



J. C. OKYERE'S BEQUEST OF CONCRETE STATUARY IN THE KNUST¹ COLLECTION: SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON *LONELY WOMAN*

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Introduction

I introduce *Lonely Woman*, one of three most important examples of concrete statuary in the oeuvre of a dominant figure in 20th century art and art education in Ghana. The other two statues of the group are the *School Girl* and *Couple*. These three statues were commissioned by the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi in the early 1960s and, as I seek to show, they are notable for their scene-setting rank in Ghanaian sculpture history and iconography. Sadly, this set of sculptures is among the least familiar in the artist's legacy; their genealogy, their inalienable qualities, and their significance in the development of a surviving Ghanaian public concrete statuary tradition have nearly always been lost to the typical member of the KNUST artistic community, and possibly, to the average scholar or connoisseur of modern art of Ghana. Excepting the few synoptic references made to the *School Girl* (on the forecourt of the Herbal Medicine Block of the Pharmacy Department) and *Couple* (on the foregrounds of the KNUST Children's Library) in Franklin Aggor's BA thesis, *A Survey of Sculptures displayed at Public Places* (1970), these works have been items of exclusion in the typical text on modern art history of Ghana. To the typical commentator, the artist's major achievement in concrete statuary is the more saccharine *Madonna*, a fountain statuary and mascot of Republic Hall, KNUST. Nevertheless, I should like to introduce these three quite anonymous works of the artist as the more compelling in their cultural, historical and morphological significance in the artist's oeuvre as well as in the history of Ghanaian concrete sculpture.

Lacunae, provenance and impetus

In the research leading to this paper, I was as interested in tracing a genealogy of these unsigned works as I was in fairly recontextualising them in their contemporaneous, past and future arenas of artistic and social thought. Concerns for establishing correct attribution would naturally come to the fore. However, when I began to make inquiries about these works in November, 2001, I sourced varying degrees of misleading attributions from, least expected of all spheres, purposively selected respondents in the University's artistic community, most of whom I had presumed to be closely connected to the development of the KNUST sculpture tradition. Fortunately, I would succeed in isolating few pertinent responses from contemporaries of the mysterious artist, who were not sculptors but who had been witnesses to the execution and installation of the statues. That they brought my attention to a little more than the name "John Christopher Osei Okyere" (1912-1983) might have seemed a modest insight but it proved to be a valuable hint. With this clue in hand, I searched for more biographical details on Okyere. I would find from Okyere's memoirs (Okyere, 1981) reproduced by an "obscure" Okyere-biographer, Henaku (1982), from conversations with some of the artist's contemporaries and contemporary commentators (Ampofo, 1989; Agyemang, 1982; Antubam, 1963; Asihene, 2004) and from official documents of KNUST (Asihene, 1963, 1965; Twum-Barima, 1965; Okyere, 1965) that the artist J. C. Okyere had a colourful but controversial persona - an extroverted Presbyterian teacher who 'stretched his hair and dyed it', an accomplished sculptor who won the 1968 National Art Contest, a famed *odurogya* (bamboo flute) player in the legendary Ephraim Amu's African music band, an eager ideologue of Africanisation who ironically over-indulged in ballroom dancing, Austin Reeds and Phillips & Pipers, an eccentric mature student of KNUST whose several confrontations with his teachers and University authorities cost him his BA Art degree in KNUST.

Hitherto, I had been only fairly familiar with Okyere's reported brilliance as a painter as well as his famed collaboration with Dr. Oku Ampofo, which had culminated in the organising of the pioneering *Neo-African Art* exhibition (1945) and the founding of the *Akuapem Six* (1952), arguably the first home-grown modern art society of colonial Gold Coast (cf. Antubam, 1963). Much later, I would confirm Okyere's authorship of this set of works in Aggor (1970), written only about five years after their completion.

The principal stimulus for my undertaking fairly overlaps Aggor's on the important role scholarship ought to play in the promotion of vigilance on the University community's accrued intellectual and material bequest. The task would seem to be even more pertinent today when the charge of apathy towards the University's artefacts appears to be tenable (cf. Ohene-Adu, 2004). Besides Aggor (1970) and Henaku (1982), I draw on fieldwork, content and contextual analysis of contemporary reports and artefacts, ephemera, archival documents, and published and unpublished examples of literature which implicate the life and practice of Okyere and their intersections with KNUST, national and international cultural history. I would hope to provide other insights which Aggor, Henaku and others would have missed due to the peculiar historical context of their undertaking and the greater benefit of hindsight I have now.

Classification of J. C. Okyere's statuary on KNUST Campus

The greater number of Okyere's significant works in exposed concrete, can be found in several locations on the KNUST campus². Even though these KNUST-commissioned statues were made and installed contemporaneously, all made in a span of a little over two years (1963-1965), for easy reference I have grouped them under two major classes, in terms of the differing conditions under which they were made. On the one hand, there are those made under the auspices

of the University administration, such as *Lonely Woman*, *School Girl* and *Couple*; on the other hand there are those made and installed under the auspices of the Halls of Residence such as the fountain *Madonna* of Republic Hall and *The Academician* of University Hall. The sculptures in the former group are stylistic pastiches, and between them, more homologous than those in the latter group which are more stylistically autonomous and demonstrate Okyere's propensity towards unrestrained eclecticism. In this latter group alone one can identify at least four distinct styles, namely: the archaism of the Chacmool-referencing *Academician* in the University Hall, the naturalistic rendition of a sculpture group depicting a man and his dogs in the courtyard of Independence Hall, the Romantic Classicism of the Republic Hall *Madonna*, and the Geodesic "Freshman" Cubism of a seated toddler at play with a dog in the courtyard of Independence Hall. Excepting the *Toddler*, the *Genre Group* and the *Academician*, the woman's body, a leitmotif in Okyere's wood carving and paintings, is also the principal leitmotif in his cement statuary in KNUST.

Agendum

Among Okyere's set of works I introduce here, I spotlight *Lonely Woman*, especially, to demonstrate the significance of the artist's achievement in concrete sculpture, the profundity of his iconography and the density of cultural meaning in his oeuvre. This spotlighting is by no means meant to privilege *Lonely Woman* over *School Girl* or *Couple* but that in my estimation, *Lonely Woman* presents a peculiarly arcane iconography, an intricate blend of references and styles, and an enigmatic aura which makes it seem emblematic of his most accomplished works. I felt compelled then to use it to illustrate the complexity of Okyere's vision, and possibly, his failings. For a more ample treatment of *School Girl* and *Couple*, the reader may consult my earlier monograph on J. C. Okyere (Amankwah³, 2002) and the synoptic paragraphs in Aggor's thesis (1970) where the tectonics and iconography of the statues have been espoused.

