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Representation of 'Ghana' in John Dramani Mahama's *My First Coup D'etat: Memories from the Lost Decades of Africa*

Akua Agyeiwaa Denkyi-Manieson | gdenkyi-manieson2@huskers.unl.edu | ORCID |
PhD Student, Department of Philosophy, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, USA

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Abstract: This article examines the representation of Ghana as a nation in John Dramani Mahama's autobiography, *My First Coup d'etat: Memories from the Lost Decades of Africa*. Drawing on a sociological approach to literary criticism and informed by postcolonial and social constructivist perspectives, the article reads the text as a national narrative in which personal memory intersects with collective history. The analysis demonstrates that beyond recounting the lives of Mahama and his father, E. A. Mahama, the autobiography reconstructs Ghana's political, social, cultural and geographical history from the precolonial period through colonialism, military rule and the contemporary democratic era. By foregrounding how national identity is narratively produced through representations of power, culture and space, the article argues that *My First Coup d'etat* functions as a public archive of Ghanaian nationhood rather than merely a personal memoir. The article, thus, contributes to African Studies by expanding critical approaches to political autobiography as a significant site of postcolonial national narration.

Keywords: Autobiography, political life writing, national identity, postcolonial memory, Ghana

Introduction

Autobiographical writing by African political leaders occupies a complex space between personal memory, national history and ideological self-fashioning. In postcolonial African contexts, such narratives often function not merely as life stories, but as cultural and historical archives through which the nation is remembered, interpreted and, in some cases, reimagined. Yet, within African literary and cultural studies, political autobiographies by post-independence leaders are frequently approached primarily as historical documents or political commentaries, rather than as literary texts that actively construct national meaning.

This article intervenes in that critical gap by examining *My First Coup d'etat: Memories from the Lost Decades of Africa* (2012), the autobiography of Ghana's fourth president of the Fourth Republic, H. E. John Dramani Mahama. Rather than treating the text solely as a record of leadership experience, the article reads it as a sociological and cultural narrative that represents Ghana as a multifaceted entity, encompassing its political, socio-cultural and geographical dimensions across various historical periods. The article argues that Mahama's autobiography functions as a national narrative that goes beyond personal recollection to reconstruct Ghana's political history, cultural practices and spatial identity from the precolonial era through colonialism, military rule and democratic consolidation.

My First Coup d'etat unfolds across three interconnected narrative strands: the life of the author, the life of his father, E. A. Mahama and the historical development of the Ghanaian nation. While the personal histories of father and son frame the narrative, the text's most expansive dimension is its sustained engagement with Ghana's socio-cultural, economic, political and geographical evolution from precolonial times to the present. It is this national dimension of the autobiography that constitutes the primary focus of this study. The analysis is guided by the following questions: How does *My First Coup d'etat* represent Ghana's political history across different historical phases? In what ways does the narrative encode socio-cultural values, traditions and belief systems as constitutive elements of national identity? And how does geographical description function as a mode of representing belonging, memory and heritage in the text?

This article is grounded in a postcolonial and social constructivist theoretical framework, which understands national identity, history and culture as socially produced through discourse and narrative rather than as fixed or essential categories. From a postcolonial

perspective, *My First Coup d'etat* is read as a text shaped by the historical legacies of colonialism, military rule and democratic transition, while social constructivism provides a lens for examining how Ghanaian identity is constructed through representations of politics, culture and space. Autobiography, in this context, functions as a narrative site where personal memory intersects with collective history, allowing the author to participate in the construction of national meaning. This framework enables the study to analyse Mahama's narrative not merely as personal testimony, but as a discursive process through which Ghana's postcolonial identity is articulated and contested.

Methodologically, the article employs the sociological approach to literary criticism, examining the relationship between the narrative and the society it represents. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates that Mahama's autobiography serves as a composite narrative of Ghanaian nationhood, offering insights into the intersections of politics, culture, geography and memory in postcolonial African life writing. This article does not seek to reconstruct Mahama's life through private archival materials such as letters or diaries, but rather to examine *My First Coup d'etat* as a public autobiographical text through which national history and identity are narrated. The analysis, therefore, focuses on representation, narrative strategy and sociocultural meaning rather than biographical verification.

Representing Ghana's political history: power, coups and constitutional transitions

A more significant part of *MFCD* is about the political history of Ghana. The narrative captures the genesis of political activism in the old Ghana empire through British imperialism to the current democratic era. Rex Gibson (1998) explains that "political perspectives of human life are rooted in politics and power". In effect, political literary criticism focuses on the treatment of power and its distribution within a story and what can be extracted from politics in a story through what it reveals about the society it explores. This section of the work examines aspects of Ghanaian politics in *MFCD*. A close reading of *MFCD* reveals five distinct phases of the Ghanaian political landscape. This article identifies these as the era of the founders, imperialism, nationalism, independence, coup d'etats and military rule and finally, the Return to Constitutionalism.

