

‘IT’S YOUR STORY, DON’T LOSE IT’ – USING SOUND AND IMAGE HERITAGE TO BRIDGE CULTURES

Conversation with J. H. Kwabena Nketia on the occasion of World Day for Audiovisual Heritage 2016

Judith Opoku-Boateng, J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana



Figure 1. Judith Opoku-Boateng with J. H. Kwabena Nketia.

1. Introduction

On 27th October, 2016, the J. H. Kwabena Archives of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana joined forces with UNESCO and other audiovisual archive institutions globally to celebrate “The World Day for Audiovisual Heritage” (WDAVH), a day set aside by UNESCO to raise general awareness of the need for urgent measures to be taken and to acknowledge the importance of audiovisual documents as an integral part of national identity. The theme for that year’s celebration was “It’s your story, don’t lose it.” My outfit organized a roundtable discussion on the theme and invited three renowned professors from the University of Ghana, who have had tremendous experience in fieldwork documentation, archiving, and dissemination. The three discussants were; Professor Daniel Avorgbedor¹, Professor John Collins², and J. H. Kwabena Nketia, founder of what is now known as the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Archives. After the roundtable discussions, I did a solo interview with him

1 Read more about Prof. Daniel Avorgbedor here: <http://www.ug.edu.gh/music/staff/prof-daniel-avorgbedor>
2 Read more about Prof. John Collins here: <http://www.ug.edu.gh/music/staff/prof-edmund-john-collins>

on UNESCO's theme for the day. This interview collates the views I gathered from Nketia from the roundtable discussion and the subsequent solo interview in the comfort of his home in Madina, a suburb of Accra.

2. Brief on J. H. Kwabena Nketia

J. H. Kwabena Nketia is a living legend. Born on June 22, 1921 at Asante Mampong in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, he is widely known and celebrated as a brilliant and versatile composer, an authority on African music and aesthetics, and a distinguished writer. He has over 200 publications not only in English, but also in his own mother tongue—Twi, in which he has written more than 20 books. He also has more than 80 musical compositions to his credit, including solo songs, and choral pieces. Nketia's publications provide important and insightful material for the study of African history, mythology, literature, poetry, dance, drama, music, aesthetics, cultural anthropology, religion, and philosophy, creating a wealth of knowledge on African societies and cultures (Hagan, 2015).

Nketia's understanding of the African worldview is exceptional, and this partly comes from having been exposed to deep Akan culture from very early in his life (Euba, 2014). Nketia was the first African Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. Nketia has lectured in leading universities around the world, including the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); Harvard University; the University of Pittsburg; and China Conservatory of Music. His Africanity was never blown away despite his international exposure. He is the recipient of numerous local and international awards

Currently, he is the Chancellor of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture at Akropong in Ghana; a Foundation Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences; and an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Society of Great Britain and Ireland; among other honors (Foundation, 2013).

3. The Conversation

Judith Opoku-Boateng (JOB), Interviewer – Today is “World Day for Audiovisual Heritage,” a day that has been set aside by UNESCO to acknowledge and create awareness about audiovisual heritage. The theme for this year's celebration is “It's your story, don't lose it.” You are a living legend in this country, and looking at your profile, it is evident that you have a special passion for audiovisual heritage preservation. You have donated your entire collection of field recordings to the archive at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, and the Archive has been named after you. What was your motivation when you started collecting music from indigenous communities in Ghana?

J. H. Kwabena Nketia (JHKN), Interviewee – Thank you very much for this splendid opportunity to talk about heritage. UNESCO needs to be applauded for this initiative. I have always been interested in music and the traditional arts, and the stories behind them, and at a certain point in my life I had the opportunity of studying those kinds of materials, not only at home, but abroad. It seemed to me that my job was really to go into the business of collecting and systematizing what we have in Ghana, and later on also what we have in adjoining countries. And perhaps as a final objective, I would write the monograph, *The Music of Africa* (1974), because those collections give us some idea of the principles by which our traditional people have created their music. To move forward, we need to know our foundation and where we want to go in terms of our experience. So this is roughly what has guided me. I come from a traditional background where tradition was important. I was a child of non-literate and non-Christian parents, but I had the opportunity of going to school.

So it seemed to me that I should supplement what the school offered with what I found in my own traditional society. In other words I kept up my traditional upbringing, and tried to learn about it and to share it, so that all of us who are in modern Ghana can appreciate our own traditions and how they can be developed and matched with the new traditions that are coming to us from various countries, so we can move forward as an independent country with our own and enlarged tradition in contemporary times. I wasn't really among the class of people who have some western upbringing before they find their own culture, and so that enabled me to take up my traditional things seriously, but at the same time look at the new things that had come to us from the West because there is a way of enriching your experience when you borrow relevant things from other cultures and enhance and improve your own.