In this paper I have tacitly pointed out where *Lonely Woman*, *School Girl* and *Couple* find unanimity, especially in terms of their common historicity, medium used, morphology, the principal leitmotif, style and syntactic and semantic borrowings. Some recurrent devices I have identified in this set of works are polymorphism, transgression and blurring of boundaries, reversal of traditional antagonistic categories, fusion and the syncope, which I find hardly explored in any of his more familiar works or in the statuary of his contemporaries. Among other things, it emerges that in the artist's iconography, the woman's body, a familiar leitmotif in his entire oeuvre, was more strategically represented in this set of statuary than in any of his more familiar works. I have concluded that some formal and iconological decisions Okyere made in especially *Lonely Woman* and, to a lesser extent, *School Girl* and *Couple* were not fashionable in the works of his contemporaries. Rather, they anticipate, albeit moderately, contemporary visions of subversive aesthetics and political discourse which are yet to impact significantly in the current KNUST College of Art tradition of commissioned statuary or official public art.

To justify my objective of stimulating a more dedicated engagement with these works, as well as to set the scene for the crux of the essay, I have sketched a historical narrative which reveals J. C. Okyere as one of the elites and leaders of thought in the Ghanaian artistic drama of the late-colonial and early post-Independence era. The historical account also implicates the changing contexts of artistic thought and of art education in the colony, the post-colony and the antipode. These are intended to foreground Okyere's entire practice, artistic and political worldview as standing at the junction of epochal and transitional crossroads in Ghanaian art, political and art educational history. It also recontextualises some of the artist's decisions as revolutionary in the context of cement statuary and its iconography in Ghana. In the implicated historical drama I sketch, J. C. Okyere's roles as artist, teacher and student intersect with those of renowned Ghanaian artists E. V. Asihene, Oku Ampofo and Kofi Antubam respectively, as well as with those of the inspiring colonial teacher H. V. Meyerowitz, in varying degrees. To a large extent, the form of the narratives which ensue are my own modulations; the actual details, however, are much more nuanced and complex.

J. C. Okyere in prefatory historical notes

Among H. V. Meyerowitz's third group of students (1939-1942) in the Art and Crafts Specialist Course (ACTC) of Achimota College, the names of three of them have featured most prominently in the official history of art and art education in Ghana. Kofi Antubam, became the senior art master of Achimota College, a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute (Quao, 1970), and arguably the most significant artist and craftsman in Kwame Nkrumah's Africanist regime (1957-1966). Ernest Victor Asihene, the only one of the trio to obtain the British National Diploma in Design (NDD), the first Ghanaian to be awarded the Art Teacher's Diploma (ATD), became a Cultural Attaché to Ghana Foreign Missions, the first Professor of Painting, the first Dean of the College of Art, and a Pro-Vice Chancellor of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in 1962. J. C. Okyere, the author of *Lonely Woman*, the subject of this paper, had far too modest a pedigree to match any of the aforementioned but his verve and accomplishment in a wide range of artistic practices have been his most enduring makeweight (cf. Museum exhibition text, Damaris, Vida, William). Asihene, for example, refers to Okyere as 'a reputable painter and sculptor' who 'produced some excellent pieces of sculpture in wood' (2004, pp. 76, 77).

However, many important details of Okyere's artistic practice still remain obscure, especially, his oeuvre in cement statuary. Also, the revolutionary quality of Okyere's artistic insight and the magnitude of his contributions to the development of Ghanaian art education and art practice are yet to be fully taken into critical account.

KNUST, Africanisation and the commissions of the 1960s

J. C. Okyere's statuary commissions in the context of physical developments and Africanist cultural acquisitions

Lonely Woman, *Couple* and *School Girl* were commissioned by the first Vice Chancellor of KNUST, R. P. Baffour somewhere between 1963 and 1965 to commemorate the concept of African Personality (Asihene, 1965; Emmanuel Adashie, Personal Communication, 21st July, 2006). By then, J. C. Okyere, in his early fifties, was a 'mature student' pursuing, successively, the Diploma in Fine Art (DFA, 1963-1964) and the BA Art (1964-1965) degrees in the College of

Art (Ampofo & Scarfe, 1964; Asihene, 1963; Asihene, 1965; Twum-Barima, 1963). The Kumasi College of Technology Science and Arts, whose establishment and tenure (1952-1961) had coincided with the ten-year National Reconstruction phase of Nkrumah's CPP Government (1951-1961) had just been transformed into an independent KNUST working with a new mandate to construct its own syllabuses 'to reflect African and Ghanaian environments' (Pitcher, 1977). At the same time the Vice-Chancellor was vigorously transforming the asbestos-interposed campus arboretum into an imposing "Portland garden city" with structural projects either eulogised by his apologists as the '[most] remarkable physical development of the campus' or lampooned by his detractors as rather excessively "prestigious" (Pitcher, 1977). This period saw the emergence of the new KNUST environment as a resonance of the post-Independence Indian city, Chandigarh. Like the Indian example, the KNUST environment was Corbusier-inspired, especially, with adaptations of Brutalist urban design and interpenetration with Tropical Modernist styles. There were also complements of Bauhaus, Constructivist and International Style-inspired design issuing from Eastern European and Ghanaian collaborations. From the Corbusierean School, the works of protégés of the British Architects Association (AA), Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, James Cubitt and Kenneth Scott, and the Ghanaian Owusu-Addo were the most noticeable. From the Eastern European School, Nikso Cisco, the designer of the cantilevered stool archway of KNUST, Miro Marasovic, and Berislar Kalogjera were the most prominent. Synchronous with these physical developments were the strategic acquisitions of cultural insignia either to reflect the newly Africanised University's "corporate image" or intended, in part, to be annals of modern African political achievement. Some of these commissions, in lieu of an extant ethos of indigenisation and self-determination, fell to staff and students of the University's College of Art. An instance of this was when the University commissioned the College of Art to replace the KCT compendious emblem of African regalia and objects of heraldic Latin ancestry with a more distinctively "Africanised" University emblem. The commission for the trinity of statuary, *Lonely Woman*, *Couple* and *School Girl* to be installed at key campus sites and to reflect the Africanist zeitgeist of the Nkrumah regime was another. If the commission would be awarded to a Ghanaian artist of high ranking in concrete statuary, the most likely candidate at the time would have been Dr. Oku Ampofo who was known to have worked extensively in the idiom, at least, since 1955 and who was at that time the external examiner for sculpture. That the commission fell to his protégé and collaborator, J. C. Okyere, is noteworthy.