The founders' era captures Ghana's political history in the pre-colonial era. In *MFCD,* the narrator traces that period to the reign of Askia Dawud, leader and founder of the Gonja state in the 1500s. He explains that modern Ghana emerged from the old Songhai

Empire, which at its peak stretched through the territories of Mali, Niger, Senegal, Guinea, the Gambia and Burkina Faso. The Gonja rulers, we read, had Muslim spiritualists who interceded on their behalf during wars. When the independent state of Ghana was founded, these Islamic clerics and spiritualists continued to stay in the territory and formed a part of the religious dimension in modern-day Ghana (88-91). The reference to Askia Dawud and the Gonja state shows a cultural continuity between pre-colonial Ghana and modern Ghana, and this article will argue that powerful empires like the Songhai still influence contemporary identity. The role of Islamic spiritualists in the leadership of the Gonja state shows the deep connection between religion and governance, which continued until modern Ghana (Silverman and Owusu-Ansah 1989). Even after independence, Islamic clerics remained an integral part of the religious landscape of Ghana, showing that colonialism did not erase pre-colonial traditions but rather made them coexist and shape the political and cultural systems of the nation (Sarbah 2023). This persistence is consistent with Ghana's pluralistic religious environment, where Islam and Christianity are key in shaping social norms and politics. It also offers insights into the continuing processes of identity and social integration in a multicultural postcolonial society where ethnic and religious groups contest for recognition in the national narrative. Moreover, the focus on precolonial history and personalities such as Askia Dawud may be an attempt to reclaim African cultural heritage and, in the process, challenge colonial education systems that erased Indigenous histories in the formation of Ghana's identity.

Modern Ghana's ties with Europe have continued to occupy postcolonial literary texts, and MFCD is no exception. The narrative succinctly relates the political history of colonial activities that have continued to affect lives in modern-day Ghana. The narrator explains that the British entered the Gold Coast territory in 1845. Along came their police and military force. By 1874, the colonial government had established a regimented police force called the Gold Coast Constabulary (32). When the Gold Coast formally became a colony, a military force called the Gold Coast Regiment was formed. Aside from this, another force emerged called the Native Authority Force, which had the mandate to enforce customary laws in the territory. The colonial government was bent on ensuring law and order in the colonies; in effect, it put in place several measures, including importing military personnel. The depiction of colonial governance in *MFCD* shows the far-reaching impacts of European imperialism on modern Ghanaian society.

The British police and military forces were introduced in the Gold Coast region as the basis of the modern legal and administrative systems of the country. The Gold Coast Constabulary and the Gold Coast Regiment were established to enforce the law and protect the colony, thus indicating the extent to which the colony was to be controlled by force. This impact is felt even to this day. Also, the establishment of the Native Authority Force to implement customary laws reveals the dual governance system that was adopted during the colonial era, that is, the British legal system and Indigenous laws. This colonial heritage is still observable in the present-day Ghanaian legal system, which is based on British common and customary laws. Using military personnel to enforce law and order in the colony shows that governance was militarised, a trend that the country has retained (Sederberg, 1971). The narrative under consideration also investigates the historical basis of many of Ghana's current institutions and further prompts one to consider how colonialism influenced the formation of institutions, power and even the policing of postcolonial societies.

The economic activities of the colonial enterprise are also highlighted. The narrator explains that several European countries moved into the colonies, including the Dutch, who built forts in the mid-1600s to keep and transit slaves (14). The robust nature of the slave trade can be attested to by the number of slave castles built along the coast of Ghana. The number of slave castles along Ghana's coast is estimated to be more than those found in any part of the world (42). Trade-in slaves were one of the many reasons education in the Northern parts of Ghana stalled. Parents were terrified and afraid of sending their children to schools where they would be captured and sent to work at plantation farms overseas (28). The socioeconomic effect of the trade was beyond comprehension, and to this date, the northern parts of Ghana remain some of the poorest regions in the whole country. Again, the Northern region was and still is considered the agricultural hub of the country, and most of the inhabitants in the Northern region are agricultural workers (127-128). Economic exploitation during colonialism, as depicted in *MFCD,* has a focus on the consequences of the European slave trade and its implications for modern Ghana. The narrator stresses the role of European countries like the Dutch in building the forts along the coast to facilitate the slave trade to the Atlantic region. This is because a larger number of slave castles are found in Ghana than in any other part of the world (Osei-Tutu Brempong 2004). This form of trade not only had direct impacts on slavery but also affected the rate of

education. For instance, in the northern regions of Ghana, parents were not willing to send their children to school because of the fear of being captured and sold into slavery. The economic effects of this disruption are still visible to date, and the Northern region is one of the poorest regions in the country. Agricultural work is still the main occupation of many in the population. This background information shows that slavery, education, and economic development are interlinked, thus suggesting that colonial economic exploitation of labor has left an indelible mark on the socioeconomic development of Ghana.

