

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Steering the Nation? Drivers, Nationalism, and the Writing of History

Jennifer Hart 

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia, United States
Email: jenniferhart@vt.edu

Abstract

Drawing on newspaper articles and oral histories, this paper provides an initial sketch of some of the issues at stake within the Ga community in Accra, focusing on the founding of the Ga Shifimo Kpee, a nationalist movement founded at the heart of the first President Kwame Nkrumah's new capital and the seat of his own power in the new country. Rather than providing a definitive account of the Shifimo Kpee, this article highlights the ways in which foundational published accounts have sometimes inhibited a richer understanding of this period and analyzes primary sources to point to new avenues of interrogation.

Résumé

En s'appuyant sur des articles de journaux et des récits oraux, ce document donne une première esquisse de certains enjeux au sein de la communauté Ga à Accra en se concentrant sur la fondation du *Ga Shifimo Kpee*, un mouvement nationaliste fondé au cœur de la nouvelle capitale du premier président Kwame Nkrumah et le siège de son propre pouvoir dans le nouveau pays. Plutôt que de fournir une analyse définitive du *Ga Shifimo Kpee*, cet article met en lumière la façon dont les récits fondateurs publiés empêchent parfois une compréhension plus riche de cette période. Cet article analyse ainsi les sources primaires permettant d'ouvrir de nouvelles pistes de recherche.

Keywords: nationalism; ghana; accra; independence; decolonization

A mere five months after independence at the heart of Kwame Nkrumah's own constituency, Ga people gathered in Bukom Square in Central Accra for an inauguration of representatives – a new set of leaders who promised to restore resources, respect, and opportunity to Ga people and to push back on the perceived onslaught of migrants into the new national capital after independence. This new group – the Ga-Adangbe Shifimo Kpee – while not a political

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of African Studies Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

party, per se, represented a powerful political challenge to Kwame Nkrumah, his Convention People's Party (CPP), and the promise of an independent and united Ghana.

In his book, *Politics in Ghana, 1946–1960*, Dennis Austin provided the following description of the Ga Shifimo Kpee, which has become the authoritative account of the movement:

Three months later further disturbances took place following the formation of a new party, the Ga Adangbe Shifimo Kpee – the Ga Standfast Association. The Accra movement and the other forms of discontent which took shape around it are worth discussing in some detail for they provided the material for a new phase of conflict between the CPP and the opposition. And it was against their background that the CPP began to extend its power over the country as a whole. The complaints of the Ga community in the capital were first voiced within the CPP itself through a memorandum submitted to the central Committee at the beginning of 1956 by the Accra regional executive.

At the beginning of 1956 (when these resolutions were handed to the central committee) the times were dangerous, and the rank and file remained loyal to the nationalist aims of the party. In 1957, however, the complaints were revived; and, although many of the CPP members refused their support, others attempted to re-cast them in a more overtly tribal form. A decision was taken among a small group of men – in a room rented by Attoh Quarshie (a government transport driver) in the slum area around Bukom Square, Accra – to form a “non-political association” to “protect the interests of the Ga people.”¹ The name chosen was the Ga Adangme Shifimo Kpee. Help was enlisted from the drivers of the local taxi station at the corner of Zion Street and Bannerman Road who began to spread the new movement quickly through the central wards of the municipality – Nkrumah's own constituency.²

Published in the immediate aftermath of independence, Austin's work has long been considered a foundational and canonical text in the history of Ghanaian nationalism, and scholars have often engaged it both as a primary and secondary reference documenting this period. Undoubtedly, the text does much to capture the complexity of what was happening in a way that only someone who was on the ground and engaged could manage and, in so doing, is able to document the experiences of some groups like the Ga Shifimo Kpee, which would otherwise likely have escaped scholarly notice. As Austin suggests, the emergence of the Ga Shifimo Kpee was the result of complex interactions between indigenous political structures, ethnic rivalries, individual citizens, and the national government. The Shifimo Kpee's slogan of “Ga land for Ga people” highlighted their

¹ The founding members were: Attoh Quarshie, Acka Tettey (teacher), Charles Lamptey (motor mechanic), E.O. Pobby (store-keeper), Tete Addy (bicycle repairer), J.T. Nartey (clerk), Nikoi Kotey (clerk).

² Dennis Austin, *Politics in Ghana, 1946–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 373–375.

claims to indigeneity, having been living in coastal towns around present-day Accra since at least the fifteenth century. Portuguese, Danish, Dutch, and English trading companies built forts along the Ga littoral in order to strengthen their connection with Ga middlemen, who provided a connection to inland trade networks. Accra communities were inherently cosmopolitan and successfully incorporated outsiders into the Ga *maskie* (“people” or “original settlers”) for several centuries. When the British declared Accra its new capital in 1874, however, population growth outpaced these mechanisms of cultural incorporation as people from the Akan-dominated interior and from the northern territories streamed south in search of new opportunities in the colonial capital. Accra, then, was a headquarters of economic and political power, but increasingly that power was held not by Ga people but by outsiders or “strangers.” While independence promised freedom, self-determination, and representation, some Ga people became increasingly concerned and frustrated about their seeming marginalization within the new national order and organized to advocate for opportunities, to demand adequate representation and to challenge Akan dominance in the city.

Austin attributes the spread of the new organization’s message to the involvement of motor transport drivers, whose mobility and prominence gave them exceptional levels of access in the city. However, his disciplinary approach here becomes somewhat of a liability when subjected to closer interrogation. Because he does not cite his sources, we cannot be sure exactly where Austin’s information came from. He undoubtedly had first-hand experience of many events, but he could not have been at everything and must have relied on accounts by others and, in particular, political leaders and elites. Oral histories with drivers in these communities, including Shifimo Kpee founder and Ga community leader Attah Quarshie and his brother, suggest that Austin overstated the role of drivers, effectively reproducing Attah Quarshie’s own personal narrative without broader research, and thus misrepresenting and oversimplifying the story of the movement’s growth. By over-relying on this elite political history to tell the story of Ghana’s early years, subsequent scholars have often unquestionably reproduced Austin’s assumptions or received narratives, resulting in an incomplete understanding of this intense historical moment. While the relative role that drivers played in this movement might seem like a relatively minor quibble that only a transport historian would care about, in the absence of more substantive research on the Shifimo Kpee this particular fact has become a sort of founding assumption about the nature of urban political culture in Ghana during the early postcolonial period. More importantly, I argue, it obscures a much more complex story about the way that Ga people experienced independence, the kinds of concerns that were informing social and political tension and transformation during this period, and the role that Ga people played in larger national narratives.

