposition”—did not impress the security officials. And he was by no means the only one turned away at the entrance to the VIP section: the Chief Imam of Accra and other prominent political actors were also denied access. Bagbin remained calm. To me he stated that in his eyes this was part of the government’s strategy to humiliate the opposition party. As for himself, he would not tolerate such pettiness, but return to Parliament House and get some work done. In the eyes of the NDC critics, with whom I spoke subsequently, this decision amounted to a practical boycott: according to them Bagbin was only waiting for an excuse to blame the NPP, for had he only waited a few more moments, the situation would have been redressed. Be that as it may, Bagbin returned to his office, and in the afternoon attended a conference organised by the Committee for Joint Action, an independent (but, as many said, NDC-dominated) oppositional forum that had been highly critical of the official celebrations.

As mentioned above, Atta Mills, who did attend the official celebration on Independence Square, looked on as the Ghanaian Armed Forces, the police and the fire brigades, the cadet schools and many others who every

16. For the development of the reconciliation talks and public discussions, see “NDC not happy with celebration programme”, *Daily Graphic*, 19 Jan.2007; “Use Golden Jubilee to facilitate reconciliation”, *Daily Graphic*, 26 Feb. 2007; “Cause of disunity in the country: blame it on politics, Prof. Ayee declares”, *Daily Graphic*, 2 March, 2007; “President extends hand to all”, *Daily Graphic*, 3 March 2007.

17. Press release by Jerry John Rawlings on 5 March 2007, published on the Internet at: <<http://www.modernghana.com/GhanaHome/NewsArchive>> (accessed 15 Sep. 2007). See also “NDC to participate”, *Daily Graphic*, 5 March 2007; “Rawlings’ absence at anniversary parade is regrettable—Prof. Ayee”, *Daily Graphic*, 6 March 2007; “Ghana@50 & the Rawlings paradox”, and further articles in *The Guide*, 6-12 March 2007.

year march in the Independence Day parades filed in, and, under the watchful eyes of a team of journalists, clapped, if rather reservedly, following the presidential speech. As he explained to a BBC reporter, the NDC politicians and parliamentarians were present

“To pay respect to the people who have contributed to make the celebration possible. We are here to pay respect to the children who have spent months rehearsing. We are here also to acknowledge the fact that for nineteen years, out of the fifty years, some of my colleagues and I were in charge of the state called Ghana, and some lost their lives [...] and it is to pay respect to all those who have contributed to what Ghana is now. And I am here also as a Ghanaian. Whilst we celebrate, it is also an opportunity to look at the past and the future of the nation. [...] We are here to remind Ghanaians: we are only fifty years, there is a long road ahead. And it is not as rosy as people want us to believe. But I think we should remind ourselves where we have come from, where we are now and what we need to move forward as a nation. [...] We have won independence, but that is not all. [...] This country is disunited, it is polarised, and we do not want to admit the truth, we have corruption, we have all kinds of problems, but we are celebrating independence, because it is a fact. [...] We should acknowledge our joint obligation”¹⁸.

This statement aptly summarises, and in interesting ways reformulates, the conviction of many Ghanaians, politicians and “grass-roots” alike, that the nation is a community united by a common destiny beyond all party-political rifts, and that the nation should acknowledge, and invite, everybody’s contribution towards a better future. In any case, everyone I spoke to was relieved that during the festivities party logos or T-shirts were rare and that national symbols predominated. But whether a majority of Ghanaians actually believed that the festivities united the nation across party lines and strengthened national unity, is difficult to assess.

A corollary of the discussions on how to overcome, or at least suspend, party-political competition during the celebrations was the debate over the political inclusiveness of the official Jubilee organisation. Was it appropriate that a government body, appointed by the executive, should officiate over the celebrations, as was the case with the Ghana@50 Secretariat, or should such an organising committee have included representatives from all political parties, or be constituted as a deliberately “a-political” organisation that also integrated, among others, chiefs and representatives from various professional and civic associations? These controversies also concerned the role that the executive, parliament and extra-governmental institutions—the management for many events was outsourced to private companies—should play in organising the celebrations. An offshoot of these discussions was that of the Jubilee finances. The Ghanaian parliament had approved a sum of 20 million US Dollars for the festivities, but the Ghana@50 Secretariat’s chief officer, Charles Wereko-Brobby, repeatedly

18. During much of parade, I sat in one of the VIP stands among NDC parliamentarians and party leaders, and was able to tape-record parts of Atta-Mill’s interview.

refused to appear before parliament to account for the expenditures, insisting that he was not answerable to parliament, but to the executive. This met with strong criticism not only from among the opposition, but also from among the majority party parliamentarians, and from the general public¹⁹.