JOB: Let's go back to history. How were you able to capture all these traditions, especially looking at the kind of traditional background you are talking about?

JHKN: Well, in the early days there was no recording equipment, nothing of the sort we have now, so you had to go to your teachers, parents, grandparents, and others in the tradition to learn from them; and so I did. My first attempt was provoked by a statement that the late Ephraim Amu³ made about going to the traditional people to learn from them. When I was in the teachers' training college at Akropong,⁴ he saw me performing on the harmonium, imitating his compositional style. At the end of it he came to me and said, "Young man, I gather you're interested in music," and I beamed with a smile and said, "Yes." And then he said, "Don't copy my music! Go to the traditional people and learn our traditional music from them, because that is how I started." So that was the best intellectual advice for a young person, but it was stimulating. So I went back to my hometown, but it was now the opportunity to look at that traditional background from another angle, from the angle of a boy who was going to school, learning about cultures and so forth, and who must be interested in his own culture. So that was the stimulus, and I started learning Adowa⁵ songs and so forth from my traditional people in Mampong Ashanti.

What impressed me most were my teachers in the traditional setup, especially the Adowa queen mother, Dede Ama Tanowaa, who taught me about the Adowa repertoire and the tricks about Adowa. She was in charge of the Adowa group, and I must say that although she was non-literate, she was very intelligent and she would tell me about the structure of the song. She sings and tells me, "You know, this is the 'call' (*ofre*) and this is the 'response' (*nnyesoo*); when the soloist interrupts, it is called (*ntumu*), and when she sings a part on top of the chorus, it is (*ntosoo*)."⁵ So it meant that this old lady who was non-literate was an intellectual because she was aware of the formal structure of the music. In other words, she had a certain sensitivity about the form and the theoretical structure, what we call the theoretical knowledge that we apply today. We all think that our non-literates probably do not dabble in intellectual things, but she was very systematic. It was all unwritten in her head, and I felt that my job now was to codify this, to bring this to our attention so we know exactly what our traditional people do. It is therefore our job to learn to sing the songs, and if possible to go beyond that and learn how to create new songs. Now in songs you are

3 Ephraim Amu, born on 13th September, 1899 and died on 2nd January, 1995, was a renowned Ghanaian composer, musicologist and teacher.

4 Akropong is the capital city of the Akwapim Traditional Area. It is located in the Eastern Region of Ghana, and in the Akwapim mountainous terrain, about 30 miles from Accra, the capital city of Ghana (Kwakwaduam Association Inc., 2013). It has a 2013 settlement population of 13,785 people.

5 Adowa is a social dance performed at funerals and also during joyful occasions. It has grace of movements of the diminutive antelope after which it is named (Opoku & Bell, 1965).

dealing with not only the music but also the language, the text, so you have a double task of knowing the language, how it works, and then the music, how you convert this into song. I was keen on seeking more knowledge on this “story” and not “losing it”, as UNESCO has it on today’s theme.

There is a lot to learn from traditional people in terms of the structure of our traditional music, the words and all the other fine aspects of how you perform as a group, with a leader and the chorus and so forth. It was the intellectual knowledge behind this traditional thing that I had to discover in order to share this with my colleagues or with other people, and so this is the essence of what we describe now as musicology, knowing how the music is organized, its history, and so forth. We do all these things in our traditions but we don’t talk about our music, we don’t write; instead, we memorize the music and we perform and enjoy. What was missing was the literacy aspect, so my job then was to bring some literacy so that the songs are available in written form, and then we learn how to sing them. Even just getting the text without the music was very important, because you can enjoy what the text says in terms of what we now describe as literature. In other words, oral literature was treated as something that you think about and say in song, and not in writing because we hadn’t developed writing for it.

JOB: Thank you Professor. How much is lost in the process of recording this information like you did, given that we did not have the recording devices?

JHKN: Well this is when the invention of recording machines becomes important for us. Because, if I go there and learn to sing it, I can only share it when I sing it, but if I record it I can also play it for others to listen to and enjoy. So the recording thing came as an aide memoire, something that was enabling us to record our traditions or stories so we can listen back and enjoy them, so we can listen and discover how they were structured, so we can listen to them and see the topics that we dealt with, so we can listen and see how interpersonal relationships were ordered in traditional society and so forth. So, this becomes your oral literature of the people which they developed, which they don’t write down, but convey orally in songs and speeches.

JOB: Professor Nketia, you have extensively documented Ghanaian musical traditions from the ten regions of Ghana as well as music from some African countries. When and how did you start this fieldwork documentation?