In the context of the colossal physical developments on campus, Okyere's concrete sculpture commissions may have appeared a minor intercut. However, the Vice Chancellor's election of the University Maintenance Engineer, Emmanuel Adashie, to assist in their installation attests to the initial importance assigned to them. According to the Maintenance Engineer, the commissions and the success of the statuary boosted the image of the College of Art sculpture programme (Emmanuel Adashie, personal communication, July 21st, 2006). As free-standing and direct-modelled concrete sculpture of larger-than-life scale, they were also scene-setting in the College of Art sculpture tradition, for the typical student of the then ebbing Diploma in Fine Art (DFA) curriculum had, hitherto, been conditioned on, especially, the marquette and small-scale model-and-cast "medallion manner" bequeathed by teachers of the ATD-NDD tradition, the Scottish Tom McCroire MacNaire (1948-1959) (Figure 1, 2) and the English David Dobson (1960-1962) which was encumbered by obligations of the Intermediate Art Examinations of the British Ministry of Education.

Coeval Nationalist and African Personality texts

Okyere's execution of the KNUST set of "garden" sculpture commissions was coeval with the publication of important texts which specified and disseminated the Nkrumahist agenda for African Personality and Africanization. Some notable ones are Dei-Annang's *Ghana Resurgent* and Kofi Antubam's *Ghana's Heritage of Culture*, Nkrumah's *African Genius*, *Consciencism* and *I Speak of Freedom*. These texts were normative about what was correct, ethical, and aesthetically sanctioned in the African Personality regime. They are all unanimous on fostering an African identity built on autochthonous past, modernist or hybrid present and the unfolding future. Antubam, for example, used a hypothetical Akan female body based on ovals and circles and on the aesthetics of the Akua-ba fertility doll to designate the canon of Ghanaian beauty. Nationalist art styles which emerged at the time were equally didactic and normative, humanist and anthropocentric; they were essentially "creative anachronisms" or Romantic Archaism anchored in early 20th century anthropological traditions and their subtexts of quasi-Hegelian evolutionism (cf. Kofi, 1964; Antubam, 1963). In painting, the most prominent Africanist aesthetic of the time was Kobina Bucknor's *Sculptural Idiom*; in sculpture, Vincent Kofi's and Oku Ampofo's "neo-primitivist" works were the most emblematic. Quao (1971) cynically labels these deliberately Africanist aesthetics as the *Totemic style*. Okyere produced his garden sculptures in this milieu which had seemed to veneer internal contradictions brought forth by attempts to unify irreconcilable cultural, intellectual and psychosocial categories into a homogenous national, regional or racial identity picture.



Figure 1. Tom McCroire MacNaire, Model and cast relief, Kumasi Post Office.



Figure 2. Tom McCroire McNaire, Model and cast relief, Prempeh II Museum, Center for National Culture, Kumasi



Figure 3a (Left). J. C. Okyere. *Lonely Woman*. (Front view). Picture credit: Aggor (1970)

Figure 3b (Right). J. C. Okyere. *Lonely Woman*'s back view set against *Unité d'Habitation*-inspired Unity Hall, KNUST. Picture credit: Aggor (1970)

J. C. Okyere: Transition to KNUST

Prior to entering KNUST in April 1963 for his B.A. Art course, J. C. Okyere had had a distinguished educational and professional experience both in Ghana and in Britain. Born to a Presbyterian teacher who had reportedly had a first class in Hand and Eye Training (Henaku, 1982; Quao, 1970), Okyere had scored the highest marks in the nationwide art examination based on which he had become one of three most prominent students of H. V. Meyerowitz's Art and Crafts Specialist Course (ACSC) in Achimota (1939-1942) (Henaku, 1982). H. V. Meyerowitz's functionalist ACSC programme had trained the specialist teachers to become able to connect their artistic background to the spectrum of evolving art, artisanal, industrial and civic systems of the then Gold Coast colony. Furthermore, the Liberal –Socialist

and Arts and Crafts ethos of Meyerowitz's programme had predisposed the students towards self-determination, communalism and "high culture" jamming.

Meyerowitz's students consequently became, besides exhibition-oriented artists, versatile artist-craftspeople and teachers, and dedicated nationalists. Okyere, like any of his mates, had sufficient background to teach spinning, weaving, fabric (textile) designing, woodcarving, lettering, pottery and basketry in the training colleges. In addition to this wide range of artistic proficiency and interests, Okyere would distinguish himself both as a painter and sculptor. His paintings received earlier acclamation for their distinction than his sculpture; by 1949, Oku Ampofo writing in the *Africana, the Magazine of the West African Society* would refer to him as showing 'remarkable daring in the use of apparently opposing colours. Reds, blues, greens, and yellows are woven into intricate and fascinating patterns with convincing effect'. (Ampofo, 1949, p. 18). Elsewhere, Ampofo would recall:

One day I walked into a classroom in Suhum...and I made a startling discovery. The walls of a classroom were literally covered with some of the most colourful paintings I had ever seen in any part of the world. They were the works of a Presbyterian teacher called J. C. Okyere. He used water colours and gouache to portray the local life of the people. Here, I thought was the basis for forming a group of artists in the Akuapem district. (1988, p. 9)

From 1950-1952 Okyere was on a colonial Government Scholarship to train in Goldsmith's College, London where he won a prize in an Overseas Students Painting and Sculpture contest organised by the British Council (Quao, 1970). This period overlaps E. V. Asihene's final couple of years of his four-year long study (1948-1952) in the same institution which would earn him his respective ATD and NDD certificates (*Professor Ernest Victor Asihene (1915-2001)*).

