

J. H. KWABENA NKETIA – THE PASSING OF AN INTELLECTUAL GIANT

Now praise we great and famous men,
The fathers named in story;
And praise the Lord who now as then
Reveals in man his glory.

William George Tarrant (1853–1928)

It was with deep sadness that we received the news of the passing of Ghana's illustrious scholar, Emeritus Professor J. H. Kwabena Nketia (1921-2019).

Indeed, the University of Ghana, Africa and the entire world have lost one of its most legendary scholars and a founding father of African Musicology who was once described by the first Ghanaian Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Professor Alexander Adum Kwapong, as "our University icon and our National Treasure."

Four years into the establishment of the then University College of the Gold Coast, Dr. Kofi Abrefa Busia identified a young man, Joseph Hanson Kwabena Nketia, at the Presbyterian Training College in Akropong and offered him employment at the African Studies unit of the Department of Sociology. Nketia, who had earlier on studied with Ida Ward at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, immediately turned into an intellectual asset of the fledgling but thriving university in the late colonial period and the early independence years.

In 1961, when the Institute of African Studies was founded, he was transferred there as Deputy Director, rising to become the first African Director of the Institute until his retirement in 1979. The University of Ghana benefitted from the work and presence of Professor J. H. Kwabena Nketia a second time when he returned to Legon in 1992 and set up the International Centre for African Music and Dance at the School of Performing Arts. This initiative eventually led to the establishment of the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives, which was named in his honor in 2015 and preserves a large number of his recordings and intellectual legacy. The archives also continues to serve as the repository for other musical works, especially recordings of the old traditional and guitar band music of pioneer guitar band performers such as E.K. Nyame and Kwabena Okai, Kwaa Mensah, Otu Lartey, Kwabena Onyina and Agya Koo Nimo as well as old time highlife music.

He extended this archives project to some of the regions, including the Cape Coast Cultural Centre, where he collaborated with others to set up a musical records and instruments museum where instruments such as the old acoustic guitars and various generations of the gramophone popularly known as the "Tarkwa Machine" were preserved. The museum also housed old vinyl (78, 45 and 33 rpm) gramophone recordings of various musical

genres including traditional music such as adenkum, kundum and asafo songs.

Nketia was Emeritus Professor at the University of Ghana, and many renowned universities. On the African continent he was well known for his extensive work on African musicology in Nigeria, Kenya, Zambia and Tanzania. His eminent contributions to scholarship have put African Musicology on an entirely new footing. With terms such as “time line pattern” for the bell formulas, which govern much of West African drumming he gave important directions and inspirations for the study of African Rhythm. But among his more than 200 publications, there are also case studies of particular styles and genres, the role of music and musicians in performance or society and last but not the least theoretical and aesthetical explorations of the intimate relationship between music and language. Nketia’s *Music of Africa* (1974) became a standard textbook that has been translated into various languages and up to date is a must-read for budding African Musicologists. Professor Nketia remained intellectually active until his passing. His latest book publication, *Reinstating Traditional Music in Contemporary Contexts*, was launched as he celebrated his 95th birthday. As a composer he continued the groundbreaking work of Ephraim Amu and with pieces such as his *Volta Fantasy* he equally contributed to the development of African Pianism.

When the idea of a University anthem came up to herald the University’s Golden Jubilee year in 1998, the University solicited for entries for the anthem both by open and direct invitation. Professor Nketia was one of those personally and directly invited to submit an entry. He accepted to do it wholeheartedly. In his own words, he said: “Since I am a member of the University and I have been branded as a “*dondologist*”, I cheerfully agreed to do it. I thought about it. what do I want to put into a university anthem that will it reflect its history, struggles, aspirations and so forth; an anthem that is short, brief but straight to the point; an anthem that has a certain lilt that will inspire people to sing and enjoy; an anthem whose rhythm and emotions would build up those who would listen to it.” A number of entries including the one from Prof. Nketia were received, thoroughly reviewed and whittled down to two which were then submitted to the Academic Board. The Board overwhelmingly selected Professor Nketia’s anthem.