A similar tug-of-war between opposition and government, and between the executive and parliament, concerned the organisation of the Commemorative Sitting of Parliament scheduled for the evening of 5 March that was to re-enact the historical final session of the colonial legislative assembly in 1957²⁰. Historically, parliament played a central role in the independence celebrations, not least because Nkrumah as Prime Minister was himself member of the legislative assembly. Under his regime, however, the constitution was changed in favour of a presidential system, which by and large also characterises Ghana's current government and that presents new challenges for the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches. One of the controversies during the Jubilee was how to re-enact the historical session in the absence of a prime minister, and, even more importantly, 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 (among them, the Jubilee Secretariat).

During the event itself, the parliamentary dais was dominated by the presence of the executive and its guests. After the Speaker of Parliament opened the session, short addresses were given by the President of the Pan-African Parliament, the President of Nigeria "on behalf of colleague Heads of State", by the Duke of Kent and finally by President Kufuor, congratulating the nation on fifty years of independence and a relatively long and stable democratic tradition. When Majority Leader Felix Owusu-Adjapong at last unceremoniously moved to adjourn, Leader of the Opposition Bagbin stepped forward to second the motion and used his control of the floor to deliver a long-winded statement, to which the majority party responded with much commotion, although whether in protest or in support remained uncertain. Bagbin not only welcomed Busumuru Kofi Annan, whose presence none of the previous speakers had mentioned, but also pointed out that the motion to prorogue parliament fifty years previously was seconded, not by K. A. Busia, whom President Kufuor had acknowledged in his commemorative speech, but by S. D. Dombo, a chief and politician from Upper West Region. Moreover, Bagbin, in a populist move that indirectly accused the NPP Jubilee organisers of elitism, thanked "all Ghanaians for their patience,

19. See, "The country's Golden Jubilee celebrations C'ttee will be transparent", *Daily Graphic*, 21 Feb. 2007; "Parliament puts Charles Brobbly on the carpet", *Daily Graphic*, 26 Feb. 2007; "From the show boy files" by George Sydney Abugri, *Daily Graphic*, 2 March 2007.

20. For details on the 1957 organisation of events, see e.g. AYENSU and DARKWA (1999), and RATHBONE (2008: 713-716).

tolerance and mandate for us to be here to represent their interest”²¹. The rest of his statement was drowned out by the NDC faction’s tumultuous applause, and a number of NPP members waved their flags enthusiastically. It is quite possible that they were also grateful to Bagbin that his statement indirectly protested the executive’s co-optation of parliament. But these tensions between the executive and parliament, too, were ultimately overshadowed by antagonisms between government and opposition.

The extent to which Jubilee celebrations may or may not have strengthened a sense of national community in spite of party-political tensions is a question requiring further research. The answer would no doubt depend on the section of the population asked—the political elite, the urban middle classes, the rural population in various regions across Ghana. Since the “irreconcilable master narratives” (Rathbone 2008: 706) are time and again being reproduced by the respective political camps, it is not to be expected that the politics of memory will become any less controversial, after the remaining eye-witnesses and contemporaries of the independence period have passed away²².

Staging “The People”: Social Inclusiveness and Elite Celebrations

The official parade and nationalist rituals such as the lighting of the “perpetual flame” at Independence Monument, the recital of the national pledge and anthem, the salute to the flag, or the “trooping” and “marching off of the colours”—in short, the standard ingredients of national festivals around the world that were also staged during Ghana’s Jubilee celebrations—highlight a significant distinction, namely that between “the people” and “the government”. This is visibly expressed by the architecture of the places and buildings where the public ceremonies take place and in the spatial arrangements of the festival. The president and his guests are driven in cars or carriages, while “the people” walk; the elevated stands and dais on which the president and his entourage sit (or stand, as the occasion demands) are opposed to the streets, benches or the floor on which the “masses” stand,

21. For a verbatim account of the various interventions during the Commemorative Golden Jubilee Sitting of 5 March 2007, see *Parliamentary Debates*, Official Report, Fourth Series, vol. 55, No. 20.