This is not to say that historians have avoided problematizing nationalist histories. As Jean Allman has argued, the complexities, contradictions, and conflicts that shaped the emergence of the modern nation-state of Ghana, the competing visions of nationalism, and the future of the new nation was “by no means the simple story of a nation united on an historic march to reclaim its

right to self-determination.”³ As Allman and other scholars have shown, both Nkrumah’s vision for “Ghana” and the competing opposition movements’ visions – political or otherwise – were highly contested.⁴ The lack of a straightforward, triumphalist story, however, should not suggest pessimism or failure. Rather, in embracing the complexity of this story, we can better appreciate and understand the dynamic social and political culture and the competing interests that were at play in shaping the new nation and its future. This is as it should be. In the same way that hagiographies oversimplify individual political leaders like Kwame Nkrumah as heroes or saviors and ignore the broader, more diverse cast of characters necessary to achieve political change, nationalist histories defined by the narrative of a single party obscure the complex dynamics at play and, as a result, fail to capture something fundamental and true about the experiences of individuals and the shape of society in this particular historical moment.⁵

In spite of these broader historiographical debates, the Shifimo Kpee (and the Ga, more broadly) remain unremarked and understudied – a curious omission given that their challenge took place at the center of Nkrumah’s own constituency in the historical core of the capital city. This article uses oral histories and contemporary newspaper reports to highlight the limits of Austin’s narrative about the emergence of Ga opposition movements like the Shifimo Kpee and explore a more complex story of the early years of independence in Ghana’s new national capital. Rather than seeking to provide a comprehensive account of Ga opposition in the years immediately before and after independence, it instead seeks to highlight sources that challenge received narratives and point to new possible avenues of research that would continue to complicate the political and economic history of early postcolonial Ghana, building on the existing Akan-dominated scholarship to reflect on how other constituencies envisioned the nation, contested the power structures of new national institutions, and sought to assert their vision of its future in a moment of rapid social and cultural change and in the midst of intense political and economic pressures.

Independence politics

Ghana’s path to independence was both obvious and exceptional. Scholars often point to the Gold Coast Colony’s economic success and high rates of literacy and Western education as foundational conditions for its independence. Widely lauded in the metropole as Britain’s “model colony,” the Gold Coast seemed

³ Jean Allman, *Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), x.

⁴ See also, for example, Richard Rathbone, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs: Politics of Chieftaincy in Ghana, 1951–1960* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), 2000; Jeffrey Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017); Jeffrey Ahlman, *Ghana: A Political and Social History* (London: Zed Books, 2023); Jeffrey Ahlman, *Kwame Nkrumah: Voices of Liberation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021); Stephan Miescher, *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022).

⁵ Jean Allman, “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History,” *Journal of Women’s History* 21(3) (Fall 2009): 13–35; Jean Allman, “Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing,” *American Historical Review* 118(1) (February 2013): 104–129; Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism*.

obvious as the first African colony to gain independence, particularly if we take British justifications for colonialism – as a temporary trusteeship to facilitate “development” – at face value.⁶ And yet, even as late as the 1940s, independence was far less obvious than one might assume. The United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) had failed to secure further autonomy or greater representation for Africans within colonial government structures or any promises of a clear path to independence. Kwame Nkrumah, who had been summoned from London to serve as the new leader of the UGCC, broke off to form his own political party – the Convention People’s Party – in 1947 in order to mobilize increasing frustration among the colony’s population.

This frustration boiled over in Accra in 1948 when members of the ex-service-men’s union marched to Christiansborg Castle, the seat of government, to present a petition to the Governor demanding jobs and compensation that they had been promised in exchange for service during the Second World War. When protesters refused to stop their march, officers opened fire on the former soldiers, killing three and wounding a dozen others. For residents of Accra, this act of violence was seen as the most recent and extreme example of government indifference to the welfare of Africans in the colony.⁷ Out of frustration, residents of Accra and other Gold Coast towns took to the streets, attacking British and Asian businesses that were seen to be taking advantage of uneven trade conditions at the expense of Africans. Looting in Accra coincided with a colony-wide boycott organized by Nii Kwabena Bonne III (Osu Alata Manche and Oyokohene of Techiman) in protest of high prices on imported goods and widespread discontent among cocoa farmers about the government’s tactics in response to the spread of swollen shoot disease.⁸ These events were not organized or coordinated political protests, but nationalist parties seized the opportunity to use the widespread discontent to push for political change, petitioning the colonial government and calling for immediate political reform and self-government.

The Watson Commission, which was formed in the aftermath of these protests to investigate the cause of the unrest, collected evidence and testimonies from a wide swath of Gold Coast society.⁹ The colonial governor and other British officials were convinced that the protests and other forms of unrest were the result of actions by nationalist politicians who they believed were manipulating the population. Nkrumah, along with other members of the “Big Six” – the leadership of the UGCC – were arrested. The Watson Commission’s investigations, however, found that there was no evidence of political involvement; instead, the evidence and testimony spoke to widespread popular discontent that highlighted the fragility of British power in the colony.¹⁰ The Commission’s recommendations included political reform that would lead to elections and

⁶ Lord Frederick J.D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: Routledge, 1965).

⁷ Jennifer Hart, *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 2024.

⁸ Hart, *Making an African City*, 134–145.

⁹ The National Archives, United Kingdom (TNA): Colonial Office (CO) 964/1, “Commission of Enquiry,” 1948; TNA: CO 964/15, “Memoranda received from members of the public—Accra and district,” 1948.

¹⁰ Jennifer Hart, “Archives of Dissent: Complicating Anti-Colonial Histories through the Watson Commission (Gold Coast/Ghana),” *Journal of British Studies* 63(3) (2024): 517–520.

greater African participation in the governance of the country as well as a clear and quick path to self-government.¹¹

Under popular pressure, Nkrumah and the others were released. However, detention strained Nkrumah's relationship with the older statesmen of the UGCC who supported more measured action. In 1949, Nkrumah, who embraced a more populist approach to political organizing, broke with the UGCC to found his own political party – the Convention People's Party. When moderate constitutional reforms were not thought to be going far enough in securing full self-government, Nkrumah's CPP organized a campaign of "Positive Action," which involved widespread nonviolent protest including a general strike. Nkrumah and other CPP leaders were promptly arrested as British officials sought to quell the violence, but the CPP continued to agitate. When the government called for elections under the new constitution in 1951, the CPP ran candidates for all of the available seats and won thirty-four of thirty-eight. Nkrumah himself was elected to a seat representing the core of old Accra, even as he sat in prison. Governor Arden Clarke released Nkrumah from prison and asked him to form a government as the country's newly elected leader. While the country would remain in British hands for the next six years, Nkrumah became the leader of government business and the country's path to independence was set.

As Jeff Ahlman notes, "the victory that swept Nkrumah and the CPP to power was nothing short of profound."¹² The numbers seemed to suggest overwhelming support for the CPP and a political movement that was both united against British colonial rule and for a vision of a newly independent Ghana. However, Austin argues that, while Nkrumah himself won his seat by a huge margin, Ga UGCC candidates in Accra had greater support than CPP opponents in other major towns like Kumasi, Cape Coast, or Sekondi-Takoradi.¹³ Ga people, in other words, were less convinced by Nkrumah's message of unity than people elsewhere in the colony, having seen their own rights eroded in the face of urbanization and "development," and Ga political elites, who were part of the colony's intelligentsia, were often more sympathetic to the UGCC and more suspicious of the CPP's tactics and message. The seeds of opposition were laid early.