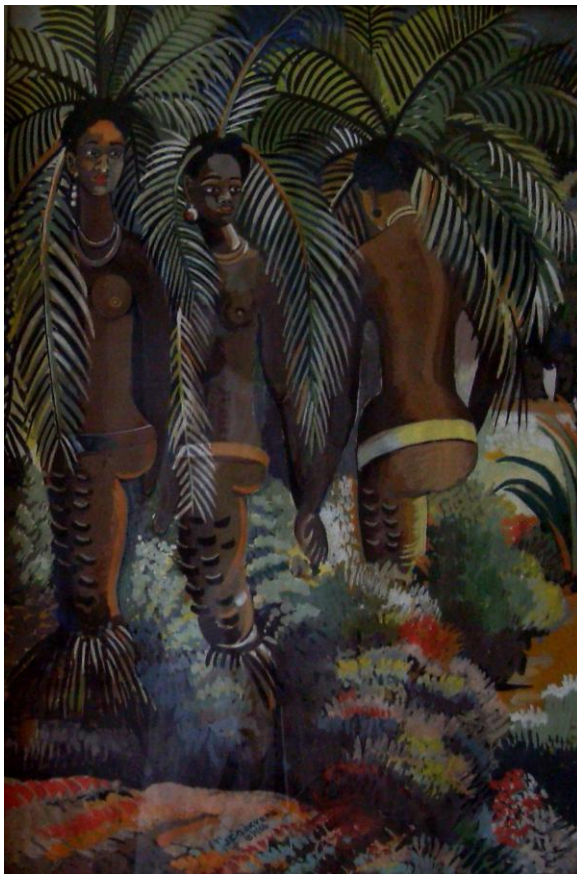


Figure: 4 (Left). J. C. Okyere. *Arbor Vitae* [The tree of life]. 1956. Collection of Ghana National Museum, Accra. Picture Credit: Janet Djamoë

Figure 5 (Right): J. C. Okyere. *Congo*. (Wood). Picture Credit: Kofi (1964)

In Goldsmiths, the 'academy' female nude model had been a recurrent subject and no doubt, Okyere's interest in the woman's body as thematic and formal subject which he had taken with him was enforced (Henaku, 1982). In his ensuing career, he would reproduce and rework the academic nude canon somehow uncritically in several of his paintings and sculptures in wood and cement.

In January 1952, while Okyere and Asihene were in their final year at Goldsmiths, the Specialist Art and Crafts programme of Achimota under the headship of the Scottish Supervisor, James Mackendrick transferred to form the nucleus of the burgeoning Kumasi College of Technology, Science and Arts. By 1958, the programme had been displaced by the introduction of a new Diploma in Fine Art (introduced 1955). Consequently, the Specialist Art and Crafts Programme was transferred with other teacher-training programmes in the KCT to the Specialist Teacher Training College (STC), Winneba where J.C. Okyere, who had previously taught at Achimota (1942-1943), United School Art and Crafts Centre, Bekwai (1943), Komenda Training College (1948-1950), Tamale Secondary School (1953-1957) and the Aburi Methodist Training College (1958), became one of its founding staff members. As one of the founding tutors of the new School of Art and Design of the Winneba Specialist Training College, Okyere taught several of the next generation

of artists and art teachers. Consequently, many of the candidates who enrolled for the new KNUST B.A. Art programme were his former students.

By Independence in 1957, Okyere had become a celebrated artist who, among other things, undertook state commissions for the Atlantic Hotel, Takoradi, the State House, Accra and the Central Post Office, Accra. The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation granted him airtime to make broadcasts on art and art appreciation (Aggor, 1970). He also organised a series of annual local and international exhibitions with his collaborator and mentor Oku Ampofo which involved the Akuapem Six and other prominent artists. As demonstrated by the quality of his often-cited work, *Congo* (Figure 5), an idealised portrait of an African woman, J. C. Okyere was among the elite in the Ghanaian wood carving industry (Kofi, 1964; Asihene, 2004). Okyere therefore joined the KNUST B.A. Art programme with quite exceptional background of knowledge and experience.

In a letter to the Registrar of KNUST in 1965, Okyere intimates, "I introduced direct modelling in cement into the institute [College of Art, KNUST], this method has become traditional and improved upon by my followers...and quite a number of works have been made and quickly displayed." This letter was written some weeks after Okyere had successfully made and installed *Lonely Woman*, *School Girl* and *Couple* for the University, rebelled against his Dean's transfer of an expatriate teacher from Art Education to teach in the Sculpture programme (Asihene, 1965; Okyere 1965), lost his bid for the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Summit fountain sculpture commissions to two of his much younger classmates, M. N. Sackitey and Asaku-Gyapong, and had failed his B.A. Part II examinations under very curious circumstances. Presenting what had appeared to be a mere make-weight response to Okyere's pathos, his former colleague in Achimota and Goldsmiths, then Dean and Professor of College of Art, E.V. Asihene, would surmise that 'there was no doubt that [Okyere] was hardworking and spent all his time on Sculpture' (Asihene, 1965). Significantly, only three years hence (September 1968), Okyere would win the sculpture prize in the National Art Contest organised by the Arts Council of Ghana (Henaku, 1982).

***Lonely Woman*, strange avatar of African Personality: Précis and appraisal**

According to Emmanuel Adashie (Personal conversation, July 21st, 2006) *Lonely Woman* (Figure 3a, 3b) was modelled in situ. The setting recalls the surrealist atmosphere in his painting *Arbor Vitae* (Figure 4) or the Arcadian ambience in Botticelli's famous *mise en scène*⁴. The location is an interface between the International Style and Tropical Modernist concrete edifices of three originally male residential halls of KNUST, namely; Independence, Republic and Unity, designations eponymous with landmark achievements in post-colonial political history and clearly deposited to boost African and nationalist consciousness. These Portland concrete edifices, with subtexts of African dependency on European invention, chauvinistic architectural, engineering and masonry industries and workforce, form a broken cincture around the canopy of tropical trees under which the near-epicene *Lonely Woman*, the proposed avatar of African Personality crouches.

Remotely restrained by the formal logic of conventional monument sculpture, the didactic and single narrative subject and standard anatomical principles, Okyere's *Lonely Woman* is columnar, figural, frontal, immobile, raised on a squat rectangular concrete tablet. Standing at about 2.7 meters high, with a head posture approximately aligning with the Frankfurt Plane, *Lonely Woman's* featureless face gazes in the direction of the Bauhaus-alluding grids of Unity Hall. The figure is tall and slender but no part is severe. Overall, its configuration appears arthropodal. The intricacy of the undergridding armature, the clever alternations of fusion and aggregation of form, superficial delineations by sure sinuous schematics, the syncopation of orifices and protuberances, and the equilibriums and tensions of implied and actual convergences and divergences enforce this aura.

