

## **‘Tongo is a Prison’: revisiting *Hamile, the Tongo Hamlet*.**

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### **Abstract**

In 1964, the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) produced an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with staff and students from the University of Ghana’s School of Music and Drama. Transposed to the far north of Ghana, *Hamile: the Tongo Hamlet* is described as the film starts as a straight adaptation with very little alteration: ‘The text is unaltered, except where it would not make sense in a Frafra community, or where an archaic word obscures the meaning’. However, in this article we explore how the repositioning of *Hamlet* to Ghana’s Northern Region speaks to a brief window of radical post-colonial politics and culture.

1964 was also the year in which Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, declared a one-party state and himself president for life before his government was toppled in a coup d’état in 1966. We argue that given the political context not only can *Hamile* be read as a profound reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s text, but that the combination of the iconography of northern Ghana together with the ambition of Ghana’s nascent creative institutions captures the highpoint of Nkrumah’s cultural policy. Indeed, the significance of the examination of this largely forgotten film lies both in our positioning of it as a clear example of decolonial practice and in its own denial of radical adaptation.

### **Introduction**

*Hamile: the Tongo Hamlet*, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, was filmed by the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) in 1963 and released in 1964 in collaboration with students and staff from the University of Ghana’s School of Music and Drama, later the School of Performing Arts. The film is a substantial two-hour feature, shot on location in the countryside surrounding Accra, Ghana’s capital city. Given the technical ambition of the piece, as well as the demands of the text itself, it is a curiously under-considered example of 1960s African cinema.

Given that the School of Music and Drama was only established in 1963, *Hamile* is a remarkably ambitious undertaking. Despite this, it makes very few claims about itself. During the opening sequence, the audience is told the following:

The action of the play takes place in Tongo, the home of the Frafra people, who live in the far north of Ghana.

The text is unaltered, except where it would not make sense in a Frafra community, or where an archaic word obscures the meaning. (1964)

There are a number of points here that bear scrutiny, the most obvious of which is that it could be argued that no Shakespearean English would make sense within a Frafra community. That aside, the two key points that we consider in this article are the representation of northern Ghana in the film, and the significance of the claim that text is unaltered.

Speaking in the early 2000s, Martin Owusu who plays Karim, or Horatio, in the film and was an undergraduate at the time and later Professor of Theatre at the University of Ghana, said that the only substantive change to the text was the characters' names. He suggested that they had been changed to make them sound 'more northern' (Gibbs, 2006). Given that northern Ghana is predominantly Muslim, Owusu seems to be suggesting that character names were altered to fit with a specific cultural context; as well as Horatio becoming Karim, Polonius is renamed Ibrahim, Ophelia becomes Habiba, and so on. Not only is changing the names to fit the Islamic context of northern Ghana significant, but it also highlights a central rationale for the adaptations made throughout the film, which is to show northern Ghana as a place of tradition, royalty and power, and simultaneously an integral and unquestionable part of modern Ghana.

Far from being a straight adaptation, we argue that the film is rooted within a very specific Ghanaian context at the point of post-independence nation building and it is this political backdrop that influences the adaptations made to the text, the text itself, and the absence of a clearer claim to the film's radical creative choices. Indeed, we argue that not only is *Hamile* a profound reinterpretation of Shakespeare's text but that the combination of a specific representation of northern Ghana, coupled with the ambition of Ghana's nascent creative institutions, encapsulates the essence of Nkrumahist cultural policy. Far from being a straight adaptation or simple transplantation of *Hamlet* to northern Ghana, this film represents a cultural manifesto and a window into the highpoint of Nkrumahism.

### **Political Background**

As mentioned, *Hamile* was released in 1964, which was also the year in which Nkrumah declared a one-party state and himself president for life. Two years later, in 1966, Nkrumah's government was toppled in a coup whilst he was on a state visit to Hanoi, Vietnam and replaced by the first of a series of military governments (Rooney, 2002).

Ghana had gained its independence from Britain on 6 March 1957, with Nkrumah as Prime Minister. The transition from Crown Colony to Republic was a complex negotiation of political devolution that took eight years to complete (Jones, 1976). The successful

conclusion of independence under Nkrumah immediately highlighted the legacy of the formation of the Gold Coast Colony, which began in 1874 and only concluded in 1956. The process of colonisation brought together diverse communities, each with a distinct cultural and legal system,<sup>1</sup> which, as Asante notes, 'have little in common' (Asante, 1965, 849). At independence, as today, there were sixty-five distinct ethnic groups in Ghana and thirty-four separate languages spoken. By some estimations, there are "ninety multi-ethno-linguistic groups" in modern Ghana (Essel, 2014, p.46).