Ga lands for Ga people

The formation of the Ga Shifimo Kpee (Ga Standfast Association) in the summer of 1957, then, was not entirely a surprise. Newspaper accounts and oral histories make clear that many of the frustrations that Ga people had expressed during the Accra riots of 1948 had remained unresolved in the march toward independence, and, in conversations about the city's future, Nkrumah and other CPP officials tended to portray Accra more as a national capital than a Ga town.¹⁴ In moving

¹¹ TNA: CO 964/32, "Report and Statement by HMG on the Report," Gold Coast Commission of Enquiry, 1948.

¹² Ahlman, *Living with Nkrumahism*, 50.

¹³ Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 142.

¹⁴ For a longer history of this tension in Accra that predate Nkrumah but were renewed in new ways at independence, see John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001); Hart, *Making an African City*.

beyond Austin's narrative to trace some of the key events and themes found in these newspapers and oral sources, we can begin to see the outlines of a much more complex, interesting, and consequential history of the Shifimo Kpee and the uncertainty and insecurity that defined the years immediately after Ghanaian independence. The *Daily Graphic* – the country's largest newspaper – carried regular articles detailing the activities of the movement and the ongoing physical, legal, political, and cultural battles between different constituencies in Accra.¹⁵ The Ga community first voiced its complaints within the CPP, passing resolutions at meetings of the Accra Region CPP held at Orgle Street on 5–12 January 1956, arguing to Nkrumah and members of the CPP Central Committee:

That this Council comprising the three Municipal Constituencies (East, West and Central Accra), the Ga-Rural Constituency and the Dangme-Shai constituency having had occasion to discuss various topics affecting the welfare of the Party resolved:

1. Whereas it is known that we find it difficult to criticize and it is improper to criticize our party in public.
2. And whereas it is known that we are given no opportunity to criticize our Party internally.
3. And whereas it is known that any attempt to offer suggestions or to make any criticism against the Party is misconstrued and accepted by the power that be as disloyalty.
4. And where it is known that criticisms are never known to have been invited by the powers that be from us, though directives are from time to time issued to use concerning organizational work...
5. And whereas it is known that the Fantis, Ashantis, and Ewes in the past, principally Fantis, though preaching against tribalism and nepotism are actually practicing these administrative vices as witnessed by the number of them who are employed in the Ministries...
6. And whereas it is rumoured that a Fanti Minister, Fanti Ministerial Secretaries and some of their wealthy friends are busily engaged in paying for and thereby acquiring for themselves some of the Estate buildings taken from defaulting members of the Party...
7. And whereas the Ga-Adangmes have deceived themselves into thinking that tribal barriers were broken down for ever...
8. And whereas this discrimination has weakened some of our members creating defections and making organizational work difficult...
9. And whereas in spite of everything else the Ga-Adangmes are being treated by the powers that be of no consequence...
10. And whereas Sir Tsibu Darku who once said 'who are the people' was appointed chairman of the Tema Development Corporation, earning allowances averaging 150 pounds a month...

¹⁵ To learn more about the ways that the *Daily Graphic* and its writers and editors covered this period, see Nate Plageman, "'Accra Is Changing Isn't it?': Urban Infrastructure, Independence, and Nation in the Gold Coast's *Daily Graphic*, 1954–1957," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43(1) (2010): 137–159.

11. And whereas it is the prevailing practice of party leaders to refuse interviews with accredited members (as witness the refusal of the Life Chairman to meet representatives of the Accra Region (CPP) recently.)
12. Therefore BE IT RESOLVED AND IT IS HEREBY RESOLVED that while this feeling in the Ga-Adangme area ... gathers and engenders a ferment for an eruption likely to blow up any time, the Hon. Dr. Kwame Nkrumah be made known of it before it is too late if he seems not to know it or does not know it...¹⁶

The CPP, however, failed to adequately respond to the core of the complaint and seemed to further exacerbate concerns over land, building large estate houses for new government officials on Ga traditional lands while Ga people struggled to find adequate and affordable housing – a situation that predated but was exacerbated by a 1939 earthquake that destroyed a large section of housing in Accra's old Ga quarters and that was slow to be replaced under government housing schemes.¹⁷ Only a few months after Nkrumah stood on top of Independence Arch and declared that "Ghana, your beloved country is free forever!" a group of frustrated young Ga leaders gathered in rented rooms near Bukom Square to form the Ga Adangbe Shifimo Kpee.

It was clear that the CPP felt threatened by groups like the Shifimo Kpee. By July of 1957, the CPP had their own well-established Ga opposition group, the Ga Ekomefeemo Kpee (Unity Fighters), which represented CPP interests in Accra. In the months immediately after independence, the CPP met with Ga leaders including the Ekomefeemo Kpee. In the same week that Ga Manche Nii Tackie Kome II was invited by the Ga Shifimo Kpee to preside over the inauguration ceremony of the new organization in Bukom Square, the CPP convened a meeting between three cabinet ministers (Minister of the Interior Ako Adjei, Minister of Works E.K. Bensah, and Minister of Education C.T. Nylander) and a twelve-person delegation from the Ga State Council, the Ekomefeemo Kpee, and the Ga Fisherman's Society, at which representatives expressed the "existing grievances of the Ga State." D.O. Thompson called for an overall increase in resources – money, he argued, was at the root of the Ga people's economic woes. Low annual maintenance grants to chiefs led them to sell lands that they held in trust for the people in order to make money, and Ga fishermen needed loans in order to make essential improvements to their industry to compete within a modern economy. The Ekomefeemo Kpee understood the challenges differently and made different sorts of requests, submitting a memorandum that called for the government to "Allow all Ga lands to be controlled by the Ga State Council. Make it an offence, punishable by law, for any person or group of persons to sell or lease any portion of Ga lands without the authority of the Ga State Council."¹⁸ Minister of the Interior Ako Adjei noted that Ga chiefs were selling the land themselves and, thus, the state could not be held responsible for the land issue, but that the Government was actively trying to address unemployment and housing

¹⁶ Cited in Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 373–375.

¹⁷ Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 375; Hart, *Making an African City*.

¹⁸ "12 Discuss Ga Affairs with 3 Ministers," *Daily Graphic (DG)*, 5 July 1957.

throughout the country. The problems, in other words, were clear to everyone, even if there were different understandings of who to blame and how to go about addressing the issue(s).