22. A debate over Nkrumah’s legacy flared up once again on the occasion of Nkrumah’s 100th birthday in 2009. The newly elected NDC government re-established 21 September, Nkrumah’s birthday, as a national holiday, calling it Founder’s Day. The opposition, on the other hand, demanded the establishment of Founders’ Day, but on 4 August, in memory of the founding of the liberal United Gold Coast Convention in 1947, of which Nkrumah’s CPP was a subsequent offshoot. For more on this intense, revealing debate, see the various articles at <<http://modernghana.com/news>> (22, 26 and 27 Feb. 2009; 17 and 19 Sep. 2009; and 20 Oct. 2009), and at <<http://www.graphicghana.com/>> (4 and 21 Sep. 2009).

squat or march. To be precise, “the people” appear in the festival arena in two capacities: first, as more or less enthusiastic masses who line up along the roads, or push into the places where the president, members of government and international guests pass by in their carriages or cars amidst cheers and the waving of flags; and secondly, in the parade, as uniformed groups representing the armed forces, civil servants, students and cadet schools, and professional groups and civic organisations. The parade, in particular, stages national society as a heterogeneous, but harmonious ensemble of professional bodies and civic associations. Differences of class, and to a certain degree also gender, are muted. The nation is represented, and presents itself, as citizens who, while distinguished by their different professional roles, all pay allegiance to the same nation-state (and government). It is indicative that displays of ethnic and regional differences had no place, and even indirect expressions of cultural difference in clothing were notably absent.

This basic configuration of the people and the government, staged during the official celebration seems to be so commonplace that no commentator found it noteworthy. Similarly, the micro-politics of who participates in the parade, and in which order the different groups march in the procession was of concern to the organisers of the parade and the participants themselves, but did not enter into public debates. There was, however, a rumour concerning the masses of people pushing onto the parade grounds. Police and security forces clearly had difficulty in securing the seating reserved for VIPs and other official guests. At the same time, it was just as undesirable to have broadcast around the world images of police and security forces beating citizens with clubs, which meant that many of the official guests (civil servants, heads of departments, etc.) were only able to find seating with great difficulty, the exception being “VVIPs” with an invitation to sit in Presidential Arch at Independence Square. Quite a few members of the NDC with whom I talked during the parade were convinced that the supposedly enthusiastic masses had actually been carted in by the Jubilee Secretariat on busses into the city in order to avoid the fiasco of half-empty stands that would expose the government’s unpopularity in front of official guests and the press²³. Unsurprisingly, supporters of the ruling party viewed things differently, and later descriptions of the enthusiastic masses filled the media.

While nobody publicly doubted the massive euphoria during the peak of the celebrations, journalists and other commentators were concerned as to whether the “grass roots” benefitted from the Jubilee celebrations as a

23. 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.

whole, and to which degree they were involved in the entertainment programmes that preceded and followed the official ceremonies. It is here that questions of class and economic as well as educational inclusiveness were widely debated, and many complained that most of the Jubilee activities were more or less restricted to the political elite—almost exclusively male and rather well-to-do Ghanaians.

Criticism regarded, for instance, the regulation of access to a number of top events that were reserved for the political elite (“by invitation only”), as well as the prohibitive entrance fees for some of the allegedly more popular events. The Miss Ghana@50 competition, for instance, and some festive dinners were so expensive that only well-off upper middle class persons could attend. One could also argue that the official symbol of Ghana@50, the at sign, @, is somewhat elitist, because not everybody in Ghana is familiar with e-mail or has access to the digital world.

Another example of the tensions between “grass-roots” and elite was brought home as I was walking around Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park on the eve of Independence Day, where numerous helpers were setting up for the gala and rock concert that evening. A Dutch water engineer explained that 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 in several parts of the city had been cut several days previously, causing a lot of inconvenience to the local population, to ensure sufficient water to fill the ditches on the festival grounds. In a similar vein, the “massive Jubilee clean-up exercise” that the Accra Metropolitan Assembly decreed included clearing the streets of itinerant vendors as well as “lunatics” and “destitutes”, provoking criticism from local branches of Amnesty International and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative²⁴.

More generally, a number of newspaper articles and radio features (and many internet bloggers) debated whether the money for the Jubilee should not rather be invested in social infrastructure and poverty reduction than in the costly public festivities²⁵. Of the 20 million US Dollars that parliament budgeted for the celebrations, 5.9 million indeed were spent on importing new vehicles (allegedly for transporting foreign dignitaries during the festivities, etc.); 4.9 were invested in the renovation of the Independence Square,

24. On the clean-up exercise, see “Accra should be dressed up for celebrations”, *Daily Graphic*, 11 Nov. 2006; “The massive Jubilee clean-up exercise”, *The Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 2007; and “Ministry to clear streets of lunatic, destitute”, *Daily Graphic*, 26 Feb. 2007. On the human rights’ organisations critique, see “Government asked to have respect for human rights during nation’s 50th Independence Anniversary”, *The Chronicle*, 12 March 2007.