MFCD also reveals the structure of colonial political administration. In the narrative, we read that the governors oversaw the daily running of the colonies and reported directly to the Queen of England. Next were the District Commissioners, who answered only to the governor. Beneath the District Commissioners were various chiefs, who had the authority to adjudicate and legislate only in the daily affairs of the colonies. However, the District Commissioner's decisions could overturn the Chief's adjudication, which meant that the Chief's authority was only ceremonial (24). If a chief disagreed with the District Commission, the latter had every right to dethrone the chief (29) permanently. Like most policies introduced by the colonial government, the position of the chief in the colonial administration brought disrepute and disrespect to the local authority. The chiefs then became ceremonial authorities who amounted to nothing because the District Commissioner could permanently overturn any decision by the chief if the latter found it unpalatable. Again, the narrator explains that the colonial administration's territory initially covered only the Southern territories. The Northern regions and the Asante Kingdom were the last to be added to the Gold Coast colony in the 1900s (28). This disparity explains the consideration of the situation of the national capital in Cape Coast and later relocation to the greater Accra region. Revealed in *MFCD* was the disdain of colonial administration towards local authority. Governors were in charge of the colonial administration and reported only to the Queen of England. Local chiefs who were once the chief in governance were made to be ceremonial. They were allowed to exercise power in adjudicating local concerns, but the District Commissioners could easily overrule them and thus reduce them to symbolic leaders. In the extreme, the District Commissioner could even dethrone a chief who disagreed with his power. This thinking aligns with the colonial plan of controlling and subduing precolonial power relations. These factors resulted in the erosion of the power of local leadership and the imposition

of centralisation (Crook 1986). The devaluation of the North and the diction of Indigenous governance mechanisms indicates that colonial rule was characterised by centralisation and regional inequalities.

In *MFCD*, we read that British political dominance of the Gold Coast colony continued until the mid-19th century, when nationalist activities began to take root in the colonies, culminating at the end of the independence struggle on March 6, 1957. Various organizations and individuals spearheaded the independence struggle; however, the activities of one such organisation, the Great Consolidated Peoples Party, GCPP, cannot be discounted. Interestingly, GCPP is elicited in *MFCD*, but it is worth knowing that, except for Dr Kwame Nkrumah, the other five members of the big six were members of the GCPP. As the narrator admits, Kwame Nkrumah opted for an American education at a time when his contemporaries chose British education. He earned his bachelor's degree at Lincoln University and a master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania (8). Dr J.B. Danquah invited Dr Nkrumah to assume the position of General Secretary of GCPP. The above indicates the rising political consciousness and nationalist movements on the Gold Coast as the fight for independence intensified, resulting in Ghana's independence in 1957. The part of the Great Consolidated Peoples Party (GCPP) in the nationalist movement reveals the existence of structured political associations that formed a part of the effort to overthrow the colonial rulers.

Again, the fact that Dr Kwame Nkrumah chose to attend an American university instead of following the colonial British educational system shows how politically diverse he was. He had more political vision than the normal leadership of his era, which was British-influenced. This difference in education experiences determined the direction of the independence struggle and leadership of Nkrumah, who was to become an important political and cultural leader of Ghana and other parts of Africa. Also, the invitation of Dr. J.B. Danquah to Nkrumah to assume the position of the General Secretary of GCPP shows that Nkrumah was recognised as one of the rising leaders of the nationalist movement to emerge in Ghana. This contradiction between the British educational system and the attraction of other systems shows the contest between colonial influences and the spirit of liberty through which Ghana attained her independence.

Unfortunately, a policy misunderstanding brought about a rift between Dr Nkrumah on one side and the other five members on the other. As a result, Dr Nkrumah formed his political party, the Convention People's Party (CPP). It was the CPP, headed by Dr