JHKN: Well, it all started in 1952, when Professor Kofi Abrefa Busia⁶, the head of the department of Sociology at the University of Ghana, decided to give me a research fellowship in sociology to study music. That was an exciting kind of departure, and from then I had my team. He made sure we had a car, a driver, a technician from the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (the only broadcasting institution at the time) who handled the tape recorder, and an assistant in the field to help with interpretation and so forth. So the idea of being here at the University of Ghana and then traveling to various places in the country, to enjoy the music, but also record and bring it back with my team, started during Professor Busia’s tenure. Thus we had a model kind of archival collection. This collection covered all ten regions of Ghana. Now a collection is just a collection, but it becomes a proper archival thing when it is properly organized and made available for research and entertainment.

6 Kofi Abrefa Busia (1913–1978) was the first lecturer in African Studies and the first African to occupy a Chair at the University of Gold Coast, now University of Ghana. He later became the Prime Minister of Ghana, from 1969 to 1972 (Modern Ghana, 2006).

JOB: So when you had the support from Professor Busia to carry out this documentation project, did you initially plan to cover all Ghanaian regional traditions?

JHKN: The initial idea was to cover some traditions, but then the interest grew, so the bigger idea was to cover as many traditions as possible from all the regions of Ghana so that we have the whole of Ghana's traditions in one place. In other words, the idea was to cover the entire country so that we use the archive to bridge ethnicities or cultures in Ghana—in a more appropriate sense, to unify the nation, so that someone from the Dagomba⁷ tribe, for example, can come to the archive and learn about 'Agbadza', an Ewe⁸ dance from the Volta region and vice-versa. The issue is, how can you develop a school system that is always singing *God Save the Queen* or *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, and not singing African songs, if you don't provide them with the materials that our forefathers were using? How can you improve on that? And that is the challenge.

And so the archive now becomes a very important, strategic thing for us in terms of music and its development in Ghana, because when you know the various traditions and you are a composer, you don't compose only in your own traditions; you can compose in other traditions. That is what has been developed since Busia paved the way. Kwame Nkrumah supported this initiative in his time, it became fashionable for all of us to learn the music of other tribes. I refer to this as "bridging cultures and unifying the nation."

JOB: How do you feel, knowing that the materials you collected in the early 1950s and donated to the Institute of African Studies archives are being useful?

JHKN: I am pleased that the University of Ghana has named this important facility after me. The point I want to make is that the archive is a very important source for development. The materials are there, but unless we have creative minds looking at how the materials may be used, they may lie there forever, and not be useful. So the stimulus to find out how our people were doing this in the past and how we could do it in the present defined the idea of making sure that even though we have several tribes, so to speak, we have different musical idioms, and that as a nation we can be familiar with the music of all our societies and that we can even perform their music. That becomes a challenge. But, we can't do it without the archive, without the materials, and we can't do it without the people in the archive systemizing what is there. And, we can't do it without scholars being interested in systemizing the knowledge and creating new works embodying the tradition. So that makes the archive a very important thing in the evolution of tradition and style, and in terms of nation building. Fortunately, my research did not cover only Ghana, but other parts of Africa.

JOB: Generally, would you highlight the role archives should play in preserving "our stories" so that we don't "lose them"?

7 Dagombas are the second largest of the 54 ethnic groups in Ghana.

8 The Ewe occupy southeastern Ghana and the Southern Parts of neighboring Togo and Benin.

JHKN: An archive is a backbone to culture and development, a backbone to education, a backbone even for philosophers, because you can learn about how your ancestors and other people were living and thinking. So the archive has become very important; preserving this for the country and for people who are curious to know their past, and to make good use of their past in the present is highly essential. For example, if you are a popular musician, we want the little thing that will make people dance; if you're another type of musician, maybe a church musician, we will want something that will make people contemplate. But with the archive, whatever your intentions are, you will find something that relates to what culture does and provides in the country.

Our heritage is our story. Audiovisual heritage materials are our stories. Besides the written records, the films, musical recordings, and oral histories that have been captured in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, and so on, on magnetic or digital formats as we have today, tell our story—the story about who we are and how we have developed or progressed as a nation or, generally put, as a global village.

JOB: What is the way forward?

JHKN: Well, the way forward is just what has begun here and in other countries. Setting up a proper archive and knowing that it is storing our field recordings and other commercial materials, but not only just storing, but making it possible for people from far and near to access them for application is what I am talking about. And I always insist on responsible access; by this, I mean creative and responsible use of the materials that have been collected by responsible and considerate people.

Another point I want to make is that the archive curators or archivists have a huge responsibility of making the archive known to the public. They must devise creative ways to advertise the “super stories” they are preserving. The archivists must try to educate people about their collection and convince people that they will find something good there. For example, those in the music field who are trying to create new music must be able to access the old music from the archives to enhance their new creation. Even politicians need to consult the archive to learn from the old order and improve on it. Lastly, I would say that we should appreciate archives and make good use of them, no matter our backgrounds, because we would get to understand ourselves better.

JOB: Thank you very much Professor Nketia for your time and the insights you have given us.

JHKN: The pleasure is mine.

4. Acknowledgements

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