As the first sub-Saharan nation to gain independence, the fragility of the new state was underscored by the fact that Ghana's geographical boundaries had been settled only a year earlier when part of Togoland, which had been a British Protectorate since its capture from Germany in 1914,<sup>2</sup> voted to become part of Ghana. The challenge of such a diversity of cultural identities at the point of political independence is highlighted by Frantz Fanon's suggestion that '[t]o fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation' (2006, 120). However, at the beginning of Nkrumah's presidency, with the nation liberated, it was impossible to say what a national culture could or should look or sound like. As Kwame Gyekye suggests, the issue faced by Nkrumah at independence was how to effectively 'weld the constituent ethnic groups into a new, certainly larger, form of sociopolitical association [...], how to solder the component parts together to make a whole' (Gyekye, 1997, 77). Robert July notes that Ghana's new political leaders grew aware of 'the importance of cultural awareness in generating [...] a single coherent, cohesive new nation from the disparate peoples that made up the Gold Coast colony' (1987, 13). As well as the need to weld together disparate communities, the immediate situation faced by Nkrumah at the start of the new state included different political perspectives on whether a new country was desirable at all.

This difference was particularly acute in the north where the National Liberation Movement (NLM), which was focussed principally in the Ashanti Region with some support in the Northern Territories 'attacked the conception of a single one-nation Ghana and sought to block the scheduled transition to independence' (Emerson, 1961, 200). Hence, in the early years of independence, the question of how to be seen to bring the former Northern Territories into the new republic was of paramount importance. One of Nkrumah's strategies was to construct and display signifiers of a Ghanaian identity built from elements of traditional, regional identity that suggested that the Northern Territories had always been part of Ghana.

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<sup>1</sup> The Gold Coast was declared a British colony on July 25, 1874 when 'it was given its own colonial executive and legislative council body and a Supreme Court' (Akamba and Tufour, 2012, 204) Following a series of wars with the Ashanti Empire to the north, the Ashanti Region and Northern Regions were annexed by Britain in 1901 and became part of the Gold Coast Colony.

<sup>2</sup> Following the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919, German Togoland was divided into French Togo in the East and British Togoland to the West. Togo remained a French colony until its independence in 1960.

One of the clearest examples of this was at his speech to mark Ghana's independence Nkrumah addressed the crowd, stating: 'we are going to create our own African personality and identity. It's the only way that we can show the world that we are ready for our own battles'. Nkrumah continued: 'our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent'. (Nkrumah, 1957)

Though the speech was underpinned by his commitment to pan-Africanism, Nkrumah's choice of costume spoke just as clearly to his domestic, Ghanaian, audience. As he declared independence on a platform at the old Polo Ground (now the Nkrumah mausoleum), Nkrumah and the other members of his Convention People's Party stood dressed in traditional smocks of northern Ghana and their prison caps. The signification of the prison caps is clear: the country's new leaders were all 'prison graduates' (Mawugbe, 2015). They had suffered for their political convictions under the British but had ultimately prevailed. The signification of the smock is more multi-layered. As Essel suggests, on one level 'The wearing of the smock in that function projected that costume as a national dress [...] Symbolically, it signified a break away from the shackles of colonialism' (Essel, 33). The positioning of the smock as a 'national dress' first and foremost projects the clear signal that there is a nation.

However, as Nkrumah was from the south, the more obvious choice of dress would have been Kente cloth worn as a long toga. Kente has long associations with the Ewe, Ashanti and Akan of central and southern Ghana and is considered so intrinsically Ghanaian that it is specifically protected as a work of folklore under the 2005 Copyright Act. In many of the photographs that capture Nkrumah at state occasions, when he is not wearing a suit, he is wearing Kente. Indeed, on the day of his speech, Nkrumah had worn Kente in parliament when he took his oath of office. So the changing into a northern smock to publicly mark the moment of independence has a particular significance. As Essel notes: 'the smock "was considered the archetypal dress of the common man, particularly the northerner, as opposed to the privileged Kente attire of the Asantehene and his royal court."' (Biney, in Essel, 32). Though there are gradations of smock that reflect social class – smocks for royals, middle and working class – Nkrumah wore the smock of the lower classes to project the service of leadership. In this context, the smock is both northern and democratic; it is the choice of the common man. Here, Nkrumah is positioning himself, and the Republic, as simultaneously a non-hierarchical, non-traditional state but one that is deeply rooted in and representative of the combined heritage of the whole nation.