25. See, for instance, “Ghanaians don’t feel Ghana@50 celebrations”, *Daily Graphic*, 21 Feb. 2007; “Let’s all contribute towards Golden Jubilee”, *Daily Graphic*, 22 Feb. 2007; “Involve grassroots in Jubilee celebrations”, *Daily Graphic*, 28 Feb. 2007; “Ghana at 50; what exactly are we celebrating?”, *The Chronicle*, 6 Mar. 2007; “The illusion and reality of nationhood”, *Daily Graphic*, 30 Apr. 2007.

Independence Arch and other squares and buildings in and around Accra; and 7.8 million went to the ten regions where they were to be spent on infrastructural developments, particularly the rehabilitation of parade grounds, monuments and other Jubilee-related locations. It was in the discussions about the budget for the anniversary, as Anyidoho and Asante's (2008) instructive analysis of newspapers articles and editorials on the celebrations demonstrates, that questions of inclusion and exclusion became particularly prominent. Many commentators strongly felt that Ghana had more pressing needs than a lavish celebration:

"Ghana has to cut its coat according to its size and think of the citizens first. [...] How many computers, hospital beds, or boreholes can half of this money provide to the people? The president's son is schooling in the USA where computers are common. How many do we have in all our universities? At least half of the \$ 20 million can buy a lot or provide chairs and tables for students who wouldn't have to stand outside during lectures"²⁶.

Others put it even more dramatically, castigating the expenditure of "as much as \$ 6 million on luxury cars whilst our mothers and babies bled to death in our hospitals"²⁷. One of the Jubilee Secretariat's promises of public benefits of the celebrations, namely the erection of facilities, including toilets, became a symbol in the debates over the social inclusivity or exclusivity of the festivities. Thus, when the toilets were still not delivered on 6 March 2007, "there were loud and angry commentaries on the radio" (*ibid.*: 153-154). Two years after the Jubilee celebrations government auditing officials calculated that the Ghana@50 Secretariat had spent not 20, but rather 60 million US Dollars and that still to date "only one out of 25 toilets for which an amount of 19 million Ghana Cedis [approx. US \$ 1.9 million] was allocated had so far been provided"²⁸.

The sense of exclusion of the political opposition, but also of the broader population and their grievances regarding the official programme motivated the government-critical Committee for Joint Action (CJA) to plan a "grass-roots" march from Nkrumah Circle to the Nkrumah Mausoleum in Accra on March 6. "Why is it that the highlighted entertainment and social events carry price tags that make them inaccessible to all but the rich?", a CJA spokesperson asked, complaining further that there were no "events through

26. "Anybody but Wereko-Brobby", *The Chronicle*, 1 Aug. 2006.

27. "A look back @ March 2007", *The Chronicle*, 29 May 2007.

28. "Ghana@50 in arrears; already spent \$60 million", Ghana News Agency, 26 Jan. 2009; <<http://www.ghanaweb.com>> (accessed 27 Jan. 2009). In June 2009, the now NDC-controlled Ghanaian government appointed a commission of enquiry to investigate the financial activities of the Ghana@50 secretariat (for the White Paper that the commission published, see <http://img.modernghana.com/images/content/report_content/whitepaperghanaatfifty.pdf>, accessed 2 April 2013). Court actions, however, against the Ghana@50 organisers to have wilfully caused financial loss to the state have so far been without result.

which ordinary people can express themselves creatively and freely”²⁹. The CJA “People’s Jubilee Procession” initiative was, as the NPP government criticised, mainly sponsored by the NDC, but not exclusively. And as the CJA leaders explained, the march was to “provide a popular platform for the masses as an alternative to the essentially elitist Ghana@50 programme”³⁰, and thus a more authentic tribute to Nkrumah’s heritage than the ruling party’s emphasis on national and international elite publics. The plan for the alternative march was finally placed under an injunction. That one of the groups which vociferously criticised the CJA’s agenda as being divisive and prone to cause “chaos and anarchy” called itself Committee for the Advance of Patriotism is revealing³¹. Indeed, what was at stake in the conflicts surrounding the oppositional march were competing views of justice and democracy, and different visions of the nation that the celebrations should enhance. However, alternative visions of national history and the future course Ghana should steer were formulated not only by the CJA. They were also expressed in less publicly noted ways, namely during the manifold Jubilee activities that various civic and professional associations, trade unions, women’s organisations and many other institutions hosted, often celebrating their own anniversaries—a fertile field for further research.