And thus, the famous University of Ghana anthem was composed. We thank you Professor Emeritus J. H. Kwabena Nketia. You have left us with a legendary composition you described as a gift to the University, which we know will stand the test of time.

On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, the University of Ghana celebrated Emeritus Professor J.H. Kwabena Nketia at a luncheon hosted in his honour on June 22, 2011 at the Great Hall. This the University saw as befitting for a man who had mostly dedicated his life to the life, work and development of the University and academia as a whole. On that memorable day, when Professor Alexander Kwapong was about to propose the toast in

his honour, he asked for permission to sit down and read his speech because of his advanced age, even though he was about four years younger than Professor Nketia. He then advised Professor Nketia to do likewise when it is his turn to respond to the toast. Contrary to Professor Kwapong's admonition, when it was Professor Nketia's turn to respond to the toast, not only did he not sit down, but he virtually sprinted up the stairs onto the stage of the Great Hall, and gave a speech which lasted more than fifteen minutes, all on his toes.

This was the man who as the “gong-gong” beater, announced the inauguration and installation of the first Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in 1961. He also symbolically “enstooled” Mr. Kofi Annan as Chancellor of the University during his investiture in 2008 at the Great Hall, in characteristic Ghanaian fashion.

Nketia was honoured with many awards in Ghana, including the Companion of the Order of the Star of Ghana (the current highest state honour), the Grand Medal of the State of Ghana (Civil Division), the Ghana Book Award, ECRAG Special Honour Award (1987), Ghana Gospel Music Special Award (2003), and the ACRAG Flagstar Award (1993). He was a Member of Honour of the International Music Council. In 1991, Professor Emeritus J.H. Kwabena Nketia was conferred with an honorary degree, DLitt, at a Special Congregation of the University of Ghana.

Other international awards Professor Nketia received include the Cowell Award of the African Music Society; the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award, for The Music of Africa (1975); the IMC-UNESCO Prize for Distinguished Service to Music; the 1997 Prince Claus Award; and the Distinguished Africanist Award of the African Studies Association of the USA (2000).

In private life Nketia was a man of gentle personality, and despite his position as an internationally renowned and celebrated scholar, there has been an air of civility and humility around him throughout his life. But behind this gentle personality was a certain resoluteness and determination with which he approached his responsibilities and related to his peers, superiors and subordinates. He was very approachable and believed in gentle persuasion. It was his approachability and ability to relate to all manner of persons and handle controversial issues with equanimity that endeared him to many people on and outside campus. For example, when the Institute of African Studies was established, Nketia was appointed the Deputy Director in charge of the performing arts, particularly the African Music and related Arts section. The Director, Thomas Hodgkin, an Englishman, was not very conversant with the sensibilities and nuances of African culture. The lot therefore fell on Nketia to steer the various programmes of that section as well as the other sections of the institute to the level of acceptance as serious intellectual disciplines. People in the university, students, workers and lecturers used to refer derisively to the new Institute as the *Dondology Institute*, implying that the Institute did not go beyond just being a place for playing African drums. Nketia handled

these unwarranted criticisms of the institute with equanimity even though he felt very concerned that some of his colleagues on the Academic Board did not believe that their own cultural heritage could be regarded as a serious academic discipline worthy of development and research.

But together with his lieutenants, Ephraim Amu, Mawere Opoku, Atta Annan Mensah, N. Z. Nayo, and with a lot of patience and determination, they steered and developed the new curricula of the performing arts section, and the institute as a whole through the various committees and Boards of the University, including the Academic Board.

It was painful for Professor Nketia to sit in Academic Board meetings and senior common rooms and listen to his colleagues talk disparagingly about the institute. But with his characteristic gentility and patience, he was able to gradually bring respect and admiration to the institute. Programmes such as *Labanotation Performance* in Dance, and *melody and counterpoint* in music, gradually became fully understood and accepted as being on equal ground intellectually as other disciplines and programmes.

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The University of Ghana mourns with his children and family.

Damirifa Due, Prof., Nante Yiye!