The Shifimo Kpee, then, was part of a much broader conversation about the challenges faced by Ga people. However, in founding their own organization, the Shifimo Kpee leadership highlighted the persistent limits of those efforts and the growing frustration of Accra's population. In announcing the Shifimo Kpee's 7 July inauguration at a press conference in Accra, organizing secretary Henry Thompson argued that the new organization was nonpolitical and not "tribalistic." This was an interesting and important claim in light of various levels of ongoing political tension in the new nation. All twenty-one paramount and divisional chiefs in the Ga-Adangbe states were invited, including the Accra Region, Shai, Kpone, Yilo Krobo, Manya Krobo, and Ada, to discuss how best to advocate for the restoration of the "lost rights" of the Ga-Adangbe people and to "ensure 'justice and fair play.'"¹⁹ This did not necessarily require driving out non-Ga people from Accra, he argued. The organization was merely interested in advocating for the welfare of Ga-Adangbe peoples. According to Thompson – and in contrast to Austin's narrative – the Shifimo Kpee was run by a twenty-man committee with no clear leader. Unsurprisingly, in light of the intense political tension of the independence movement, there were swirling accusations that the organization was being funded by an outside entity intent on destabilizing the country. However, Thompson insisted, those accusations were a mere "propaganda stunt." The reality, he argued, was that "we are virtually running the organization on empty stomachs and have had no financial assistance from anyone. We owe no allegiance to any political party."²⁰ This position was echoed by the diverse group of prominent CPP and opposition politicians – including K.A. Gbedemah (Minister of Finance), Archie Casely-Hayford (Minister without Portfolio), K.A. Busia (Leader of the Opposition), C.T. Nylander (Minister of Education), Ako Adjei (Minister of the Interior and Justice), and R.M. Abbey (MP for Accra West) – who were invited to the event.

As Accra resident Willie Quaye noted in the pages of the *Daily Graphic* that same week, the organization's slogan "Strangers Must Go" seemed to undermine Thompson's claims.²¹ The organization's claims to not be political were also undermined at the inaugural rally on 8 July when Attoh Quarshie, who served as an executive member of the Shifimo Kpee, told the crowd that they would "contest all future elections to the Accra Municipal Council," arguing that "in future, membership of the AMC should be restricted to the Gas." Quarshie further clarified that "by 'strangers' the association meant Cabinet members who initiate policy to deprive the Ga-Adangbe people of their birth rights. They do not mean the ordinary citizen who sets about his business in a quiet way."²² While the organization was "only asking that all non-Ga-Adangbes should respect the rights of the owners of the land and behave in the way all strangers

¹⁹ "Shifimo Kpee Is Not Tribalistic," *DG*, 6 July 1957.

²⁰ "Shifimo Kpee Is Not Tribalistic," *DG*, 6 July 1957.

²¹ "Better Slogan," *DG*, 7 July 1957.

²² "Shifimo Kpee Will Contest AMC Elections," *DG*, 8 July 1957.

should,” it seemed difficult to disentangle the call to protect their “birth right” and the broader interpretation of the “Strangers Must Go” slogan from Quarshie’s narrower definition of “strangers.”²³

By targeting cabinet ministers in their critiques the Shifimo Kpee also created more confusion about their claims to be nonpolitical. While they did not function as a registered political party and did not have any official affiliation with an established political party, in the face of CPP dominance, focused criticism on cabinet ministers quickly and inevitably transformed into a critique of the ruling party. As J.C. Smith, the Acting Secretary of the Shifimo Kpee noted, “We are now a new country without those institutions which have been developed in older countries to act as checks on a Government in a democratic country. If we sincerely wish to maintain democracy, then we have got to develop our own institutions to act as checks.”²⁴

Smith was essentially calling for the formation of “civil society” – a non-governmental organization that represents citizens’ interests – but the work of civil society resonated differently in light of postcolonial tensions in a country that was both democratic and heavily influenced by the authority and control of Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party, in the midst of incredible geopolitical and domestic threats in which “checks” on the government were held in suspicion as a possible manifestation of outside interference, an impediment to the necessary work of structural transformation and decolonization, and an undermining of the “unity” and “common purpose” through self-sacrifice that Nkrumah and others so desperately sought to establish.²⁵ While anti-colonial sentiments united people with diverse interests in their fight against colonial oppression, after independence the work of figuring out what a country should be and how to govern proved much more complicated, with competing visions that drew on both contemporary realities and old tensions, highly self-interested motivations, and broader social, political, and economic concerns. It was, in many ways, inevitable that Nkrumah and the CPP would be held responsible for the persistent challenges faced by citizens in the new country. Anti-colonial nationalism’s vision of a free future and Nkrumah’s calls for decolonization were successful because of their popular appeal; however, the reality of the structural challenges faced by the leaders of newly independent countries like Ghana were much harder to realize in practice. The promise of independence, in other words, could not immediately materialize for everyone at once – a reality that rankled in the context of the populist politics of the nationalist movement. The government – both local and national – clearly saw the Shifimo Kpee’s “check” as a threat, which was made tangible through the presence of 200 uniformed police officers who were on duty at the inaugural rally.²⁶

²³ “Shifimo Kpee Will Contest AMC Elections,” *DG*, 8 July 1957.

²⁴ “Shifimo Kpee Will Contest AMC Elections,” *DG*, 8 July 1957.

²⁵ Kate Skinner, “It Brought Some Kind of Neatness to Mankind: Mass Literacy, Community Development, and Democracy in 1950s Asante,” *Africa* 79(4) (2009): 479–499; Jeffrey Ahlman, “A New Type of Citizen: Youth, Gender, and Generation in the Ghana Builders Brigade,” *Journal of African History* 53 (2012): 87–105.

²⁶ “Shifimo Kpee Will Contest AMC Elections,” *DG*, 8 July 1957.

The Shifimo Kpee joined together with other “non-political” associations in order to further their arguments. When the Ghana National Youth Association was formed on 3 August, the Shifimo Kpee was one of eight associations “seeking the welfare of their states in particular and the country generally” to send representatives to discuss how they could work together.²⁷ The Shifimo Kpee seemed to immediately face challenges, however. Just a week after the inauguration, J. Hutton-Mills pleaded with members to avoid violence. A clear sign of the perceived threat of their movement, Hutton-Mills – who had family connections to the CPP government but supported the Shifimo Kpee – warned that “certain people had become envious of the organizers of the movement because they never thought that the Gas would wake up one day to fight for their birth rights.”²⁸ In the face of intimidation and threats of retaliation, leaders like Attoh Quarshie remained publicly and vocally defiant, appealing to all Ga people to join the struggle “as no amount of intimidation or court actions will deter us. We are determined to fight on and until we see victory, there will be no turning back.”²⁹

Later that month, Shifimo Kpee leadership felt it necessary to make more specific statements about the focus of their complaints, suggesting increasing push-back from various quarters. When Nkrumah diverted from his previous behavior of standing in an open car during a procession through Accra to the seat of government at Christiansborg Castle for the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference, Henry Thompson – who had been installed as the organizing secretary of the Shifimo Kpee – expressed concern about Nkrumah’s obvious fear of the organization, arguing that the Shifimo Kpee “is not against the person of the Prime Minister, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. It is only against the Government’s policy of neglecting the Ga people.”³⁰ While Thompson encouraged the people to maintain their faith in the police as long as they continued to obey the law – reasserting a commitment to the ruling government – Quarshie provided more concrete examples of the ways in which “strangers” were seen to be “cheating the Ga people” – in this case, Syrians who had leased land in Teshie at a low rate and then sublet the land to a foreign firm at a high profit.³¹

Throughout the next several months, however, Shifimo Kpee members found themselves targets of arrest. Sixteen people who were alleged to be members of the organization were brought up on charges of forceful entry, assault, and offensive conduct conducive to a breach of the peace, having been accused of attacking Madam Dedei Aryeetey and her household for not supporting the cause.³² District Magistrate Hewlett, however, found the prosecution witnesses unconvincing and released the accused.³³ Another two – including organizing secretary Henry Thompson – were found not guilty of attempting to destroy posters and an offensive manner conducive to a breach of the peace a few days

²⁷ “National Body of Youth Associations,” *DG*, 8 July 1957.