Debating Ethnic and Regional Inclusiveness: The Role of “Tradition” and Asante Symbolism

One of the basic ambiguities inherent in the Ghanaian project of nationhood is the unresolved tension between two fundamentally different conceptions of national belonging. On the one hand, Ghana is legally constituted, and many Ghanaians share this view, as a modern nation-state with equal rights for all citizens, regardless of ethnic, religious, or regional background. In this conception, the state, and its institutions, confront a “civic nation” comprised of individuals equal, at least in principle. Whatever “traditional” or other communities they may feel attached to is bracketed from the official political sphere. On the other hand, Ghana inherited, and in part has also actively promoted, a colonial model of the nation as a federation of “native states”, of quasi-“natural”, pre-political, decent-based communities that are centred on the authority of traditional chiefs (Lentz & Nugent 2000; Nugent 2007). In this model of (multi-)ethnic nationalism, concepts of autochthony and respect for culturally distinct group identities play an important role, and the state is expected to function as arbiter by ensuring that national

29. “CJA declares positive defiance”, *The Chronicle*, 20 Feb. 2007.

30. *Ghanaian Times*, 1 March 2007.

31. “Group advises CJA against its intended march”, *Daily Graphic*, 20 Feb. 2007; on the march, see also “Court stops CJA”, *Daily Graphic*, 2 March 2007; and “CJA loses again”, *Daily Graphic*, 3 March 2007.

resources are evenly distributed between them and by providing a level playing-field for their political representation. Supporters of this model may disagree whether autochthony and ethnic belonging should play any active role in the political process, or rather only a passive one in the form of more or less depoliticised displays of cultural identity and linguistic difference. Furthermore, while a majority of Ghanaians from the Southern regions would emphasise the historical dominance of the Asante over much of current Ghana and assert that modern Ghana is “built upon a traditional Akan ethnic core, around which non-Akan peripheries are clustered” (Brown 2000: 29), people from those “peripheries” are highly critical of such Akan-centredness. In any case, it is not the individual, but the community to which he belongs that is viewed here as the “counterpart” of the state, and in this model one cannot simply be a Ghanaian, but can only be so by at the same time being a Fanti, Asante, Dagomba, Dagara, Ewe, and so on.

In Ghana’s political reality, these two ideal-typical models intermingle, and anyone can draw on arguments from both strands of thought, depending on the occasion and the particular interests in question. Indeed, Ghana’s favourite slogan, namely “unity in diversity”, testifies to this flexibility and ambiguity, since it leaves open whether unity is believed to evolve through peaceful interchange between irreducibly diverse communities or whether Ghanaians should discover, and promote, the basic unity (and sameness) that lies beneath apparently diverse cultural customs. This intermingling of, and inherent tension between the two models is also evident in the Ghana@50 celebrations’ cultural policies. The Jubilee Secretariat clearly attempted to cater to public expectations of a balanced regional participation in the celebrations—and the different ethnic/cultural communities usually are, for administrative convenience, imagined to neatly coincide with regional boundaries³². This regional involvement took two different forms that reflect the above-mentioned models. On the one hand, some Jubilee activities that were concentrated in the capital Accra were repeated, on a smaller scale, in the regional capitals and the seats of the district administration. These events drew on “neo”-traditions that deliberately avoid any visible association with an identifiable ethnic group and tradition. On the other hand, both within the regions and in the capital, the Secretariat encouraged festivals of “traditional culture”, usually organised by local chiefs and educated elites, that explicitly celebrated regional specificities and ethnic communities. The first type of involvement stages all Ghanaians as equal citizens; the second pays tribute to their “primary patriotism” (Geschiere & Gugler 1998) as members of specific local and ethnic communities.

32. See, for instance, complaints from the Upper West Region, “Upper West in darkness about Ghana@50”, *Daily Graphic*, 10 Feb. 2007; and the Jubilee Secretariat’s standard assurance “Jubilee funds for all regions—Wereko-Brobby”, *Daily Graphic*, 21 Feb. 2007.