The careful stage-management of the independence celebrations was attested to by Kwabena Nketia. An ethnomusicologist and Music Consultant on *Hamile*, Nketia was employed by Nkrumah to help produce the independence celebrations. In an interview given in 2002, he noted that at independence there was 'a deliberate attempt [made] to recontextualise [traditional] music in the new state' (Wiggins and Nketia, 66). Moreover, during the independence celebrations, he recalls that:

We brought performing groups from parts of the country to perform at the stadium [...] They only had ten minutes, so before they were ready they were off again, but it was symbolic. [...] For these people who came to perform, it was bringing them from the periphery to the centre, so politically there was also the sense of making them feel part of the new nation (Wiggins and Nketia, 2005, 66).

Given the threat of cessation, one of Nkrumah's key strategies was to promote a unitary sense of Ghanaian identity where national identity took precedence over tribal identity. That the body of the president, and the personification of the new body politic, was dressed in the archetypal dress of the common man, and that that common man was from the north rather than the south, sent a very clear signal to the domestic audience. As Essel suggests: 'Using the smock rather assisted in the bonding of savannah north to the coastal south' (Essel, 33). In order to spread this message, Nkrumah identity developed cultural institutions that would support his political agenda. Culture became the mechanism for promulgating Nkrumah's vision of a post-colonial Ghana.

### **Nkrumah's Cultural Policy**

With knowledge of the events that in a short time toppled the Nkrumah government, it is difficult to appreciate how seemingly robust Ghana's position as a political, economic, and cultural model was at the time *Hamile* was produced. The numerous large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Akasombo Dam, Tema Harbour and the motorways around Accra were symbolic of a country moving forward. They were not merely civil engineering projects, but expressions of a confident Afro-futurism made present.

Amongst all this activity, it is telling that Nkrumah also found time to support and develop Ghana's creative industries, which he consistently used the cultural industries in Ghana as part of the apparatus of the state. Shortly into his presidency, several cultural institutions were either founded or redeveloped to fit the Nkrumahist cultural agenda. These included the Arts Council of Ghana, the Ghana Film Corporation, the National Museum of Ghana, the Ghana News Agency, and the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. In addition, Nkrumah inaugurated the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, which by 1963 incorporated the School of Music and Drama under Joe de Graft, the writer of *Hamile*. The development of these institutions, many of which had their roots in the colonial era, refashioned the means of cultural production and placed it in the hands of the republic, rather than the colonizer.

As an illustration of the speed of progress in the early years of independence: prior to 1957, only four Ghanaian plays had been published in some form.<sup>3</sup> One was serialised in a newspaper, two were published and one was performed, lost and rediscovered in the 1970s. However, by 1960, just three years after independence, the Arts Council of Ghana had been established, the National Theatre Movement had outlined the trajectory for establishing a national theatre building, the Ghana Drama Studio had been built and its resident theatre company, and the Experimental Theatre Players, were working under the guidance of their director and writer Efua Sutherland. Multiple plays had been published and received multiple performances (Gibbs, 2012).

In 1961, Nkrumah attended the inaugural performance of Sutherland's Ghana Drama Studio and prior to the performance addressed the audience. Robert July notes that his speech articulated

the desire that a network of theaters be established throughout the land, the hope for a renaissance of the arts in Africa [and] most of all, Nkrumah's recurrent dream of pan-African unity, aided in this instance by the universal language of art (July, 74).

That Nkrumah was in attendance at all gives an indication of the political economy of theatre in Ghana at the time. Moreover, that he vocally supported the development of more theatres throughout Ghana as a means of promulgating expressions of cultural unity demonstrates how central the creative industries were to Nkrumah as part of his on-going 'systematic effort to achieve cultural decolonization' (Morriseau-Leroy, 1968, 92).