The figure's features and garb predisposes the average Ghanaian observer to ascribe the masculine gender to it. This garb would seem to allude to one of the ostensible expressions of the African Personality which Dei-Anang finds definitively conveyed in contemporary Ghanaian culture by "the use of the traditional Kente cloth worn after the manner of the Roman [male] Toga [which] is already doing much to arouse national consciousness" (Dei-Anang, 1964, p. 198, 199). Indeed, from a distance and from particular perspectives, the figure appears most persuasively male. However, on closer inspection, there are insignia on its body and distinctive features which allude to the conventional Ghanaian female figure. *Lonely Woman* seems to have been purposely represented by the artist as a female-bodied cross-dresser, a drag-king, a Duchampian *Rrose Sélavy*, to say the least. Some visible cues conventionally associated with Ghanaian female are suggestions of ear-rings, beaded necklace, wristlets on both hands, a pair of rounded swelling on the chest, the dominance of soft organic geometry, an exaggerated contour of the hip region and an elegant and almost chic air. Observed frontally, we notice angulated flexion of both arms; the right one, acute and elevated, the left, obtuse and suppressed. What should appear to be the normal pronation of the right forearm, however, ends in a peculiar supination of the wrist and palm. The hand's dorsum comfortably and gently rests on the lumpy left section of the chest in a posture which, some observers have suggested, recalls a familiar dance gesture. But this pose of the right palm, besides the anatomical difficulties it presents to the viewer, is quite enigmatic, almost defying incontestable interpretation. We can however extrapolate, with some degree of confidence that the artist purposefully punned with factual and counterfactual dynamics.

The dorsal section of *Lonely Woman's* torso suggests a familiar metonymy drawn between the morphology of the acoustic guitar and the contours of the woman's body (Figure 3b).



Figure 6. *Madonna*, Fountain sculpture and mascot of Republic Hall, KNUST. Picture Credit: Aggor (1970)

Presumably, for a self-confessed Lothario of Okyere's sort (Okyere, 1981) suggestions for such voyeuristic readings would not have been so far out of his range. Similar inferences have been made elsewhere; especial cases I can immediately recall are, respectively, Picasso's association of the figure of the guitar with feminine connotations (Bois, 1990/1998, xxvi) and the subject of a boorish "Parthian shot" in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1969/1983; p. 65). In the latter example, the Ghanaian "been-to" Baako's new acquisition is described as having "a female shape, a bit stylized...plus a goddam hole big enough for the mythical African prick". If we should go by the logic of the metonymy, already privy to what appears to be the "answer" to Okyere's puzzle, the upper dorsal incisions of sinuous lines would appropriately and simultaneously allude to cloth folds if referring to the woman as to strings if referring to the acoustic guitar. But our interest in the region's metonymy could be further boosted if we also considered the suggestive polysemy which art historical and other cultural allusions could offer. For the reader privy to the crisis of representation in 20th century thought, the tendency to attach what Bois (1990/1999, p. xxvii) has called "a vast array of meanings" to a single referent seems more plausible.

Thus, the pelvic region may further convey other interesting connotations, especially, when reconciled with some notable formal inflections in 1930s British sculpture. Okyere seems to have invoked the "pierced form" of the Yorkshire "couple", (Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore (Figures 8, 9)), in an interplay between the ontological binary oppositions presence and absence, inside and outside. Like an eye, the vacuole seems to return our gaze. Looking through it, the observer can contemplate, as well as, contrast, for example, the Euclidean regularity of the *Unité d'Habitation*-inspired Unity Hall against the fractal and biomorphic geometries in *Lonely Woman* and its immediate surrounds (Figure 3b). This seeming appropriation is not only peculiar to Okyere's work in Ghana's sculpture history for contemporaneous with *Lonely Woman* was Vincent Kofi's fountain sculpture at the former Winneba Ideological Institute (today's Southern Campus of the University of Education, Winneba) which explicitly appropriates and repurposes Hepworth's vacuole. Another seemingly explicit appropriation in *Lonely Woman* is the form and posture of Giacometti's *Invisible Object* (Figure 7). *Lonely Woman*'s hyper-longiform (Figure 3a, 3b) and pose recalls that of Giacometti's caged and seated Swiss girl with a rectangular plate against her shins. Okyere's *Lonely Woman* appears to be a clothed version of Giacometti's nude girl freed from her cage-seat.

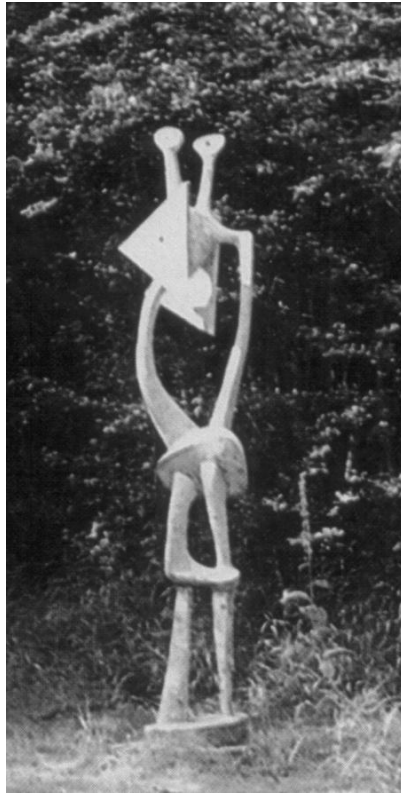


Figure 7 (Left). Alberto Giacometti. *Invisible Object*.

Figure 8 (Centre). Garden sculpture by Henry Moore.

Figure 9 (Right). Drawings for sculpture by Henry Moore

The back-view, smooth, flat, incised, recalling aspects of Cycladic sculpture and Kenneth Armitage's almost relief-like idiom and garnished with quite few but noticeable orifices, is quite unlike that of the side-views or the frontal view; its dynamics are much more determined by schematics suggested by controlled sgraffitto. This planar idiom is used most affirmatively in *Couple*. In *Lonely Woman*, folds of cloth are not terraced but indicated by five diagonal but parallel lines which stretch from the left shoulder (upper vertex) downwards towards the right side of the waistline (lower vertex). The rest of the cloth appears tucked under her arm while the strong linear accent demarcating the boundary between the left arm and the trunk flows vertically downwards, meets the waistline, meanders into a concave hip to contain a hollowed oval buttock and then extends and descends as a virtual line of symmetry dividing the two apparently fused pair of lower limbs. There appear to be Gothic references in the deportment of the figure.