An example for the first type of activities was the “freedom flame”, modelled on the Olympic flame, that travelled through the entire country, with public ceremonies and speeches accompanying its arrival in the various regional capitals. The flame was lit in Upper West Region, then carried through the other northern, and afterwards southern, regions of Ghana, reaching Accra on the eve of Independence Day. However, in many other cases, colourful representations of Ghanaian culture and African-ness draw on specific regional and ethnic styles, and the Ghana@50 celebrations were no exception³³. Here, as on many other occasions, Akan-centred symbols abounded. The “0” in the Ghana@50 sign, for instance, was clearly styled as an Akan *adinkra* symbol, signifying *gye nyame*, “only God”. The official Jubilee cloth was inspired by a *kente* design, and Northerners, wearing the smock as their “traditional” dress, felt slighted by the Jubilee Secretariat’s attempt to declare the *kente* cloth the article of clothing constituting official “Ghanaian” traditional dress. Similarly, during the two festive parliamentary sittings in the context of the Independence celebrations parliament was decorated with Ghanaian flags and banners in the national colours as well as with traditional *kente* cloth. In fact, the special *kente* cloth that during the commemorative sittings adorned the back of the parliamentary dais, left and right of Ghana’s coat of arms, was presented to parliament by the Asantehene, the King of the Asante³⁴. During the ceremonial entrance of the President, Vice-President, Chief Justice and other dignitaries for both sitting, the big *fontomfrom* drums were beaten, and special horns blown. Like the *kente*, these instruments are imports from Asante royal history. More generally, while these cultural quotations from Akan repertoires have from the very beginning shaped official displays of Ghanaian national identity, they have become even more numerous under the Kufuor government, representing a celebration of “the Asante moment” in Ghanaian politics with which not all Ghanaians can identify, particularly not many Northerners. As became clear in numerous informal conversations with Northerners, many non-Akan Ghanaians regard with much wariness the use of such ethnic symbols, criticising this as a lack of balance.

The role of tradition and a critique of Akan dominance were also the focus of extended discussions on the politics of clothing. Particularly President Kufuor’s dress was a matter extensively discussed in the press before and after the Independence Day parade. Some people sided with the President who had argued his suit was a fitting symbol for a modern Ghana and that on similar occasions the heads of state of countries like China or Japan would also choose to wear “modern suits”. Although President Kufuor’s

33. Another pertinent example is the peculiar fusion of European, Akan and neo-traditional styles in the Seat of State, on which the President sits when delivering an address in parliament; for details on this, see LENTZ (2011).

34. Interview conducted by Jan Budniok with Jones Kugblenu, Director of Public Affairs (Parliament), Accra, 22 May 2007.

choice of the suit for the Jubilee parade attracted much scathing criticism, his predecessor Rawlings, who did choose to wear Ghanaian costume, was also criticised for his inability to wear the Akan cloth in the traditional manner with the required dignity. But now in retrospect, he was praised for his preference for Ghanaian clothing and his versatility in alternating between the Northern smock, the Muslim *boubou* and the *kente* cloth. Kufuor, often seen in a Western suit, seemed to compare poorly in this regard. During the Commemorative Parliamentary Sitting, Kufuor did wear a light-blue *boubou*, but observers criticised this as being inappropriately simple for the occasion. On the other hand, at least it was “Ghanaian”. The presidential Jubilee dress code has occasioned so much debate (also in blogs and feature articles on the Internet)³⁵ that some critics have asked whether this topic really warrants so much discussion. However, the question of appropriate clothing has attracted so much attention, because it has become an idiom in which the role tradition and regional identity in the modern nation is debated. And the discussions around *kente*, in particular, have become a battle ground for the defence of, or attack on, Asante dominance³⁶. To give just one example of the strongly worded contributions to this debate: a blogger calling himself “devil’s advocate” believes that the only source of the “*kente* war” were “tribal sentiments” that needed to be overcome:

“If it was ever proven without a shadow of doubt that KENTE [sic] was first introduced and woven in Ghana by EWES, Ashantis might cease wearing it. Ashantis have this tendency to think that anything that is remotely related to them is superior to all others and they would promote and prop it up by all means necessary, as cheap, tawdry and backward as it may prove, to the detriment of the entire nation of a varied cultural group, they do it with the Twi language, [...] and now this piece of rag called KENTE. [...] Ewes can begrudge Ghanaians as much as they want, and Ashantis can yell till their eyes pop out, none of them can alter the acculturation

35. See, for instance, “The President’s attire on March 6”, *Daily Graphic*, 14 March 2007; some contributions to the “clothing” debate can be found on <<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?>>: “Kufuor’s suit at Ghana@50 parade” (14 March 2007); “President Kufuor and the Kente myth” (14 March 2007), “Comment: Oyokoba please read this” (14 March 2007); all accessed 7 Sept. 2007. See also “Kuffuor’s clothing and Ghana’s agenda setting”, <<http://www.blogger.com/feeds/4086309023051813855/posts/default>>; all accessed 7 Sep. 2007.