### **Ghana's Film Industry**

As noted, *Hamile* was made by the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC), formerly the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU) which was founded in 1948 and briefly renamed the Ghana Film Unit between 1957-1961. Like all colonial film units, the GCFU ran under the British Ministry of Information. The GCFU trained local talent under the direction of British filmmakers but retained a propagandist tone. Prior to *Hamile* only a handful of feature length films had been made. These include, *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952), Ghana's first feature film, *Progress in Kojokrom* (1953) and *Mr Mensah Builds a House* (1955). All of these films are created to a greater or lesser extent through the colonial lens, centering British perspectives and the English language. As Ohene-Asah points out: 'the ideology undergirding films of the units was similar to earlier colonial films as they fueled a central

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<sup>3</sup> J.B Danquah, 's *The Third Woman* (London: Society for Christian Literature 1943); and F. Kwesi Fiawoo's, *The Fifth Landing Stage* (Accra: Sedco Publishing Ltd, 1983) were published at the time. Mabel Dove's *A Woman in Jade*, (in *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2004)), was serialized in *The Times of West Africa* in 1934. Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards: A Comedy and The Anglo-Fanti: A Short Story* (Accra: Readwide Publishers, 1997), was lost and rediscovered in the 1970s, though James Gibbs suggests that page proofs for Chatto and Windus were prepared (James Gibbs 'Seeking the Founding Father: the story of Kobina Sekyi's *The Blinkards* (1916) (unpub, 2010) 11).

colonial agenda of systematically indoctrinating indigenous people to accept European ways of life' (Ohene-Asah, 810). That *Hamile*, filmed only eight years later, contains none of these colonialist perspectives, is something we return to below.

Domestically, Ghana's developing film industry was both hugely popular and quickly demonstrated its political value to Nkrumah, who attended the premier of *The Boy Kumasenu* as prime minister of the Gold Coast (Sandon, 2013). The film reportedly showed to 40,000 people in the first three weeks and was particularly popular in Accra. The *New York Times* suggested that this was because of the audience's eagerness 'to see (and see again) themselves or their friends and their familiar surroundings and way of life on screen' (Times, 1953 in *Colonial Film*, np). When it showed at the Berlin Film Festival in 1953, *Variety* called it 'a remarkable entry by a completely unknown little film nation' (Rice, 2008).

*Mr Mensah Builds a House*, which begins with a highlife song with the lyrics: 'he who has a house and wife lives a happy and contented life', is particularly interesting as an illustration of how the state, and Nkrumah specifically, harnessed the creative industries to support a political agenda. Briefly, Mr Mensah, a civil servant is close to retirement and plans to move back to his home village into a new house he has been building for the last three years. His nephew Kofi is in charge of the project and, unbeknownst to his uncle, has spent most of Mr Mensah's money on keeping up his own lavish lifestyle. When Mr Mensah arrives in the village with his wife, having been presented with a carriage clock by his British boss to mark his retirement, Mr Mensah finds a building site. To his rescue comes a government minister who, as part of the government's rural housebuilding scheme, guarantees to provide Mr Mensah, and anyone else, with the materials to build his house if the village contributes the labour. The Colonial Film Archive notes that the film was commissioned by the Housing Ministry, which was led by Nkrumah. The film was shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1956 and the reviewer in the *Glasgow Herald* suggested the film was made with all the 'freshness and enthusiasm that is a young country's birthright' (Rice, 2008). Domestically, the film was distributed by cinema vans, with a total of 249 performances playing to 257,530 people' (Report on Togoland, 1955, 68). As prime minister, Nkrumah stated that his second development plan, 1956-61 'would lay greater reemphasis on rural housing and rural development' (The Times, 1954).

Through these experiences, film, as a medium, demonstrated its double utility to Nkrumah as both a mechanism for communicating a direct message of government policy to a domestic audience, and as a window to showcase Ghana's creative and technical presence in the world. Or, as Ohene-Asah suggests, 'the GFIC was meant to demonstrate the government's commitment to 'building a film production and exhibition network that communicated Ghana's independent and self-sustaining status to the rest of the world' (2021, 811). This drive led to 'Nkrumah's government provid[ing] funding to support capacity building that could enable the Ghanaian staff to effectively take over the film

industry (2021, 811). The first manager of GFIC was (George) Kofi Awoonor (Williams), poet, novelist, Professor of comparative literature and Production Advisor on *Hamile*.

### ***Hamile***

*Hamile* was directed by Terry Bishop, a British director, and the only non-Ghanaian member of the team. Other members of the creative team, including Kwabina Nketia, Kofi Awoonor, Joe de Graft, Ernest Abbeyquaye are significant figures across Ghana's cultural industries, playing key roles in arts, education, and politics. Bishop (1912-1981) was a documentary maker as well as working in film and television in the UK, directing episodes of swashbuckling series such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1956-1960), *Sword of Freedom* (1957-1959) and *Sir Francis Drake* (1962). From the late 1940s and into the early 1960s his output was prolific and included *Daybreak in Udi* (1949) for the Crown Film Unit, a documentary set in Nigeria that won Best Documentary at the 1950 Academy Awards. Bishop directed *Hamile* - noted as *Hamlet* in his biography – towards the end of a productive 20-year period. It is the only Shakespeare he directed and the influence of the fast-paced and dynamic aesthetic developed in his earlier television work is clear in the opening scenes of the film.