²⁸ “Don’t Be Violent – Dr. Hutton-Mills,” *DG*, 15 July 1957.

²⁹ “Don’t Be Violent – Dr. Hutton-Mills,” *DG*, 15 July 1957.

³⁰ “Shifimo Kpee Is Not Against the Person of Nkrumah – Says Henry Thompson,” *DG*, 26 July 1957.

³¹ “Shifimo Kpee Is Not Against the Person of Nkrumah – Says Henry Thompson,” *DG*, 26 July 1957.

³² “14 Shifimo Kpee Members on Assault Charge,” *DG*, 27 July 1957.

³³ “16 People Acquitted,” *DG*, 24 September 1957.

later. Magistrate C.C. Hewlett chastised the police for unnecessarily escalating the situation rather than settling the issue themselves, requiring such a small matter to be brought to court.³⁴ Another member, Amarkine Laryea, pleaded not guilty to wounding a member of the Ga Ekomefeemo Kpee by hitting him over the head when returning from a Shifimo Kpee rally.³⁵

Shifimo Kpee members also found themselves targeted by rival groups like the Ekomefeemo Kpee who often engaged in violent action.³⁶ Thanks to their involvement with the Shifimo Kpee, multiple prominent members of Accra society, including Carl Reindorf, Henry Thompson, and Attoh Quarshie, were abducted under mysterious circumstances, taken to CPP headquarters, and tortured – an attack that motivated Kofi Busia (Parliamentary Opposition Leader), S.I. Dombo (Deputy Leader), and J.B. Danquah to police headquarters to witness statements from the victims and suggested increasing concern about the political motivations behind the violence.³⁷ The interrogation of the victims during the trial further amplified these political tensions, with Crown prosecutors suggesting that “the alleged incident was a story put up [by the victims] to discredit the CPP.”³⁸ The harrowing accounts, however, shocked many. Enoch Ankrah recounted his abduction as he and a friend were chased by a CPP jeep on their way to Korle Gonno in a taxi:

Mr. Ankrah said when he and his friend alighted from the taxi, they began to run away, but they were overtaken by the jeep. Six men, he said, jumped out of the jeep and gave chase. One of them shouted at them, saying that if he did not stop, he would be killed. Later one of the men in the jeep who had a knife in hand caught him. Enoch Arkyee Okine, one of the accused men, Ankrah said, hit him on the forehead with a cudgel. Then he was led to the jeep. All along he was beaten up.³⁹

Attoh Quarshie ran for his life during the event and hid in a house when they were attacked in Chorkor, but when he came out of his hiding place he saw fellow victim Henry Thompson being put in a jeep while bleeding from his head.⁴⁰ CPP driver Lawrence Kobina Kennedy confirmed many details of the victims’ story.⁴¹ While fifteen people – including CPP Propaganda Secretary Ibrahim Quartey, Enoch Ayi Okine (security officer at the Ambassador Hotel), Thomas Nyan Plange (electrician of the Accra Municipal Council), Jacob Fulani (organizing secretary of the Builder’s Brigade), and Amartey Bofio Quartey (assistant national propaganda secretary of the CPP) – were ultimately arrested, charged, and sent to jail

³⁴ “Two Shifimo Kpee Members Discharged,” *DG*, 29 July 1957.

³⁵ “He Struck with Bottle – Police,” *DG*, 2 August 1957.

³⁶ “It’s History,” *DG*, 28 July 1957; Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 376.

³⁷ “Henry Thompson – Alleged Abduction,” *DG*, 23 August 1957; “He Shouted in Court and Was Removed...” *DG*, 19 September 1957.

³⁸ “He Shouted in Court and Was Removed...” *DG*, 19 September 1957.

³⁹ “‘I Was Chased by a Jeep’ – Court Told,” *DG*, 20 September 1957.

⁴⁰ “‘I Was Chased by a Jeep’ – Court Told,” *DG*, 20 September 1957.

⁴¹ “I Drove Fulani and Others to Chorkor Beach,” *DG*, 3 October 1957.

in connection with the abduction, Shifimo Kpee members continued to experience violent attacks.⁴²

Unsurprisingly, these kinds of incidents inflamed tensions between the organization and the police. When police arrived to investigate a motor vehicle accident near Bukom Square, they were confronted by large numbers of men, women, and children near the Ga Shifimo Kpee offices. As Police Constable Joseph Nickson recounted:

Most of them were holding bottles, stones, and clubs. They were singing war songs. He estimated that there were about 500 people. ... [H]e heard Mr. Carl Reindorf shout in Ga “Ga Shikpon” (Ga lands) and the crowd responded “Gamei Anoni” (For the Gas). Later, he said, Mr. Carl Reindorf shouted “Shimi” (strike) and the crowd started to throw stones at the police jeep damaging parts of it.⁴³

The police used tear gas to disperse the crowd, making some arrests on the spot, and police continued to identify individuals they saw in the crowd over the next several days.⁴⁴ Fifty-three people were arrested and charged. At the trial, J.B. Danquah, who represented fifty of the accused, provided additional context, arguing that the motor accident occurred in front of Shifimo Kpee offices, involved members of the Ekomefeemo Kpee, and that the Shifimo Kpee offices had been attacked with stones by Ekomefeemo Kpee members.⁴⁵ At the core of both of these trials was an emerging debate about the reliability of the police and a growing suspicion about a government conspiracy to undermine or attack political opponents.

Rhetoric vs. reality: thinking practically about politics

Popular commentators at the time argued that, regardless of whether you agreed with the Shifimo Kpee, it was important to pay attention to what was happening in Accra. Moses Danquah, who had a regular column in the *Daily Graphic*, warned that ignoring or dismissing these sorts of popular movements risked committing the same mistakes as the colonial government. Popular protest, he argued, was not mere expression of a “few, irresponsible elements’ of the community.”⁴⁶ In the context of anti-colonial nationalism, these popular movements were warnings which “no amount of shrugging of the shoulder, no amount of contemptuous or deprecating snap of the fingers or disdainful wagging of the head can hide.”⁴⁷

⁴² “Alleged Abduction – Police Arrest Ten,” *DG*, 24 August 1957; “Assault on Four Shifimo Men: One More Is Charged,” *DG*, 27 August 1957; “15 Men Accused: New Charges in Shifimo Kpee Case,” *DG*, 10 September 1957; “Henry Thompson: ‘I Was Robbed,’” *DG*, 10 September 1957; “Twelve CPP Members Granted Bail,” *DG*, 22 November 1957.