Nkrumah, that won independence for Ghana. The members of the big six, whom the narrator called 'nationalists', were Dr. J.B. Danquah, Dr. Ebenezer Ako Adjei, Mr. Edward Akuffo-Addo, Mr. William Ofori-Atta, Mr. Emmanuel Obetsebi-Lamptey and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. The attribution of Ghana's independence to the members of the Big Six is a unitary approach by the narrator, himself a statesman, political leader, and role model, yet his follow-up comment on Nkrumah's overthrow raises doubts that warrants an explanation of Dr Nkrumah's position in Ghana's politics. The narrator explains that Kwame Nkrumah had a "far-reaching vision for Ghana and Africa" and adds that some people either did not share that vision or did not approve of his methods for making it a reality. As a result, on February 24, 1966, a Coup D'etat happened, which toppled the CPP government (9). All Ministers of State, Members of Parliament, District Commissioners, Chairmen, and Secretaries of the CPP government were asked to report to the nearest police station and were all arrested (14). Because the first coup was swift and unexpected, it is often called "a bloodless coup". Ghana's first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, died in exile in 1972 (15). The overthrow of Dr Nkrumah ended the era of nationalism and independence struggle and ushered the country into 12 years of 'coup d'etatism' and military rule.

The military established the National Liberation Council to manage affairs (14; 107). Those found guilty were punished, while those found blameless, like E. A. Mahama, were released after a year in prison (15). Major General Ankrah was made the Head of State. After a while, Gen Ankrah was ousted from power on corruption charges. Then, Brigadier General Afrifa stepped in, and he served briefly; elections were held in 1969, which attempted to bring the country back to constitutional rule; that attempt was partly successful (129). Under constitutional rule, Dr Busia became Prime Minister of the Republic of Ghana. He served for a little over a year. Busia introduced the Aliens Compliance Order, which demanded that all illegal aliens in Ghana, the majority of whom were Nigerians, return to their home countries. Not satisfied with Busia's government, the armed forces and Colonel Acheampong staged another Coup d'etat in 1972; at the end, Colonel K Acheampong was made Head of State. He introduced Operation Feed Yourself (130), a policy that urged Ghanaians to cultivate their food. It yielded some results. Colonel Acheampong promoted himself to the rank of General in 1975. General Acheampong was Ghana's fifth Head of State and third military ruler. Revealed in the just narrated is a focus on the turbulent political history of Ghana

in the post-independence era, more so on the series of military coups and the short-lived periods of constitutional rule. The National Liberation Council (NLC), which was the first administration after a coup, clearly illustrates the fluidity in Ghana's politics, where military takeover was used frequently to handle political duties. The coups and changes in leadership, which can be seen through the lives of Major General Ankrah, Brigadier General Afrifa, and Colonel Acheampong, show that Ghana's political systems were weak and ineffective during this period. The fact that General Ankrah was ousted on corruption charges and others who followed him could not hold on to power indicates that it was difficult to consolidate power in a post-colonial state. Dr. Busia's short tenure as Prime Minister and implementation of measures such as the Aliens Compliance Order show that the country attempted to solve national problems. However, all these were unpopular and led to military takeovers. Colonel Acheampong's military administration, which implemented the Operation Feed Yourself policy, demonstrates that the state was prone to using authoritarian measures even though some policies worked. The frequent military administrations and attempts to transfer power to civilians reflect the clash between democratic desires and military might in Ghana's political growth. These events, most notably the political continuity problem and the military's control of politics have influenced the governance of Ghana and its citizens to this date. The continued instability in this era has helped shape Ghana's present-day political culture, the military's role in governance, and the country's transition to civilian rule in the later decades.

General Acheampong formed the National Redemption Council and, in 1974, introduced Operation 'Keep Right,' which switched Ghana's measurement from imperial to metric; he was successful (166). He also introduced the National Reconstruction Programme, which aimed at promoting employment and teaching practical work skills. Later, General Acheampong dissolved his political party and replaced it with the Supreme Military Council (177). After a while, the people became fed up and requested General Acheampong to step down. The economy of Ghana was challenging; the military took over the running of the state and met out brutalities on the citizenry. Hoarding, an indigenous form of corruption called 'kalabule' emerged. In order to appease the growing agitation among the citizenry, General Acheampong introduced the Union Government, a system of government based on an Indigenous form of democracy. Lots of money was spent on teaching the ideals of the Union Government. Universities were forced to close

in the agitations and demonstrations that were ensured. Most Ghanaians, especially University students, were against the union government. The government organised a referendum in March 1978 to determine whether the Union Government was to stay (*MFCD* 187-188). He failed. General Acheampong's political party forced him to resign. Lieutenant General Fred Akuffo took over as Head of State in 1979, but nothing changed. The economy remained mismanaged (*MFCD* 203). General Acheampong's rule is a clear example of the complexity of military governance, economic uncertainty, and population discontent in Ghana's post-independence experience. His policies like Operation 'Keep Right' and the National Reconstruction Program show attempts at improving efficiency through infrastructure modernisation and creating employment but did little to tackle the root economic problems. The shift from the National Redemption Council to the Supreme Military Council reveals how military rulers often reorganised power to keep on top of the situation rather than to exercise governance effectively. The appearance of the term 'kalabule', which means corruption through hoarding and price inflation, shows the level of economic hardship that led to people's anger. The Union Government introduced by Acheampong as a new kind of democracy shows that he was aware of the existing opposition, but the Union Government was rejected in the 1978 referendum, meaning that the population wanted real democratic governance. The closure of the universities because of the protests shows the political activism of students and intellectuals in combating military autocracy. His forced resignation and the subsequent leadership of Lieutenant General Fred Akuffo, who brought about no significant change, also shows the pattern of poor leadership and economic mismanagement that was evident in Ghana's military regimes. The political instability of this period made it a springboard to subsequent efforts to achieve constitutional governance and economic development.