As the film begins, riders speed through the countryside on horseback. Traditional music plays over the opening credits and the surtitles cited above. As the credits close, the riders enter a village of small, round thatch huts. They dismount under the shade of a large tree, where a large pestle and mortar for pounding cassava stands idle. As the riders lead their horses off camera, the audience is in no doubt that this is a rural village far from the metropolitan centre. The characters enter the palace compound, led by two court musicians, and are received by the King and Queen - neither of whom are referred to by name – who are seated under a canopy in the centre of the compound.

With the exception of the burial of Habiba (Ophelia), the action of the film takes place inside the royal compound. When characters leave, they are seen from the point of view of the palace gates, moving towards the horizon. Tongu is a microcosm, a heterotopia, self-contained and the centre of its own drama.

The palace is surrounded by high walls that enclose elaborately decorated buildings built in the traditional mud architecture of northern Ghana. In keeping with the northern aesthetic, the set is redolent of the chief's palace at Wa and the decorative style of the Gurunsi people who live on the border of Ghana and Burkina Faso. The signifiers throughout the film emphasise the location and culture as belonging to northern Ghana. The dress, beads, horse livery and architecture are all unmistakably from northern Ghana, as are the horsehair fans for swatting flies carried by the characters.



The signifiers of royalty are firmly situated within a northern context. The king and his court sit on skins on the ground, rather than stools, which would be traditional in the south. The king wears his smock cap skewed to the front, which as Essel suggests in her analysis of northern dress signals 'leadership [or] no equal' (2015, 37). The characters drink from calabash bowls, and during the duel between Leitu (Laertes) and Hamile at the climax of the film – replaced here with a wrestling match – the voluminousness of the calabash heightens the drama as the King places the poisoned pearl inside the drink intended for Hamile, only to see the Queen take up the drink in both hands and drink it herself.

In terms of the text, the film is, as stated in the opening titles, 'an adaptation of Hamlet by William Shakespeare' and there are several elements of adaptation, major and minor, that provide a clear sense of the political context of the time. The transposition of the action to northern Ghana is clear, but the time is more obscure. It is simultaneously the postcolonial present of the 1960s and a precolonial, independent kingdom. Though the exact year is not made clear, we are told that Hamile will return to Legon, which lies just to the north of Accra and is home to the University of Ghana. One of the more subtle adaptations to the text takes place towards the end of the opening scene (Act 1, scene 2 in *Hamlet*). Here, the audience is given a clue as to the setting, through the following exchange:

King: Now for your intent in going back to Legon, it is most retrograde to our desire.

Queen: Let not thy mother lose her first, Hamile. I pray thee, stay with us. Go not to the university.

Hamile: I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

King: Why, it is a fair and loving reply. Be as ourselves, in Tongo.

On one level, this can be read as a joke. The staff and students involved in the film are all from the University of Ghana, which is often referred to simply as 'Legon'. The King and Queen telling Hamile not to go back to Legon is, perhaps, an in-joke concerning their studies and life on campus.

However, there is a second layer of meaning that provides an insight into the cultural confidence of the moment. Legon was the only university in Ghana at the time, having been founded in 1947 as the University College of the Gold Coast, before changing its name to the University College of Ghana at independence in 1957. It only became the University of Ghana in 1961, two years before the film was shot. The clear identification of Legon as 'the university' positions the film firmly in Nkrumah's Ghana. Further, by substituting Wittenburg for Legon, Ghana's university is subtly positioned as an intellectual centre, a place fit for the education of princes, comparable with the great ancient universities of Europe.

The affirming of Legon as occupying the same world as the film also speaks more profoundly to a central principle in Ghana's nation building process. At independence, the name 'Ghana' was chosen as a replacement for the Gold Coast and it referred to a precolonial empire to the north of modern Ghana. It was not chosen because of a hereditary link between the people of old and new Ghana, but rather to invoke a sense of a thriving civilization that existed independent of the influence of colonialism. In this moment, Nkrumah's Ghana, which contains a seat of learning to rival any in Europe, can also accommodate Tongo reimagined as an ancient, powerful kingdom.