⁴³ “‘Our Police Jeep Was Stoned’ ... Witness Tells Court,” *DG*, 13 September 1957.

⁴⁴ “A Crowd of About 500 Attacked Me at Bukom Constable Tells Court,” *DG*, 17 September 1957.

⁴⁵ “‘Our Police Jeep Was Stoned’ ... Witness Tells Court,” *DG*, 13 September 1957.

⁴⁶ “Moses Danquah Gives His Impression on the Bukom Square Incident,” *DG*, 10 July 1957.

⁴⁷ “Moses Danquah Gives His Impression on the Bukom Square Incident,” *DG*, 10 July 1957.

The people should pay attention; the energy behind the movement, he argued, “was as great as any demonstration of popular feeling since the liberation of Kwame Nkrumah from prison on the impelling, convincing, inescapable results of the first General Elections of 1951,” and this was all the more ironic because Bukom Square “provided the principal arsenal for the great battle to overthrow imperialism and all it connoted and stood for to give way for that era of national respect and dignity.”⁴⁸ While trying to avoid taking sides on the substance of the issues at hand, Danquah applauded the order and tone of the rally and its leaders, with particular praise directed at Attoh Quarshie for walking the fine line between populist appeal and intellectual engagement in a way that was firmly rooted in Ga culture and history. He concluded his assessment by appealing to history, proclaiming, “I may be right, I may be wrong. But only history can decide. NO MAN CAN!”⁴⁹

So what *has* “history” or, at least, History said about the Ga Shifimo Kpee? Attoh Quarshie’s grand rhetoric – and that of other members of the Ga elite and Shifimo Kpee leadership – certainly made an impact at the time in ways that are more significant than suggested in Austin’s narrative. While people showed up to rallies and expressed support, what would active participation look like and what were people willing to sacrifice for these principles? Even a cursory look through the pages of the *Daily Graphic*, the country’s largest and most widely circulated newspaper at the time of independence – suggests that the early days of the Shifimo Kpee’s founding and organization were much more dynamic, complicated, and consequential than Austin’s analysis and subsequent histories of the period have suggested. The young men who were among the most active in the Shifimo Kpee represented a wide swath of Ga society, from elites like Henry Thompson and Carl Reindorf to the fishermen and manual laborers who found themselves in the crosshairs of the police. The fifty-three people arrested in connection with the events in Bukom Square in September of 1957 provide some illustration of the constitution of the membership – among those fifty-three were Neequaye Kotey, fisherman; Joseph Annan, tailor; Aryee Ankrah, Fisherman; Enoch Dowuona, Electrician; O. Nelson, fisherman; Samuel Osei Adu, fitter; Odartey Lamptey, fisherman; Emmanuel O. Nelson, ticket collector; Frederick Teiko Clottey, a student; Nii Attoh, a draughtsman; and Ibrahim Oku Glover Tetteh, propaganda secretary of the Ga Shifimo Kpee.⁵⁰ This list captures a sense of a more diverse “crowd” engaged through the Shifimo Kpee than Austin’s broader narrative assumes – a “crowd” that echoes constellations of social protest nearly a century before while still reflecting new social and economic categories that emerged in the period around independence.⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Moses Danquah Gives His Impression on the Bukom Square Incident,” *DG*, 10 July 1957.

⁴⁹ “Moses Danquah Gives His Impression on the Bukom Square Incident,” *DG*, 10 July 1957, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ “A Crowd of About 500 Attacked Me at Bukom Constable Tells Court,” *DG*, 17 September 1957.

⁵¹ Dominic Fortescue, “The Accra Crowd, the Asafo, and the Opposition to the Municipal Corporations Ordinance, 1924–25,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (3) (1990): 348–375.

For Shifimo Kpee founding member Attoh Quarshie, his experience as a driver was foundational to his politicization and mobilization within the Shifimo Kpee. As he recounted to me in an oral interview in 2009:

To start, I was in government transport as a professional driver. I was attached once to the Castle, then Governor Arden Clarke before Listowel, the latest. And we've been seeing things – the way people are suffering and the truth is this: when you read the Watson Commission, you can see that even the colonial government planned that they want to give us a standard education, similar to the one in Great Britain because they don't want to leave us into the hands of the wolves. ... We want peace, so Nkrumah stood for Accra Central here, We, this is where I was born, so he stood for election and we voted for him because we want him to come out. Once we have seen that he is completely ignorant about the powers of the constitution, we were happy because if he is not ignorant of the constitution, he will see that the tiniest matter have gone, so you see, Dr. Danquah succeeded with his constitution. And that constitution brought Nkrumah, and according to the constitution, the leader of the party would be the leader of the government. So they made Nkrumah leader of government. Now when he got this thing, after that one, it start to change him.⁵²

Quarshie's movement around the city and his work as a government transport driver gave him unprecedented access to different parts of the country and a connection to politicians and political processes that may have seemed more distant for the average Accra resident. For Quarshie, the challenges that the Shifimo Kpee sought to address were the direct result of Nkrumah's own failures and the political defensiveness of the CPP, which sought to control resources within party channels even if that meant failing to take direct action to address issues like swollen shoot disease, which directly impacted the well-being of the people. According to Quarshie, drivers were central to any strike or protest – within the Shifimo Kpee or otherwise. Their unique control over mobility technologies and infrastructures made them a powerful conduit of information dissemination and a potential threat to government:

Drivers are the most important people in any strike in this country! You see them blow their horn – *peepeepee peepeepee* – Ay! The drivers, they are the most important part because they carry the people from the market, they carry the workers from the work and then from home to work, and the conversation go on, so what they hear from you they hear from this gentleman and they hear from that gentleman. So they spread news quicker even than radio and television. Because many people don't listen to radio. But the passengers who go to markets, go to offices, say "Ay! Go and see! The drivers! In town!" So drivers are the most important institution, which help anything – even the workers' condition, even democracy – the ones who will

⁵² Interview with Attoh Quarshie, 24 August 2009.

make the government hot, to force it, are the drivers! Taxi drivers, mammy lorry drivers – they are the people! Even the President, if his driver go strike, who will drive him? You see, the food – who will bring the food into the city? If the drivers strike, we will finish in the country.⁵³

In a narrative that echoed that of Austin's, Quarshie argued that drivers near Bukom had been essential to the spread of the movement's message and the mobilization of its people.