A year later, in 1979, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings staged a coup and set up the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). Jerry John Rawlings (1947-2020) introduced the 'house cleaning', by which five former heads of state were executed (*MFCD* 210). By then, the CPP party had been reorganised into a PNP, the People's National Party, led by Dr. Hilla Liman (1934-1998). Elections were held, and Liman was elected president of the Third Republic (*MFCD* 204). The economy was still unstable under Dr Hilla Liman. A little over two years later, Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings staged another coup and ousted Liman from power on December 31, 1981 (*MFCD*

211). The 1981 coup marked the end of Coup D'Etat in Ghana, but not the end of military rule. Jerry John Rawlings, a flight lieutenant in the Armed Forces, continued to rule as Head of State of the Republic of Ghana for eleven years until the nation was ushered into constitutional rule in 1992.

The narrator explains that the period after the second coup was marked by constant military brutality and the murder of innocent citizens. The difficulties within the country forced many people to migrate to greener pastures. We read, "[T]he postcolonial experience in nationhood was failing miserably" (*MFCD* 243). Ghanaians started leaving en masse (*MFCD* 244). Many of these emigrated people entered Nigeria, Europe, and North America. Skilled Ghanaian workers were highly sought after in Nigeria, for instance. Later, the Nigerian government introduced the Aliens Compliance Order in which all illegal aliens, the majority of whom were Ghanaians, were given two weeks to leave Nigeria. This policy, the narrator believes, may be a reaction to the 1969 Aliens Compliance Order introduced by the Acheampong government (*MFCD* 261). Life had become tough in Ghana. Nearly all government companies were at a halt. For instance, a journey that takes a few hours could take over twenty-four hours because of the unavailability of transport. (*MFCD* 274) Shortly after, President Rawlings ushered the country into an Economic Recovery Programme with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and Ghana's economy improved. Food was readily available, agricultural output was rising, necessary provisions were available and essential commodities were no longer hoarded (*MFCD*303). The period after Rawlings' coups demonstrates that the postcolonial state in Ghana was rather unstable and that military interventions always followed democratic transitions. The AFRC's rule was quite brutal, and they executed people, which illustrates how far they went to fight corruption. However, at the same time, it increased the national trauma and caused emigration. The author correctly indicates that 'the postcolonial experience in nationhood was failing miserably' since it captures the economic decline and governance failures that made Ghana a country from which many had to flee. The Nigerian Aliens Compliance Order shows that exclusionary policies may have unforeseen long-term effects. In the end, Rawlings had to switch to economic reforms with the help of the Economic Recovery Program supported by the IMF and the World Bank, apparently realizing that military rule could not bring the country back to its feet.

The above is a comprehensive narrative of the political history of Ghana from pre-colonial through colonial to the present dispensation. From a postcolonial perspective, the narrative reveals how colonial governance, military intervention and democratic transition shaped the distribution of power in Ghana. The detailed military narrative indicates that military intervention was incompatible with economic pragmatism as Ghana moved towards democratic governance in 1992. However, there is an element of skepticism underneath the narrator's tone. This can be inferred from the details of the various coups. Since 1981, the nation has been politically stable after five successful democratically elected regimes. The incessant political upheavals in Ghana speak volumes about the country's ethos. Most African countries experienced this era of rapid political instability, as depicted in *MFCD.*

Socio-Cultural Values and National Identity in *My First Coup d'etat*

For obvious reasons, the narrator repeatedly demonstrates the importance of formal education to himself and the nation of Ghana. Formal education introduced by the British was, for a long time, limited to the southern territories and later to the middle belt. In the mid-1920s, the colonial government established the Achimota School with assistance from various chiefs. Achimota School has kindergarten, primary and secondary divisions. In 1925, the Prince of Wales paid an official visit to the school and consented to have his name placed on the Achimota School. Achimota School was therefore named The Prince of Wales College in 1925. Besides the Achimota School, the colonial government extended education to all the regions in the colonies.