This invocation of precolonial civilizations as precursors to a new legitimate state is underlined by the reference to Sokoto - which replaces England in the play - where Hamile and Abdulai - Rosencrantz and Guildenstern - travel before being captured by 'very warlike bandits'. Sokoto was a Sunni caliphate in West Africa in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The substitution of England, the original Hamlet's destination, with Sokoto serves to subtly replace the former colonial power with a closer, distinctly West African power, which the film positions as being of equal status.

These slight but consistent adaptations throughout *Hamile* serve to invert the power dynamics not only of the original text, where the 16<sup>th</sup> Century English audience is affirmed as inhabiting a centre of power, but also of the recent colonial dynamics. The persistent pushing back and minimizing of the colonial influence on screen provides the audience with an insight into an alternate reality where African kings and kingdoms hold the same cultural and political status as Europeans. The significance of this can be seen in Aime Cesaire's repost to Hegel's suggestion that Africa was 'no Historical part of the world [...] it has no movement or development to exhibit' (McClintock, 1995, 40-1): 'we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world' (Cesaire, 1972, 30). This dynamic, which sits at the root of the *negritude* movement and fed into Nkrumah's concept of the 'African personality' is clearly present in *Hamile*. Here, the film displays confident, powerful traditional African kingdom, whilst lying just beyond the horizon is a modern university.

The use of film as a medium to explore and present a new, confident Ghanaian state marks a significant change between the colonial and postcolonial approach to film, which is drawn out by Ohene-Asah who distinguishes between the work of the Gold Coast Film Unit and GFIC in the following way:

British use of film in the Gold Coast was from an etic perspective, the production and use of the medium after colonial rule was largely from an emic point of view where the overarching thought in film conceptualization, production and exhibition is premised on the indigenous people's own perspectives (813).

Though *Mr Mensah Builds a House* shows African actors and even includes African languages, it clearly supports the agenda of the colonial administration. Whereas *Hamile* through its conceptualization, production and exhibition, highlights a very specific indigenous perspective. However, this is not, as Ohene-Asah implies, the perspective of a homogenous indigenous people, but rather the perspective of a southern political and cultural class at the point of nation building.

This southern political perspective that underlies the film is evidenced by the fact that though the film is set in the north and contains several signifiers of northern cultural identity, as Gibbs notes, *Hamile* was filmed not in the north but in Greater Accra (Gibbs, 2012). The landscape and architecture that has such a presence in the film is a likeness, a construction that reflects the filmmaker's impressions of the north and is reflective of the prevailing political agenda. This is evidenced firstly by the factual errors contained within the surtitles, which state that Tongo is the home of the Frafra people. Tongo is a real place. It is a small town in what is now the Upper Eastern Region, near Bolgatanga. Tongo is the principal town of the Talensi people, not the Frafra.

The real Tongo is not present, instead Tongo becomes an icon for a generic north, a north of southern Ghana's political imaginary. In true neoclassical style, the film provides a pertinent political metaphor, perhaps aimed at the NLM, of the perils of a self-governing north. Here, the real political threat of cessation in Ghana is dealt with by providing the audience with a view of what happens when petty kingdoms are ruled by Claudius-like kings.

However, perhaps the most telling adaptation in the film is the absence of the Fortinbras subplot. At the end of the film, the final speech is given as a voiceover by Old Hamile. Without the entry of Fortinbras and his 'rights of memory in this kingdom' (Act V, scene 2), *Hamile* does not resolve in a manner that observes a neoclassical orthodoxy, where the rightful, God-appointed, king is restored to the throne and brings balance back to the kingdom. Instead, the audience watches as the body of Hamile is lifted by four soldiers who carry it across the palace compound followed by the courtiers. In *Hamile*, Tongo is not saved by the appointment of a new king; it is not preserved and allowed to carry on as it was before. Here, Tongo ends. With no heir to restore the kingdom, this rendering of the north must inevitably be integrated into Nkrumah's modern Ghana, its traditions respected but inevitably changed into something new, confident, and forward-looking; a *Sankofa*, moving to the future by observing the past.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusions

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<sup>4</sup> The Sankofa is a Ghanaian Adinkra symbol. It is most often represented as a bird with a long neck stretching back over its body. The Sankofa symbolizes the need to draw from the past when building the future. Like kente, Adinkra symbols are specifically protected under Ghana's 2005 Copyright Act.