In contrast to Austin's account and Attoh Quarshie's own narrative, which suggests that drivers played a disproportionately important role in the growth and operation of the movement, the Shifimo Kpee's membership, in reality, drew on a much broader range of people. Drivers had their own compelling reasons for not participating in movements like the Shifimo Kpee. As one driver at the Salaga-Mamprobi station adjacent to Bukom Square told me, when he began driving work in 1957, the Shifimo Kpee was indeed formed around Bukom in Jamestown but that drivers themselves did not form or spread news about the Shifimo Kpee in any sort of organized way. Drivers made individual choices about whether they participated in movements:

Not that every society that you see that you just go and join it. Even in a church – if you are going to a particular church and they have a society in the church, if you like that is where you join; if you don't like then you don't join it. So it is not everything that everyone will involve himself into.⁵⁴

In interviews, drivers who were active during this period consistently cited business interests as justification for not involving themselves in political movements. Relying heavily on the regular patronage of passengers, political activity might alienate long-standing clients or cause arguments in the vehicle that could distract the driver and undermine the safety of all involved. Staying out of politics while driving – like limiting the playing of music or other forms of potential distraction – was a sign of professionalism among many drivers of the era.⁵⁵ Individuals chose to participate – including Attoh Quarshie's own brother who was a driver at that time – based on their own frustrations with government, the domination of Akan peoples in governmental positions, and the lack of job opportunities for Ga people broadly. In recounting his own memories of the Shifimo Kpee, his escape to Togo to avoid arrest, and his experience of watching Shifimo Kpee leadership being released from prison after Nkrumah's overthrow, Quarshie's brother broke down crying multiple times.⁵⁶ The events detailed in the newspaper were more than stories or political talking points – they were traumatic experiences for many, which continued to linger more than 50 years later.

⁵³ Interview with Attoh Quarshie, 24 August 2009.

⁵⁴ Interview with Salaga Mamprobi Station taxi driver, 22 May 2009. Some interviews are anonymous at the request of the interviewee.

⁵⁵ Interview with Abraham Tagoe, 5 August 2009; Interview with Salaga Mamprobi taxi driver, 22 May 2009.

⁵⁶ Interview with Salaga Mamprobi taxi driver, 22 May 2009.

Drivers did occasionally collectively mobilize during the early years of independence, but their collective actions through strike and other forms of protest tended to be directed at issues that impacted the conditions of their work rather than broader political issues. Concerned about government policy toward motor transport, which emerged after independence, drivers met actively with government ministers throughout July 1957 in protest of new motor traffic regulations regarding “licensing fees, verification of weights, change of ownership, refund of portion of fees paid, the painting of names and addresses of owners on commercial vehicles, fines, and maximum period of driving commercial vehicles”⁵⁷ as well as the Third Party Insurance scheme, which drivers felt was an undue financial burden. While the Shifimo Kpee rallied the general public around popular causes of shared sacrifice, the complaints of the Ghana Motor Transport Drivers’ Union garnered little sympathy from the general public who felt that the new regulations demanded “a higher sense of responsibility among drivers and transport owners in the discharge of their duties to the general public.” Individuals writing in the national newspaper struggled to understand the drivers’ concerns about policies that seemed intended to “safeguard the lives of the people”:

The operation of such a progressive policy is long overdue in Ghana. That it has now been introduced is as much a tribute to the tact and firmness of the Government as to all reasonable-minded persons who support it. The drivers’ decision to go on strike is not justified. For they have put no alternative suggestions to ensure public safety. Moreover, the Minister of the Interior, Mr. Ako Adjei, has expressed the Government’s earnest desire to meet all legitimate demands of the Union.⁵⁸

A drivers’ strike entailed collective action that impacted the many for the benefit of the few, and the union’s threats of strike were seen as “coercive measures” that “can only create unpleasant conditions by paralyzing the road transport system, the object being to create a general background of chaos.”⁵⁹ The government’s response was also subject to criticism by opposition political parties like the National Liberal Movement, the leaders of which argued that government representatives were failing to take drivers’ concerns seriously in order to find a solution that would end the strike.⁶⁰ “THE NATION IS GETTING FOOTSOKE,” one commentator declared, calling for both government and union men to “get round a table NOW and thrash out their problems like sensible and responsible men before letting the innocent suffer” through what Opposition Leader K.A. Busia called “a major national disaster.”⁶¹ Madam Kai Lomoko, a cassava seller at Makola No. 2 market “expressed the opinion that the drivers should have exercised a little more patience because the strike was affecting the

⁵⁷ “Drivers to Meet Ako Addie,” *DG*, 13 July 1957.

⁵⁸ “Drivers’ Strike,” *DG*, 20 July 1957.

⁵⁹ “Drivers’ Strike,” *DG*, 20 July 1957.

⁶⁰ “NLM Calls for Probe,” *DG*, 25 July 1957.

⁶¹ “The Long Walk,” *DG*, 25 July 1957. Emphasis in the original.

common man in the street more than it affected the Government or the Ministers.”⁶² Meanwhile, government transport units organized centralized distribution of foodstuffs and central commodities throughout the country during the strike.

The strike highlighted both the widening gap between government ministers and the average population as well as the growing frustration among various members of the population about their seeming inability to achieve security and prosperity in a new nation plagued by both internal and external challenges. Unlike the more deep-seated antagonism expressed by people like Attoh Quarshie, however, the animosity between the drivers’ union and the government seemed short-lived. In the next year, the Accra Passenger Vehicle Operators’ Union, which ran “trotro” (minibus) services in metropolitan Accra, called on the CPP government to save the trotro service from the interference of municipal authorities.⁶³

At the same time, the frustrations present in the Shifimo Kpee’s criticism of the government also spilled over into other areas of town life. As Minister of Housing A.E. Inkumsah noted, “one of the chief topics of political discussion in Accra nowadays has been what was known as the ‘Ga land problem’”. A *Daily Graphic* story reported:

He said, “We all know the feelings of Ghanaians concerning their land and nothing could be better calculated to create distrust and resentment than the circulation of rumors that the Ga people were being robbed of their lands.” The Minister said he wanted to give the facts to enable the people to judge for themselves as to whether or not the allegations were true. They could then form their own opinions as to who were responsible for the alienation of Ga lands: whether Government or individuals Gas themselves, or certain Ga chiefs.⁶⁴

Inkumsah welcomed proposals for the private development of stool lands through individual means while asserting that the CPP government would continue to protect the rights of individuals to engage in lawful private transactions. However, dissent within the Ga community over the land issue had already spilled over into more direct action. On 8 August 1957, Ga Manche Nii Tackie Kome II was destooled at a meeting of Ga chiefs. Charged in absentia, Kome was accused of “dereliction of duty, practicing autocracy and refusing to confer with the chiefs, elders and people of the Ga state as he is by custom bound, on matters affecting the general administration of the Ga State and also the Ga

⁶² “Govts’ Plan to Deal with the Motor Strike,” *DG*, 25 July 1957.

⁶³ “Minister Asked to Save ‘Trotro’ Service,” *DG* 1958. To learn more about the history of passenger service and the emergence of the trotro in Accra, see Jennifer Hart, “Of Pirate Drivers and Honking Horns: Mobility, Authority, and Urban Planning in Late-Colonial Ghana,” *Technology and Culture* 61(2) (April 2020): S49–S76; Hart, *Making an African City*, 148–175.

⁶⁴ “Inkumsah Talks on Land Problems in Accra and Appeals to the People – Don’t Be Swayed by Sentiments...,” *DG*, 3 August 1957.