36. The *kente* debate also touched on how Nkrumah was clad. Particularly Northerners noted that during the declaration of independence at the Old Polo Grounds Nkrumah and his close associates were clearly clad in Northern smocks and that the first Nkrumah statue erected in front of the old Parliament House (and later transferred to the National Museum grounds) also showed Nkrumah with a Northern smock. However, after the statue had to undergo repair following the breaking off of one of its arms during its relocation to Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park in 1992, Nkrumah re-appeared dressed in *kente* cloth—in some people’s eyes a clear and rather unsettling sign of Asante “imperialism”. For more details on the aesthetics and history of the Nkrumah statue, see HESS (2000: 35, 48, 54).

of Ghana. Unless we intelligently find ways to assimilate our multifaceted culture and language into one unique form called Ghanaian, I see no hope. I am beginning to think that an allied force of Fantis, Gas, Kwahus and Hausas should form a coalition and tell these Ashantis and Ewes to shut up once and for all cos [because] Ghana is much bigger, smarter and civil than they could ever be"³⁷.

One of the occasions at which the nation was intentionally staged as a "federation of native states" was during the independence celebrations of the morning of March 6 on Independence Square. Right beneath Independence Arch, in front of the VIP dais, sat a large number of chiefs from all over the country in pomp and pageantry, representing their respective "traditional areas" and ethnic communities. At some point during the official ceremony they rose and paraded under their umbrellas to greet the President who stood on a small pedestal decorated in the national colours—a performance that could both be read as the chiefs' claim to equal rank or as their deference to the "higher" authority of the modern state. It is not quite clear how much latitude the Jubilee Secretariat had in arranging these encounters between the chiefs and state representatives, or whether the chiefs more or less imposed their own protocol. The Secretariat certainly did have a hand in organising the Ghana@50 durbar in the Accra zongo, during which Vice President Alhaji Aliu Mahama formally greeted and addressed the chiefs and immigrant communities from Northern Ghana, as well as from Burkina Faso and Nigeria. This durbar, and the media coverage that it received, like all the other official Jubilee events, was clearly an attempt to redress the imbalance in the visibility of the various regions' traditional rulers during the official celebrations³⁸. Significantly, here as on other occasions, when state officials elicit the presence of "traditional authorities" and "ethnic communities", they organise these components of the nation along the lines of administrative boundaries, thus making the expression of allegedly "pre-political, natural" communities congruent with the structure of the contemporary nation-state.

On the whole, however, it is remarkable that the official celebrations gave relatively little space to performances in the mould of the "federation of native states" model, but rather foregrounded national paraphernalia and rituals muting ethnic and regional loyalties³⁹. None of the monthly themes

37. "Comment: misplaced priorities of Ghanaians", 15 March 2007; <<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?>> (accessed 7 Sep. 2007).

38. For more details, see, for instance, "Veep salutes Zongos at Ghana@50 durbar", *Daily Guide*, 6 March 2007; and "Zongo communities hold durbar to mark Jubilee", *Daily Graphic*, 6 March 2007.

39. This was rather different in the German Ghanaian diaspora's Jubilee celebrations in Berlin, as NIESWAND (2011) shows; one of the reasons for this difference may be that these celebrations were mainly aimed at a different public, namely Germans who were to be treated to a "show" of the richness and diversity of Ghanaian culture(s).

around which activities were organised related to the country's internal ethnic and cultural diversity or to the role of traditional authorities; while there were months devoted to the "Diaspora" and to "Africa unity", others focused on health, education, and various aspects of development. This may well have been a deliberate attempt to avoid conflicts and estrangement that could arise from a more prominent staging of ethnic nationalism. In any case, the relatively low visibility of the chiefs during the Independence celebrations stands in notable contrast to the often important role that traditional authorities usually play at official events. But on this, too, as well as on how the tension between civic and ethnocultural nationalism played out during the independence celebrations, more research is needed.

The study of national celebrations, such as the Ghanaian Jubilee, allows us to explore contested processes of nation-building and images of nationhood. The ways such national celebrations are negotiated and organised at the local, regional and national levels as well as in the diaspora, reflect the societal and political fault lines with which nation-building has to contend—among others, diverse political traditions and orientations, questions of social class, and regional and ethnic diversity. More importantly, however, they become a forum of debate, both "on-stage" and "off-stage", in the media and in more informal popular discussions, about what should constitute the norms and values that make up "Ghanaianness", and, in the interstices of the official ceremonies, provide space for alternative demands for public recognition.