At the opening of the Institute of African Studies, Nkrumah spoke of his hope that it would 'serve the needs of the people by helping to develop new forms of dance and drama, of music and creative writing, that are at the same time closely related to our Ghanaian traditions' (Obeng, 1997, 135). Moreover, he called for the academics and their students to 'stimulate the birth of a particularly African literature,' (Obeng, 1997, 128). Here, it is possible to conclude that *Hamile* is a clear example of this ambition and, in part, because it is an adaptation of Shakespeare, the national poet of the coloniser.

Shakespeare's legacy is often, reductively, framed as simply a 'genius' playwright. However, within a postcolonial context, Shakespeare, and what he represents, is far more potent than a collection of play texts, instead as a playwright he was positioned as part of a weaponised cultural superiority. In *Africa Must Unite*, Nkrumah discusses colonial education in withering terms: 'Our text-books were English text-books telling us about English history, English geography, English ways of living, English customs, English ideas, English weather' (1963, 49). For children growing up in the colonial system, there was a daily dissonance; a difference between what was in the literature and what was out of the classroom window.

Borrowing from Roland Barthes, it is possible to construct an understanding of the cultural capital of Shakespeare in a colonial context as 'myth', a stage of semiotics that renders the sign as natural rather than constructed. Here, Shakespeare as 'genius national poet' and a benchmark for a civilized society become merged. Shakespeare becomes a tool of colonial education whilst simultaneously reminding the student that true cultural achievement belongs to the colonial power and is unattainable to them. The 'genius' of Shakespeare, and so by association the cultural superiority of the colonizer, is rendered as natural to the point that 'goes-without-saying' (Barthes, 2009, xix). The positioning of Shakespeare as a central pillar of education, not just theatre, serves to constantly restate and reenforce this myth. As Barthes notes, '[l]iterature is an undoubted mythical system' (Barthes, 2009, 159).

The issue here, as Barthes suggests, is that '[i]t is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside' (2009, 160). Or, as Audre Lorde states: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (1984, 110). With *Hamile*, there is a clear effort, aligned to the contemporary political context, to confront this dynamic. In many ways, *Hamlet* is the ideal production to speak back to Britain, an established classic of the western cannon, that can be radically adapted to produce a sharply performed and dramaturgically tight film that sits comfortably within an unapologetically Ghanaian landscape. Most importantly, it casually declares that it is doing nothing of significance. Just as the Globe or the Royal Shakespeare Company might decide to transpose *Hamlet* to a new setting, *Hamile* is not billed as a 'major reinvention' or an African Hamlet, it is just *Hamile: the Tongo Hamlet*. Another interpretation; another high-quality cultural output from Ghana's world-class cultural industries.

Hence, *Hamile* is in some ways the high point of Nkrumah's cultural policy that had been built over seven years. It shows an idealised version of the north, showcasing it as a beautiful, ancient landscape, steeped in tradition but, importantly, an intrinsic part of modern Ghana. It uses homegrown acting and technical talent in a manner that is bold, visionary and skillful. The artistic choices are striking, the performances are strong, and the soundtrack complements the action of the film whilst centering traditional Ghanaian instruments and musicianship. It places students and staff of the School of Music and Drama on screen, positioning them as professional-level actors with the technical skill to tackle Shakespearean text.

Ohene-Asah notes that the Gold Coast Film Unit began in 1948 as 'a mouthpiece for the colonial administration' (2021, 810), and that under Nkrumah, GFIC became 'a tool for this pan-Africanist agenda' (Ohene-Asah, 2021, 809). With the means of production, and reproduction, firmly in the hands of the state, signifiers of a new, shared, Ghanaian identity become the foundational logic for the adaptation. Here, the purpose behind the choice of Tongo and Frafra, though containing inaccuracies, is to depict the north on film as a historic centre of power that is part of the country in which the audience viewing the film also live. They can see this depiction of the north through cinemas in the southern cities and the popular cinema vans travelling across the country, a depiction of a landscape that simultaneously familiar and cinematically glamorous. The power of the image, like the photo of Nkrumah declaring independence whilst dressed in a northern smock, lies in its capturing a Ghanaian cultural and geographical landscape and showing it back to a Ghanaian audience without the need for further validation from a colonial power.