Though the colonial government made strides in education, the narrator bemoans the discriminatory nature of colonial education. This is attested to by the fact that before the 1900s, the colonial government deliberately withheld formal education from the Northern regions because they believed the people of the North were better suited for "labor than for intellectual endeavors" (*MFCD* 28). This gap accounts for the high illiteracy rates in the three Northern regions. The discriminative nature of colonial education is also reiterated in Stephanie Newell's introduction to *Marita or the Folly of Love*. She notes, "Female literacy levels remained low throughout the colonial period, and women formed a tiny proportion of the small percentage of literate Africans" (18). Colonial education was gender-biased, as Newell points out. Therefore, the education system was the preserve of Southern males in colonial Ghana. Despite its shortcomings, the colonial education system in the Gold Coast was structurally adequate. For instance, when

formal education was extended to the northern regions, pupils from distant places to school were placed in properly equipped boarding houses (*MFCD* 22). A case in point is the Achimota School, where female adults and maternal figures were assigned to each dormitory in primary school. These women cared for the "overall well-being" of the students (*MFCD* 10). When he assumed office as the first president of the Republic of Ghana, Dr Kwame Nkrumah imparted education to a large extent. Besides secondary schools, Dr Nkrumah built two universities: the University of Cape Coast and the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi (*MFCD*146). Further, to facilitate education and probably bridge the vast gap between Southern and Northern schools, Dr Nkrumah introduced the Northern Scholarship scheme, which catered for tuition, accommodation, and boarding fees for the people of the Northern regions.

Moreover, what has been dubbed Ghanaian hospitality is not left out of the narrative. The people of Ghana are depicted as naturally hospitable and welcoming. This is attested to by the customary offering of water to visitors in every Ghanaian household (*MFCD* 117). The depiction of hospitality in Ghana in the narrative, primarily through the traditional gesture of water offering to the visitors, shows real generosity and communalism, which are the cultural norms. This is an act that seems to be quite simple and, at the same time, is loaded with meaning regarding the way in which Ghanaians view the world: harmony in society and respect for guests. From the historical perspective, full of colonial disturbances and postcolonial struggles, such traditions help keep the region's cultural identity intact when all the political and economic barriers have failed. In addition, the hospitality that endures challenges the external narratives that cast Ghana's history as only revolving around instability by illustrating its social fabric's strength.

Besides the colonial government, Euro-Christian missionaries played a role in developing colonial Ghana. In healthcare, various missionaries established hospitals in colonial Ghana; for example, the Presbyterian mission established the infamous Agogo Hospital, which specialises in eye care. The Agogo Hospital serves not only Ghana but the entire sub-region. In one of such hospitals established by the Catholic Church, the narrator was taken to when he needed medical attention. That hospital was described as neat, with modern beds, clean sheets, and kind-hearted nurses (*MFCD* 70). That is a recognition of missionaries' contribution to Ghana's development. Many such hospitals are scattered throughout Ghana.

Again, the nucleus of Ghanaian society as a closely-knit unit is not left out of the narrative. The narrator points out that in most Ghanaian families, new mothers return to their extended families to be cared for until the child is deemed old enough to accompany his or her mother back to her marital home *(MFCD* 26). This brings to the fore the role of the extended family system in Ghana. Notwithstanding this, that system had its disadvantages; in some cases, nursing mothers returned to find their positions as wives usurped by other concubines or would-be wives. Presently, however, members of the extended family, in most cases, the mother of the new mother instead visits, stays for a while until the baby is old, and then returns to her permanent residence. Ghanaian society emphasizes the extended family system in providing communal support and social cohesion. This practice of new mothers going to their families for postpartum care is based on a deeply rooted notion of people's responsibility for childcare not being the responsibility of the nuclear family alone (Kingsley Nyarko 2013). However, the system's vulnerabilities are also acknowledged, especially regarding marital stability; for instance, some women returned to find their positions threatened. The change to a temporary modified version of this practice, where a mother or close relative visits, shows that the social structure is evolving with modernity, urbanisation and changing gender dynamics; it shows the balance between tradition and contemporary realities.

Further highlighted is the essence of customary rites among Ghanaians. Several customs mark every phase of life in Ghana. Instantaneously, mentions could be naming ceremonies, rites of passage, marriage rites, divorce rites, funeral rites, installation rites and many others. One that is given prominence in *MFCD* is the naming rites (*MFCD* 93-96). Every tribe in Ghana has a unique format for performing the naming rites: the Ga-Dangme call it Kpojiemo and the Akans call it Abadinto. The ceremony is an occasion to accept or welcome the newborn baby into society and give the new child an identity. Being a Dagomba, the narrator relates that all newborn babies are considered strangers; baby boys are called Saando and girls are called Saanpaga. The babies are kept indoors for a week, after which they are outdoored and given names, making them official community members. Eight days after the birth of the child, elderly ones, popularly called the 'Wanzam' or itinerant barbers, are called upon to circumcise the baby boy and shave off his hair. The Wanzam are also made to imprint distinguishing tribal marks on the faces of the babies. We further read that all traditional Ghanaian names "hold meaning." There are distinct names for the days a child is born, the ethnic