The shift of *Lonely Woman*'s buttock to the right and the tensile pull of the hip shifts the weight of the region towards her right side. Seen together with the subtle lowering of the right shoulder the posture alludes to an arrested contraposto, an indication of Okyere's remote fidelity to Greco-Roman classicism. Frontally, the picture of a membranophone emerges if we fix our gaze on the flat and even surface of the oblique *os coxa* positioned just beneath a slightly raised left hand; a musician drumming with the bare palm is invoked (Figure 3a). This picture of *Lonely Woman* as drummer is resonant of the controversial issues on gendered African traditions and their destabilisation in the new African Personality regimes. The question is raised in the co-educational programmes of Achimota where traditionally gendered vocations such as pottery (female), weaving (male), and carving (male) were respectively taught to and practised by both male and female students. But the epitome of this harbinger of cultural *détournement* was Ephraim Amu's avant-garde *Bomaa Dance Display*. In this production, Okyere's teacher and mentor inserts women drummers in a traditionally masculine regime. The experiment naturally attracts fervid criticism from a colleague sympathetic to unalloyed nativism, "But another thing was sacrilege i.e. Women beating the drums of the Bomaa set – one of the greatest taboos" (cited in Agyemang, 1988, p. 160). By the introduction of transvestism, androgyny and enigma in the avatar of African Personality, *Lonely Woman*, Okyere seems to extend Amu's culture-jamming agendum but Okyere's approach seems to evade rather than provoke the rant of the purist Africanist.

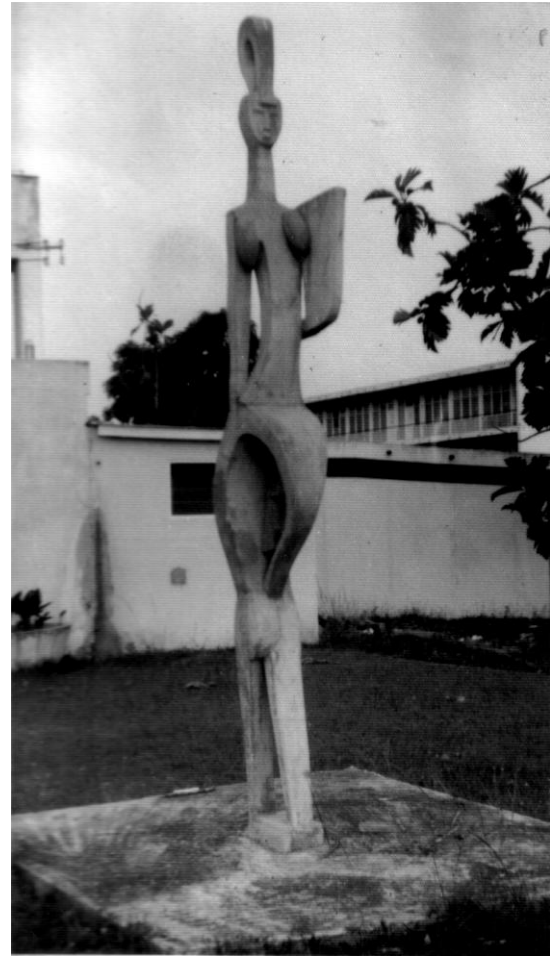


Figure 10 (Left). J. C. Okyere. *Couple*. Children's Library, KNUST. Picture credit: Aggor (1970)

Figure 11 (Right). J. C. Okyere. *School Girl*. Faculty of Pharmacy (Herbal Medicine Block) KNUST. Picture credit: Aggor (1970)

Okyere's technique of polymorphism and polysemy is taken to absurdly didactic heights in *School Girl* where cocoa pods calling to mind the neighbouring Agriculture Faculty double as breasts, a pair of compasses signifying the adjacent Architecture Department functions as legs. This manoeuvre recalls the composite portraits of Renaissance proto-surrealist Guiseppe Arcimboldo. Indeed, we could endlessly mine for meaningful cues in Okyere's *Lonely Woman*. Profuse with formal and rhetorical devices of morphing, anaphora (such as the *mise en abyme*), reversal, blurring of traditional boundaries and puzzling iconography, *Lonely Woman* seems to cast its observer in an active role.

Polylogue: Tropes of location, Surrealist *acéphale* vocabulary, androgyny and transvestism

I discuss *Lonely Woman* in respect of its special location on the KNUST campus, some devices which appear to renounce obligations of the single narrative monument sculpture, aspects of hierarchical and oppositional thinking which anticipate contemporary discourse on identity and gender. It will emerge that certain rhetorical and formal devices recur more frequently and in more considerable degrees than others. I infer that the denial of dichotomous thought underpins the most recurrent devices; they seem to corroborate Neils Bohr's famous aphorism for the principle of complementarity that "opposites are not contradictories but complements". I have also presented a critique of Okyere's seeming innovations against the background of precedence, concomitance and anticipation. I have assumed that together, this outline can appropriately contextualise Okyere's accomplishment in the idiom in KNUST and Ghanaian history.

Tropes of location

Using the anatomical metaphors of location and direction (posterior, lateral and anterior respectively) as points of reference, it would seem *Lonely Woman's* body and its location on campus reflect the chronology of the three surrounding halls and the literal meaning of their corresponding eponyms. Independence Hall, the first of the halls to be commissioned by President Kwame Nkrumah (1959) and commemorating Ghana's immediate-past Independence Day (6th March, 1957) is in the figure's rear; Republic Hall, the second of these halls to be commissioned and commemorating the then extant First Republican status of Ghana (1960) aligns with the figure's left side. Unity Hall, which was still under construction (Emmanuel Adashie, personal communication, July 21st, 2006) and which was intended to commemorate an envisioned African Unity is ahead of the figure. It is as if the patron and artist had meant, by this positioning, to embody the envisioned "African Unity", the ostensible goal of the "African Personality" concept, as the totality of immanent local referents in the past and present and more collective referents in the future.