As I have shown the celebrations were intensely politicised, and various groups attempted to appropriate the festivities for their own agendas. We may therefore well ask whether Ghana@50 actually accomplished its goal, uniting the nation and fostering reflection as well as pride, or rather deepened Ghana's major political, social and ethnic fault lines. The answer to this question, of course, depends very much on to whom one talks and on which level the issues are discussed. However, ultimately underlying these often seemingly irreconcilable debates over national history and what constitutes a desirable national future, there are a number of explicit and implicit understandings and conventions shared by most participants in the debates and by many Ghanaians generally. These commonalities rest not so much on substantive symbols or political convictions, but on the rules of the debate. There seems to be a minimalist consensus that the nation's future should be defined by some degree of social inclusion, defining Ghana as a "social justice community" (Brown 2000: 38), by cultural diversity and by "multi-party" democracy. At the very least Ghanaians agree that disagreements on these issues and on the rules of the debate should be resolved (or tolerated) without recourse to violence. "Unity in diversity" with regard

to both politics and ethnic-regional diversity is more than just a slogan, it is a widely shared conviction, as is the idea that cultural and regional heterogeneity should be generally depoliticised. And rather than being merely divisive, controversies such as the ones discussed above, may well strengthen national consciousness and indirectly deepen a sense of commonality.

Charles Turner's (2006: 209) observation that "a national tradition [...] may consist in an extended argument that a nation conducts with itself about the good internal to that tradition [...] or in extreme cases about whether there is such a tradition at all" could almost be regarded as a motto for the Ghana@50 celebrations. In any case, as an historical watershed it quite clearly fulfils the criteria that according to Lyn Spillman (2003) are shared by all robust festivals: controversies notwithstanding, all parties refer to the same moment of Ghana's "birth", because it can serve to anchor competing political projects and legitimate the corresponding visions for the future. The Independence Day celebrations therefore can accommodate the projective identifications of all Ghanaians and might thus indeed serve to foster national unity.

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ABSTRACT

The Ghana@50 commemorative events organised by government and government-related institutions aimed at advertising Ghana as “champion” of “African excellence” *vis-à-vis* an international audience as well as fostering national unity by providing moments of communal reflection and future commitment. However, while many Ghanaians apparently appreciated the magnificent party, the Jubilee also provoked bitter debates that touched on three main issues. First, political inclusiveness, *i.e.* the question who precisely should organise, finance and lead the celebrations, without aggravating party-political tensions. The second issue regarded social inclusiveness, the extent to which the symbols and festivities addressed the “grass-roots” or were restricted to the (international) (political) elite. The third point of contention concerned ethnic and regional inclusiveness, *i.e.* how evenly Jubilee events and funds were geographically distributed and to which degree all regions and ethnic groups could identify with the festivities’ symbols and slogans. The paper explores these controversies as well as the festive formats around Ghana@50, based on the author’s observations in Accra during the celebrations and an analysis of newspaper articles and Internet forums.

RÉSUMÉ

Ghana@50. Célébrations de la nation. Débats de la nation. — La fête du cinquantenaire de l’indépendance, Ghana@50, organisée par le gouvernement et les institutions gouvernementales, a tenté de promouvoir le Ghana comme « champion » de « l’excellence africaine » vis-à-vis d’un public international et de renforcer l’unité nationale en offrant des moments de réflexion collective et d’engagement pour le futur. Cependant, tandis que de nombreux Ghanéens ont apparemment apprécié la fête magnifique, le cinquantenaire a également provoqué d’après débats portant sur trois questions principales. La première est l’équilibre politique : qui précisément doit organiser, financer et diriger les célébrations sans aggraver les tensions entre les partis politiques ? La deuxième est l’inclusion sociale : dans quelle mesure les symboles et les fêtes ont été adressés aux « bases » ou limités à l’élite politique ? La troisième question concerne l’inclusion ethnique et régionale : comment les fonds ont été répartis géographiquement et dans quelle mesure toutes les régions et les groupes ethniques ont pu s’identifier avec les symboles et les slogans engagés dans les célébrations ? Cet article explore ces controverses ainsi que les formats festifs autour de Ghana@50, en se basant sur des observations à Accra au cours des célébrations et sur une analyse des articles de journaux et des forums de l’Internet.

Keywords/Mots-clés: Ghana, nation-building, national days, independence, state ritual/ *Ghana, construction de la nation, fêtes nationales, indépendance, rituels d’État.*