group the child belongs to, the first or the last in that lineage or even the circumstances of the child's birth. Ghanaian culture emphasises naming rites as can be seen; their prominence stresses the role of identity, community belonging and tradition. The fact that names are assigned differently based on birth circumstances, lineage or ethnic affiliation is evidence of the importance of names as things that are not just labels but historical markers of heritage and personality. More broadly, the belief that newborns are strangers initially and only officially outdoored and named speaks to a broader spiritual and communal understanding of personhood. Furthermore, circumstances like circumcision and the imprinting of tribal marks by elders, like the Wanzam, add to the weight given to customary rites in constructing individual and collective identity. However, some of these practices concerning bodily modifications and seclusion periods may be undergoing a reshaping due to evolving social norms and modernisation, marking a continuing negotiation between tradition and contemporary values.

Moreover, the place of religion is not left out of the narrative. The narrator explains that Ghana is a multireligious state yet mentions Christianity and Islam as the only religions in Ghana. That is quite unfortunate, as Ghana is made up of Christians, Muslims and traditional believers. One of the first religious bodies in Ghana was the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholics routinely practiced what the narrator calls "choreographed rituals" like kneeling, sitting, standing, and singing. Priests wore long robes, while Nuns wore habits and served Holy Communion in an ornate silver goblet. The entire mass was conducted in Latin, a language that, according to the narrator, no one among the congregants understood (*MFCD* 81-82). Because that mass is conducted in a language none of the congregants, other than the priest, understood speak to the language situation in Ghana. There are nearly 100 languages in Ghana, nine of which are taught in schools, yet English is officially accepted. However, data presented in *The Ghana Film Industry and the Politics of the Ghanaian Language* (Manieson 2016) indicates that the Akan language closely trails the English language. Though not declared 'official' in the Akan language, recognition of Akan will alleviate many language-related problems. Moreover, as is usually the case in colonial settings, Western education in Ghana runs in tandem with Christianity, a system Louis Althusser calls Colonial State Apparatuses. The overall effect was that most of those who obtained formal education graduated as Christians (*MFCD* 89-90). Islam, as already stated, had been a part of Ghana since the foundation of the old Ghana empire. The Mende rulers who founded ancient Ghana had

Islamic clerics and spiritualists who took part in warfare and predicted the destinies of nations during warfare. These have stayed and presently constitute the second-largest religious body in Ghana (*MFCD* 88-90). It is of the essence to add that, besides Christianity and Islam, African traditional religion constitutes a third of religious practices in Ghana. Though currently endangered, traditional beliefs and their followers form a part of the total populace in Ghana.

MFCD captures the religious diversity of Ghana, but it does so incompletely, failing to note traditional African religions that are still widely practiced in the country. The lack of mention of traditional beliefs overlooks the entire spiritual and cultural complexity of the religious life of the Ghanaian people, as many of them, including Christians and Muslims, continue to practice traditional spirituality (Acquah 2011). The analysis of Catholic rituals and the Latin in the Mass reveals how language has been intertwined with religion and colonialism. The comparison made between the use of English in Ghana and the church reveals other social equity and identity management concerns. Christianity and Western education appeared to have arrived in the country at the same time, just as Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses theory suggests that colonial institutions were deliberately imposed to shape the mental and spiritual infrastructure of the colony (Althusser 2024). These representations underscore the socially constructed nature of Ghanaian identity, where cultural practices and belief systems function as shared frameworks of meaning.

Ritual, tradition and cultural memory in Ghanaian society

In *Cultural Criticism: Toward a Definition of Professional Praxis*, William J Rouster (1996) defines cultural criticism as a pedagogical exercise involving an examination of political elements of society to tease out the unconscious ideologies held by society members to create a more enlightened society" (1). This section examines folk ideologies and beliefs that have subtly found their way into John Dramani Mahama's life narrative. Two events, the Simpah dance and the animal festival in Busunu, are given prominence in *MFCD*.