It is easy to overlook the presence of *Lonely Woman* among the trees for it seems to have always been there. In its humid and pristine setting, *Lonely Woman's* Portland grey colour has been given a hybrid palette (daubs and washes of ochres, beiges, greys and sap-greens) by algae, moulds, insect nests and faecal droppings from birds. The figure

convincingly appears to be a stump - a trunk whose growth, though stunted, exudes such *elan vital* as would make the Portland medium appear to shoot out fresh green shoots in subsequent seasons. Such verve is also enforced by the overall configuration of terraced and incised cloth folds, dotted beads, interplay of tensions between contrasting oblique directions, scales, textures and visual weights.

Acéphale vocabulary, transvestism and Lonely Woman's androgyny

Okyere's effacing of *Lonely Woman's* facial features and the skewed emphasis on the pelvic region can have interesting implications in contemporary discourse. On the one hand, the morphology of the statue's head suggests that the artist may have taken mere aesthetic lessons from, for example, the canonical Cycladic head. The particular setting of the chin on the columnar neck also abbreviates Modigliani, the Byzantine icon or Buddhist sculpture. On the other hand, the androgynous and aniconic head would seem to reminisce a familiar trope in avant-garde Modernist cultural currency - the formalised cranium of Surrealist art which takes source from the praying mantis metaphor and its *acéphale* subtext popularised by critics Caillois and Bataille (Krauss, 1985/1991), and artists Giacometti, Picasso, Max Ernst and Moore. By the 1930s, the female-mantis metaphor had become a familiar referent in Surrealist visual and textual vocabulary because of its ostensible anthropomorphic qualities and its status in contemporary folklore as *femme fatale* (she consumes her male partner's head to climax copulation). Thus, the insect became an icon of cultural subversion, an envisioned female intrusion into male dominated hierarchical regimes in gender politics, the collapse of analogous rational-irrational oppositional distinctions. As Krauss describes the iconography of the attendant millieu, "Within the imaginative circuit of the period...the man with the insect head is also the woman with the insect head: the praying mantis" (1985/1991, p. 69). Put in context, it would seem *Lonely Woman's* featureless and insect-like head could be read beyond mere aesthetic lessons into meaningful iconography appropriated to problematize, for example, such dichotomised cultural categories as gender and identity. The gender and identity-neutral qualities the statue conveys and the deconstruction of oppositional myths however suggest a distinctive reading of precedent Modernist sculpture. In *Lonely Woman*, the reduction of emphasis on the head and the shifting of emphasis to the pelvis, undermines, for example, the ATD-NDD humanist, iconographic and anecdotal obligations in figural sculpture which associate the anatomical metaphors "superior" and "inferior with the cranial and the caudal sections respectively. That *Lonely Woman* interrogates this hierarchy marks a noteworthy accomplishment in modernist Ghanaian cement sculpture history. It would seem to anticipate Robert Storr's theme for the Venice Biennale (2007), *Think with the Senses-Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense*.

As indicated by the cusped hands, some parts of the *Lonely Woman* are fused, one with the other. The distinctiveness of respective fingers is simply suggested by thin scratches. There are also fusions between parts of the body on the one hand and accessories on the other, as indicated by the fusion of ears and ear-rings into a pair of Buddha-like ear-lobes. Traditional humanist poles of femininity and masculinity also appear to coexist evenly. The style of clothing has been shown to evoke more masculinity than femininity in the traditional Akan system of values with which Okyere, no doubt would have been familiar, yet the figure's graceful gesture, schematics and the title assigned to it allude to the female stereotype. Somewhere, the feminine-masculine poles appear indistinguishable, hybridised or transgressed. Okyere's mastery of morphing with the cement medium renders almost indistinguishable the transitions between one pole and the other. It would seem strange that Okyere whose worldview on sex and gender was essentially bigoted and male-chauvinistic (Okyere, 1981) should have produced an image of a sexless or transvestite nature.

Critique: Counterposing J. C. Okyere against Oku Ampofo

Viewed introspectively, one identifies the prevalence of the figurative monument - the single (monolithic), vertical, hieratic, immobile, slender outdoor statue in Okyere's oeuvre of large-scale concrete sculpture. The dominant leitmotif is the African woman's body. Yet there are strange inflections within his oeuvre which contrast with the idiomatic and stylistic achievements in *Lonely Woman*, *Couple* and *School Girl*. *Madonna*, for instance, executed around the

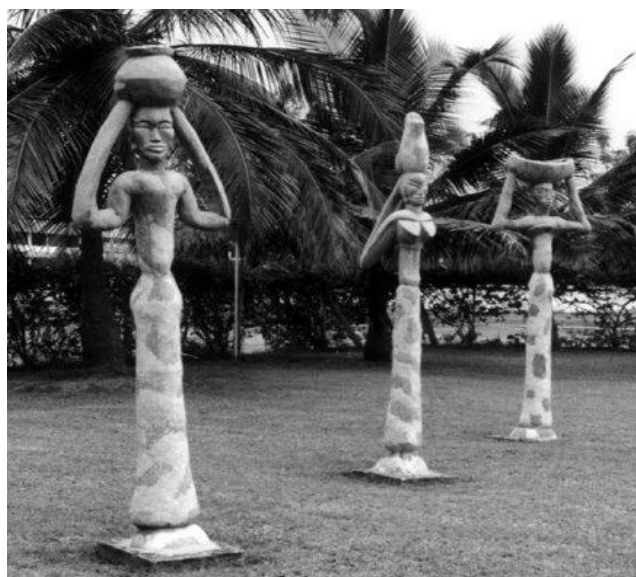


Figure 12 (Left): Oku Ampofo. *Struggle with tragedy*. 1955. Picture credit: The Oku Ampofo Foundation

Figure 13 (Right): Oku Ampofo. *Study of three market women*. 1958. Picture credit: The Oku Ampofo Foundation

same time as *Lonely Woman* and its kin references a familiar classical academic figure and pose recalling the classical aesthetics Okyere would have studied in the Goldsmiths but abhorred by his teacher Meyerowitz. With the introduction of the 'African' gourd as the fountain's nozzle, and the water which flows directly towards the left breast (Figure 6), the artist has reproduced aspects of the often saccharine and kitschy compositions which are mere ensembles of self-gratifying codes for the bourgeois male voyeur. The classicised African woman, more often than not, an indication of Ghanaian art school "freshman" craftsmanship and Afro-kitsch may have been borrowed uncritically, as is still done in the KNUST College of Art today. Quite expectedly, till date, the *Madonna* (Figure 6) has become the most celebrated of Okyere's concrete sculpture in KNUST. However, *Lonely Woman* (Figure 3a, 3b), *Couple* and, less so, the crypto-Cubistic *School Girl* attempt to renounce the pretensions to Greco-Roman high craftsmanship and high taste suggested in the *Madonna*.

