

The Fallacies of J.B. Danquah's Heroic Legacy
A comment by

Prof. R. Addo-Fening
Department of History
University of Ghana, Legon.

Sir,

Allow me space in your Newspaper to comment on the above-mentioned publication which appeared in the Ghanaian Lens of Tuesday 6 June 2006. I owe it to students of Ghanaian History, Okyeman and the Ghanaian public at large not to let it pass without comment.

The writer, Dr. Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, Professor of African/African American History, University of Pittsburgh, takes a swipe at President Kuffuor and Okyenhene Amoatia Ofori Panin – the former, for describing the late Dr. J.B. Danquah as “the Prime Minister Ghana never had” during the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of his death in February 2005; the latter for suggesting that the University of Ghana be named after Dr. Danquah.

The publication, to say the least, is in bad taste, it is also badly written. It is rambling, erratic and barely coherent. Besides, it contains factual errors that Senior Secondary school students of history are not likely to make. Indeed this publication has done Dr. Botwe-Asamoah's academic credentials more harm than good.

I should like to begin this discourse with a few definitions. The Cambridge advanced Learners' Dictionary (2003) defines fallacy as “an idea that a lot of people think is true but which is false”. And what is a falsehood? Something is said to be false when it is not correct, that is, it is not in agreement with the true facts. The same Dictionary defines fact as “something which is known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists or about which there is information.”

Dr. Botwe-Asamoah does not set out to factually disprove what he calls the fallacies of J.B. Danquah's Heroic Legacy. What he does is to engage in a furious tirade of abuse of the President, Okyenhene Nana Sir Ofori Atta I and the present Okyenhene, Amoatia Ofori Panin. The true academic is one who respects facts and allows facts to speak for themselves. He does not resort to a stream of coarse invectives to mask his lack of knowledge and understanding. That detracts from academic respectability. Dr. Botwe Asamoah could have used this publication to stimulate a dispassionate intellectual discourse on the historiography of Ghana. Instead he chose to use it to malign respectable and decent citizens and stir up needless and ethnically divisive controversy.

First, Dr. Boatwe-Asamoah states that J.B. Danquah aspired to the position of Minister of Home Affairs under the Allan Burns constitution which he dates erroneously

to “the late 1930s.” Allan Burns was appointed to the Governorship of the Gold Coast in 1941 and published the new Gold Coast Constitution which was to bear his name in March 1946. Hailed as “a landmark in British Tropical Africa,” the Burns constitution provided for 6 ex-officio members, 18 elected members and 6 nominated members representing special interests. That constitution “involved no significant shift in the executive” [See Richard Rathbone (ed) 1992) British Documents on the end of Empire: Ghana, p.xxxix]. If the constitution made no provision for ministerial positions, how does the writer explain his claim that J.B. Danquah aspired to become Minister of Home affairs under it?

Second, Dr. Botwe-Asamoah alleges that J.B. was involved in the barbaric murder of Odikro Akyea Mensah of Apedwain February 1944.” What is the writer’s source for such a tendentious statement? In 1998 I spent six weeks at the Public Records Office and perused the complete file on the Akyea Mensah’s murder trial. I found no hint that remotely connected Dr. Danquah to the murder. Dr. Danquah’s role in the case was that of Defence Counsel. And what was wrong with that? Since when did defending kinsmen in a court of law become an abomination? As for the myth that Nana Sir Ofori Atta fathered 80 children the least said about it the better. Is the author peddling a myth as a fact? And is it a serious argument of the Professor that because of a myth that J.B. Danquah’s half-brother fathered 80 children he does not deserve to be a national hero? What is the relevance?

Dr. Botwe-Asamoah states that J.B. Danquah was rejected by the non-traditional groups – farmers, trade Union and Youth congress” as their “representative” in the Legislative Council. When in Ghana’s constitutions history were the above-mentioned groups constituted into a single electoral body for purposes of electing a representative to the Legislative Council? He further alleges that on 1st September 1955 Nana Ofori Atta II mobilized Akyem Abuakwa’s resources in support of Danquah’s political acampaign. Does that *per se* disqualify J.B. Danquah from being considered a national hero?