State Council, on matters and functions regulated by customs.”⁶⁵ Later in the same month, the government declared that the annual Homowo harvest festival in Accra would not include public ceremonies, processions, assemblies, or other demonstrations. While the festival could go on in private homes, public celebrations were suspended due to a fear that frustrations would result in violence among community members.⁶⁶

Power, politics, and repression

Concerned about the obvious discontent and the growth of real populist opposition in the country, the CPP government passed a new Emergency Powers Bill in December 1957 that introduced expansive new powers of preventive detention, which CPP ministers like Krobo Edusei argued would enable the government to deal with the “traitors” in the country and prevent further violence. This approach was reinforced by the Preventive Detention Act, passed in July of the following year, which empowered the government to actively go after individuals who were seen to be a threat to the country, broadly defined. Shifimo Kpee leaders, who had joined together with other opposition movements to form the “United Party” in November 1957,⁶⁷ found themselves the target of these new measures. Attoh Quarshie, Henry Thompson, and others were among forty-three people arrested for attempting to assassinate the president and plot to overthrow the government.⁶⁸ Quarshie, in particular, was accused of organizing “Tokyo Joes” – a group of young men “dedicated to the overthrow of the Government by force and the assassination of members of the Government” – and “The Zenith Seven” – “a subversive and terrorist organization.”⁶⁹ Far from the “persons who in the past made their livelihood through organized violence” cited by the prime min discussing the use of the Preventive Detention Act, the occupations of those arrested represented a similar swath of Accra society as had the membership of the Shifimo Kpee – traders, farmers, journalists, storekeepers, clerks, head teachers, money lenders, carpenters, tailors, messengers, and mechanics, among others. However nearly half of the arrested were listed as unemployed – a signal of the economic challenges in the city.⁷⁰ Attoh Quarshie managed to evade capture for nearly a year before being apprehended and sent to Ussher Forth Prison.⁷¹

While the repressive actions and violence of Preventive Detention are easy to dismiss as yet another manifestation of megalomania and power-hungry paranoia, Austin rightly argues that the authoritarian regime that the CPP

⁶⁵ “The Ga Manche Is Declared Destooled,” *DG*, 9 August 1957.

⁶⁶ “Ga Homowo Festival Starts Today – But No Ceremonies,” *DG*, 24 August 1957.

⁶⁷ Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 384–385.

⁶⁸ “43 Being Arrested: PM Issues Statement on ‘Assassination’ and ‘Plot to Overthrow Govt,’” *DG*, 11 November 1958.

⁶⁹ “Allegations against the 43,” *DG*, 17 November 1958.

⁷⁰ “43 Being Arrested: PM Issues Statement on ‘Assassination’ and ‘Plot to Overthrow Govt,’” *DG*, 11 November 1958.

⁷¹ “Attoh Quarshie in Ussher Fort,” *DG*, 1959.

government had transformed into by the time of the declaration of the Republic of Ghana in 1960 was, in many ways, unsurprising. The tensions and challenges facing the new country were immense and the realization of the promises of independence proved too slow for many people. Austin notes that “the Ga revolt especially was a great shock to the CPP. It took shape in the capital, in Nkrumah’s own conscience, from within the party’s own ranks.” Within the political rhetoric and ideology of the CPP, “local” associations like the Shifimo Kpee were a threat to the construction of a new *nation* and to the promise of independence.⁷² As the brief analysis of newspaper sources and oral interviews suggests here, however, understanding the reality of the lived experiences and political motivations of individuals in these movements requires that we move beyond CPP rhetoric to think carefully about the way the tensions and challenges of the postindependence moment were experienced, navigated, and interpreted by diverse groups of citizens.

For the history of Ghana, these questions not only have implications for our understanding of these otherwise understudied or ignored political and social movements, but it also has implications for our understanding of the way that Nkrumah and the CPP sought to shape and survive the years immediately after independence and implement real change in the country. By beginning to pull at some of the threads of our received narratives we create space to ask new questions about this moment and draw connections across otherwise overly determined periods of “colonial” and “postcolonial.”

Author Biographies. Jennifer Hart is a Professor of History at Virginia Tech. A historian of technology, mobility, infrastructure, and urban space, she is the author of *Ghana on the Go: African Mobility in the Age of Motor Transportation* (Indiana University Press 2016) and *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra* (Indiana University Press, 2024).

References

- Ahlman, Jeffrey. “A New Type of Citizen: Youth, Gender, and Generation in the Ghana Builders Brigade.” *Journal of African History* 53 (2012): 87–105.
- . *Living with Nkrumahism: Nation, State, and Pan-Africanism in Ghana*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017.
- . *Ghana: A Political and Social History*. London: Zed Books, 2023.
- . *Kwame Nkrumah: Voices of Liberation*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021.
- Allman, Jean. “The Disappearing of Hannah Kudjoe: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Tyrannies of History.” *Journal of Women’s History* 21(3) (Fall 2009): 13–35.
- . “Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing,” *American Historical Review* 118(1) (February 2013): 104–129.
- . *Quills of the Porcupine: Asante Nationalism in an Emergent Ghana*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
- Austin, Dennis. *Politics in Ghana, 1946–1960*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- Fortescue, Dominic. “The Accra Crowd, the Asafo, and the Opposition to the Municipal Corporations Ordinance, 1924–25.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (3) (1990): 348–375.

⁷² Austin, *Politics in Ghana*, 44–45.

- Hart, Jennifer. "Archives of Dissent: Complicating Anti-Colonial Histories through the Watson Commission (Gold Coast/Ghana)." *Journal of British Studies* 63(3) (2024): 517–520.
- . "Of Pirate Drivers and Honking Horns: Mobility, Authority, and Urban Planning in Late-Colonial Ghana." *Technology and Culture* 61(2) (April 2020): S49–S76.
- . *Making an African City: Technopolitics and the Infrastructure of Everyday Life in Colonial Accra*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2024.
- Lugard, Lord Frederick J.D. *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. London: Routledge, 1965.
- Miescher, Stephan. *A Dam for Africa: Akosombo Stories from Ghana*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022.
- Parker, John. *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- Plageman, Nate. "'Accra Is Changing Isn't It?': Urban Infrastructure, Independence, and Nation in the Gold Coast's *Daily Graphic*, 1954–1957." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43(1) (2010): 137–159.
- Rathbone, Richard. *Nkrumah and the Chiefs: Politics of Chieftaincy in Ghana, 1951–1960*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000.
- Skinner, Kate. "It Brought Some Kind of Neatness to Mankind: Mass Literacy, Community Development, and Democracy in 1950s Asante." *Africa* 79(4) (2009): 479–499.
- The National Archives, United Kingdom (TNA): Colonial Office (CO) 964/1, "Commission of Enquiry," 1948.
- . (TNA): CO 964/15, "Memoranda Received from Members of the Public—Accra and District," 1948.
- . (TNA): CO 964/32, "Report and Statement by HMG on the Report," Gold Coast Commission of Enquiry, 1948.