There is much in Okyere's oeuvre to suggest that *Lonely Woman* encapsulates a subtext of Henry Moore's elongated and knotty garden sculptures (Figures 8, 9) which reference, not least, 'primitivist' simplicity and subtlety. While the British artist had principally cast in bronze or carved in stone, Okyere appropriates the style and reworks in cement and Ghanaian iconography. The equivalent in modern Ghanaian painting was Bucknor's 'Sculptural idiom', a crypto-Cubist and surrealist formal synthesis with Africanist iconography. Bucknor had believed this to be the authentic African style of painting in modern times.

Historically, Okyere's entire production of vertical cement statuary has not been as often-referenced as, say, Oku Ampofo's. Yet, a more dedicated reading would reveal that notwithstanding Ampofo's more familiar repertory and its merit in the vanguard of the cement monument production in Ghana, certain seeming anticipations of Ampofo's seem challenged by some nuances in Okyere's rather scanty oeuvre. These challenges, I assert, are most favourably embodied in *Lonely Woman* and to a lesser extent, in *Couple* and *School Girl*. Some aspects of Okyere's idiolect appear almost unprepared for by anything in Ampofo's concrete sculpture or concomitant examples of the idiom's use in Ghana. Where Ampofo, for example, appears Baroque and melodramatic (Figure 12), Okyere seems "Gothic", decorative and reserved. Where Ampofo is direct in his statement (Figure 13), Okyere is puzzling, cerebral and ironic (Figure 3a, 3b, 8, 9). Where Ampofo is wholly positive and bulbous, Okyere syncopates the dominance of positive form with holes, orifices, scratches and protuberances (Figure 3a, 3b, 10, 11). Okyere's approach recalls Bachelard's example of the 'language of agglutination', the hyphenated syntax which obtains words that are sentences themselves. To scoop out excesses of this artificial syntax, Okyere plays with the device of 'loosening intimate ties' by strategically unwelding some prefixes and suffixes. Okyere plays with the components of the dialectics of division; inside/outside, male/female, North and South, being and non-being finds a place in this prudent alchemy while Ampofo reproduces the hierarchical system of values.

However, comparably, Okyere's tact, prudence and modulation seem laboured, nervous, excessively premeditated, flattering and in some places needlessly perfunctory. In *Lonely Woman*, there seems almost routine symmetry and equilibrium in every sphere of the figure's configuration. In many respects, Okyere's style can be read as needlessly compliant to *passé* modernist convention and technique; this obeisance to obligation at the expense of innovation, sometimes drowns his otherwise poignant statements. A keen eye would discern here and there to which extent he has merely woven rarefied "African" concepts and reified fruits of Cubism, Surrealism and Cycladic art around scaffoldings of Moore and Ampofo. Further, Okyere uncritically remains in the strict Corbussieran *béton brut* [exposed concrete] aesthetics, the Modernist mantra of "truth to materials". Thus, he fails to "abuse" his medium; not even the premixed lime-proof colourants which Ampofo introduces to animate his work nor the polychrome of concomitant *Posuban* statuary would feature in any of Okyere's concrete sculptures. In the tradition which followed *Lonely Woman*, *Couple* and *School Girl* in the College of Art, concrete sculpture, with very few exceptions, retains this feature of "truth to material" and "form follows function". While more documentation and examination would be required to extend this correlation to establish cause, the suggestion that their organising principles draw from similar ideological regimes seem certain.

Conclusion

By referencing *Lonely Woman* and related examples, I have attempted to sketch J. C. Okyere's achievements in the direct-modelled concrete sculpture idiom and its iconography. Being one of H. V. Meyerowitz's most prominent students in the Achimota Specialist Art and Crafts course and proceeding to become one of the influential personages in Ghanaian art, Okyere was no mean figure in the development of art in Ghana. I have situated Okyere's accomplishments within the general development of artistic and cultural production in Ghana and elsewhere. It has emerged that Okyere drew on a repertoire of nativist, exotic, archaic and modernist sources to develop his own lexis.

While I have sounded patronising of the artist's idiolect of interfacing, hybridising, double-coding, blurring, polymorphism and reversal of hierarchical and gender boundaries, I recognise it as a modulation of repurposed styles. Simultaneously, I have inferred the extent to which some of these exude from syntactic borrowings, allusions to, appropriations or reproductions of familiar subtexts then associated with the canonical African identity and style. Of course, a keen eye would discern here and there to which extent the artist has woven reified 'African' concepts and rarefied fruits of Cubism and Surrealism around scaffoldings of Henry Moore and Oku Ampofo,

It has been important to opine that in the context of 1960s cement sculpture practice in Ghana, *Lonely Woman* conveyed remarkable novelty based on which subsequent developments on KNUST campus would find important resource. The enigmatic iconography and rarefied technique in *Lonely Woman* stimulated some new directions taken by Okyere himself and succeeding College of Art cement sculptors. In retrospect, the achievements of direct-modelled concrete sculptors E. K. Azzii-Akator, Asaku-Gyapong, W. N. Sackitey, M. K. Vordzogbe, Kweku Andrews, P. Y. Mensah (Big Joe), J. K. Asare Tettey, L. F. Y. Nukpe and sundry in the direct-modelled cement sculpture idiom can be put in their apposite historical perspectives if references are made to such precedents as *Lonely Woman* and its kin. The KNUST, indeed, possesses some of the most significant of J. C. Okyere's works in cement. Renewed interest ought to be expended to restore their significance in KNUST and Ghanaian history.

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Endnotes

¹ KNUST is the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. It began as Kumasi College of Technology (KCT) in 1952 in colonial Gold Coast. After Independence in 1957, Gold Coast became Ghana. Kwame Nkrumah became the first President of Ghana. KCT became an autonomous University, the KNUST, in 1961 during Nkrumah's Republican regime.

² J. C. Okyere also made the older *Farmer* in front of Akuafu Hall, University of Ghana, Legon.

³ I wrote the monograph Amankwah (2002) when I was yet to change my name from Edward Kevin Amankwah to *kari'kachā sei'dou*.

⁴ I refer here to Botticelli's *Primavera*.