In the view of Dr. Botwe-Asamoah, Dr. J.B. Danquah does not deserve to be considered among Ghana’s heroes because he “took no drastic measures to end colonialism in the Gold Coast.” What one may ask, was the avowed mission of the United Gold Coast Convention which Danquah was instrumental in founding and of which British officialdom regarded J.B. as “the mainspring” (See Prof Richard Rathbone (ed) 1992 opcit p. 43). And what is the historical pedigree of the CPP that achieved independence for Ghana? Did it not draw the hard core of its membership from the ranks of youthful leaders nurtured by the U.G.C.C? Was it for nothing that J.B. Danquah was dubbed the “doyen” of Ghana’s politicians?

Finally Dr. Botwe-Asamoah does not support the call on the Government to rename Ghana’s Premier University after Dr. J.B. Danquah. No one would ordinarily quarrel with Dr. Botwe-Asamoah’s private opinion but for the incomprehensible logic of his argument which is that Danquah “opposed the 1951 Local Council Ordinance Bill(sic) and the establishment of cocoa Marketing Board introduced by Nkrumah’s internal-self government.” One is at a loss to know what to make of this jumble of

words. Was it Nkrumah's Government which first took office in 1951 that established the Cocoa Marketing Board?.

In all his years at Legon, first as a student and then as a lecturer Dr. Botwe-Asamoah seems to have learnt nothing about the historical antecedents of his Alma Mater. That speaks volumes of the depth of his knowledge of the history of Ghana. I will strongly recommend professor Francis Agbodeka's History of the University of Ghana to him. Suffice it to say that but for J.B. Danquah's insistence, Ghana would not have had its own University at the time it did.

The Colonel Walter Elliot Commission on Higher Education in West Africa which visited West Africa in 1944 produced two Reports: a majority Report and a Minority Report. The former recommended the establishment of three University Colleges, one each ~~from~~^{for} Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone; while the latter, on grounds of economy, recommended a single West African University with "territorial", colleges in each West African country as "campuses." Oliver Stanley, the Secretary of State for the colonies accepted the Majority Report.

Unfortunately for our country, Oliver Stanley was replaced as Secretary of State for the Colonies by Rt. Hon Arthur Creech Jones in the Labour Party Government that took office in July 1945. Creech Jones who had signed the Minority Report as a member of the Elliot commission was disposed to implement that report. J.B. Danquah initiated a protest as a result of which the Gold Coast Legislative Council appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of Kenneth Bradley, acting Colonial Secretary, to advise the Government of the Gold Coast.

The Bradley Committee supported the demand for a separate University college for the Gold Coast in the belief that the people of the Gold Coast would mobilize the needed financial resources locally to support the project. Dr. Danquah and Dr (later Prof) Baeta, both members of the Legislative council volunteered to sell the idea to the Ghanaian public. Dr. Danquah personally travelled around the country to exhort cocoa farmers to accept a levy of two shillings and six pence (£0.125) per load on the next cocoa seasons crop. The farmers' contribution yielded approximately £897,000 which became the seed-capital for the University College of the Gold Coast.

Conclusion

In the 19thC a school of "objective History" emerged that aimed at producing history based on a close study of facts and uninfluenced by personal feeling. The founder, Leopold Von Ranke in his own words wanted "only to show what actually happened." He and the Romanticist school to which he belonged thought that History consisted of a corpus of ascertained and objective facts available in documents and waiting to be collected for exposition.

To-day it is acknowledged that facts about the past, by themselves, do not constitute history. They are only the raw material of history. To turn them into historical facts they need to be interpreted by the historian to invest it with historical significance.

As Prof E.H. Carr stresses, the element of interpretation “enters into every fact of history”. History cannot consequently be an exact science as interpretation is subjective and rests on a **a priori** decision of the historian. We must therefore view every piece of historical writing as combining objective and subject elements.

According to Prof. Barraclough “the history we read, though based on facts, is strictly speaking not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgments”. This is explained by the fact that “one age, one man, sees in a particular historical event things which another does not and vice-versa”. Hence Sir George Clark has described history as consisting of “a hard-core of facts (and) a surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation.” This is what Prof E.H. Carr implied when he wrote that History is “a dialogue between the past and present” a never-ending dialogue between the historian and his facts.

The definitive history of Ghana has not been written and will never be written. No one can claim to have said the last word on the history of Ghana; so the question of someone trying to impose his view on the nation should not arise. By all means let us carry on the debate about our country’s history, but let us do so with utmost civility and equanimity devoid of coarse ~~in~~ invectives and name-calling