Hence, it is the absence of a claim to a radical repositioning, or decentering of the text that is most significant here. The film makers at GFIC and the faculty at the University of Ghana clearly felt that this was simply another production, sitting within the context of multiple ambitious projects. This ambition speaks to the creative environment established by Nkrumah's cultural policies, including the development of national infrastructure, which enabled artists such as Joe de Graft to develop and produce works of an international standard. Though the means of cultural production were being brought into the hands of Ghanaians, there was also pragmatism in the inclusion of Terry Bishop, who brought a significant track record of shooting fast-paced, engaging work on a tight schedule. Arguably, Bishop's inclusion also reflects the fact that ten years earlier, the colonial training structures of the GCFU meant African film makers 'did not rise above assisting British technicians' (Sandon, 2013, 502). Hence, one of the legacies of the colonial period was the continued reliance on British expertise in filmmaking. That Bishop was the only non-Ghanaian filmmaker attached to the project is indicative of the rapid development in training and infrastructure in Ghana's film industry post-independence.

As a document of a moment, *Hamile* illustrates a remarkable convergence of political will, artistic ambition and technical excellence that provide one of the clearest examples of Nkrumah's cultural policy in action. However, perhaps the most significant element of *Hamile*, and why it is useful to revisit it, is that neither Nkrumah's cultural policies nor the ambition of Ghana's nascent film industry lasted much beyond the release of *Hamile*.

By 1966, Nkrumah was in Conakry, a deposed leader making speeches and writing books about the CIA's involvement in Africa. Like *Hamile*, Nkrumah found himself a usurped head of state, unable to affect change while Ghana/Togo carried on in a new reality of curtailed social freedoms and diminished cultural ambition. Between 1966 and 1981, when J.J. Rawlings staged his second coup and this time held onto power for 20 years, Ghana had eight heads of state. The curfews imposed by successive military governments and the attention paid by those governments to the staff and students at Legon, fundamentally shifted the trajectory of Ghana's creative industries. The military governments of the 1970s and 1980s that frequently replaced the short-lived civilian governments, imposed intermittent curfews that prevented people gathering in the evening to make and share work, and precipitated a drain in creative talent away from Ghana (Collins, 2009). Joe de Graft left in 1969 to take up a position at the University of Nairobi, and, as well as writing *Mambo* an adaption of *Macbeth*, he played the eponymous role in *The Wilby Conspiracy* (dir. Nelson, 1975) alongside Sidney Poitier and Michael Caine, returning to Ghana a year before his death in 1978.

In a move that illustrates the politics of the moment, Nanbigne notes that the military government that succeeded Nkrumah, the National Liberation Council, 'ordered all the films that had been made under the leadership of Nkrumah to be destroyed because they fed Nkrumah's personality cult' (2011, 169). Though this did not happen entirely, with some negatives being destroyed by way of compliance and other negatives and reels being removed to a film laboratory in London, it does emphasize both the fragility of the medium and the ease with which film could be harnessed to support the political aims of the moment. Indeed, as Nanbigne points out, the military governments followed Nkrumah's example, and 'each succeeding government only exploited what little was left of the resources of GFIC to make mainly non-commercial documentary films to justify its stewardship' (2011, 178-179).

Though Nanbigne describes the 1970s and 1980s as 'the pinnacle of African filmmaking' on the continent, he notes that in Ghana and Nigeria particularly there was a marked 'demise in filmmaking proper' (2011, 173). The rise of home video allowed filmmakers to find new ways of working that did not rely on dwindling state infrastructure. In terms of GFIC, Peter Bloom (2021) notes that following the Ghanaian government's divestment from GFIC and the transfer of majority ownership to a Malaysian media company for just USD1.4 million over 15 years, GFIC was 'dissolved in 1996, then spun off into GAMA [Ghana-Malaysian] Film

Corporation [...] in association with TV3, which became the first independent television station in Ghana' (2021, 63-64).

The fragility of the political and creative moment in which *Hamile* was made in many ways reflects the fragility of Ghana's film heritage. The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation's film library was destroyed by fire in 1986, the GFIC film library was emptied following its takeover in 1996, with cartons of reels and prints destroyed by exposure to the weather. The films that had been saved from destruction by the NLC in 1966 were later dumped at the Ghana embassy in London 'in response to Ghana's default in paying for storage' (16). Together, these events have severely diminished the legacy of Ghana's post-independence film culture. That *Hamile* has survived and is now freely available as part of a digital archive is highly improbable and underscores its significance as a cultural artefact. Not only does the film add to the appreciation of Ghana's rich post-independence cultural heritage but it acts as a window into a now lost moment, which, like the Ghost of old Hamile, asks only to be remembered.

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