First is the Simpa dance, a musical performance among the people of Damongo, the narrator's maternal hometown. He narrates that the Simpa dance took place during the full moon period. He adds that it was a tradition used to initiate courtship. On the night of the performance, the villagers gather at an open space in the night for the dance. The young ladies, beautifully dressed up, would adorn themselves with beads, while young

boys would also put on their best appearance so that the young ladies would choose them. Young ladies dance seductively to music provided by the gathering. It was one program that the narrator and all his friends looked forward to yearly. Simpa was not only a performance for young people but also for all who were gathered. The program was always accompanied by brass band music, which was conducted by a head popularly called *conductay* (*MFCD* 76). As described, the Simpa dance is used socially and culturally in the narrator's maternal hometown of Damongo. It is not just a show but a significant ritual connected with courtship and social interaction. The location under a full moon on open ground also brings a certain level of mystique to the event, making it feel like an important part of their culture. The focus on looks, with young ladies decorating themselves with beads and young men in their best clothes, shows that courtship is a drama or play in this culture. The dance, done to the rhythm of a brass band, suggests a possible integration of local traditions with outside music, especially because of colonial and post-colonial musical influences in Ghana. The reference to *'conductay'* as the head of the brass band is quite interesting because it implies the local tweaking of Western music.

Besides Simpah, the animal festival in Busunu is also given a mention. The crux of the animal celebrations was that the gods came down from the sky on a particular night to feast on Earth once a year. The gods are immortals, not supposed to be seen by humans; hence, human and animal curfew is imposed in the early hours of the day. Every household was obliged to sacrifice one animal during the night of the god's visit. Though the people could take part in their sacrifice, they were to reserve the "juiciest" and most "desirable parts" of the slaughtered animals to the gods (*MFCD* 84-88). These two cultural narratives represent numerous festivals in Ghana (Odotei 2022). Like Simpah, there are the Dipo rites among the Ga Dangbe and Bragoro rites among the Akan. Also, like the animal festival, the people of Winneba have the Aboakyir festival and the Adei festival among the Akans. These occasions offer opportunities for people to come together and acknowledge their spirituality.

The Busunu festival is described as deeply spiritual and communal and is, therefore, rooted in the community. The idea that the gods come down from the heavens to feed on earth gives the whole event a touch of the supernatural, and at the same time, it stresses the need to sacrifice to maintain a good relationship between the gods and humans. The curfew on humans and animals demonstrates that the event is special and

the gods should not be seen to keep their mystery. The demand for every household to provide the best portions to the gods reveals the respect and exchange principles of traditional religion. This is in line with other festivals in Ghana; for example, the Aboakyir festival of the people of Winneba, where deer are hunted and offered to the gods or the Adeɛ festival of the Akans, which also entails animal sacrifices. When comparing Simpa and the animal festival with other rites like Dipo and Bragoro, the author successfully classifies these celebrations as a part of the Ghanaian cultural traditions. These festivals are not just religious celebrations; they are also platforms for people to come together and bond, identify themselves, and pass on the culture to the new generation.

Geography, space and the representation of national belonging

Embedded in this autobiography is a picaresque description of selected landscapes of Ghana. As a former student of Achimota, it is not surprising that the narrator accurately describes the geographical landscape of the Achimota forest. The thickness of the forest sheltered slaves who had escaped from their captured masters (*MFCD* 42). The slaves in the forest gave its name, Achimota, a Ga word translated as "speak no name." Though partly depleted, the Achimota forest has remained a significant landscape in the Greater Accra region.

Also, significant attention is drawn to parts of the Northern region, especially the hometown of the narrator's mother, Damongo. The narrator writes, Damongo is my mother's hometown, a respectable-sized village in the northern region of Ghana, at the edge of Mole, the country's most popular game reserve (*MFCD* 18). We read;

> Damongo was a sizable, though hardly bustling, town. It was, in fact, a district capital from as far back as the colonial times. ...Damongo was a wondrous place, drenched in the most vibrant array of colours. The sunset went from orange to violet, the sky was a pristine blue, save whatever feathery white clouds were floating through. Between the earth and sky were as many shades of green as imaginable, trees and bushes as shrubs and more trees, more bushes, or shrubs. Damongo is situated right next to Mole, which is the largest game reserve in the country. It occupies more than 4800 sq kilometers and nurtures hundreds of species of animals, from elephants to gazelles to butterflies, offering the sort of atmosphere that encourages a relationship with nature and reminds you that you are part of a larger cycle of creatures and events. (54-55)

He continues: Just about a kilometer from the town is Damongo Scarp Forest Reserve, home to over a hundred different species of birds *(MFCD* 58). The above portrays significant geographical landscapes in the nation. The narrator further reveals the seasonal dynamics in the northern region of Ghana: the rainy season and the dry season. The rainy season spans May to October, whereas the dry season begins in November and stretches through April (*MFCD* 67). The narrator gives a detailed account of how the people of Damongo and the surrounding regions interact with the different ecosystems and describes the region's diverse ecosystems. The mention of Mole National Park and the Damongo Scarp Forest Reserve points to the conservation role in Ghana, which has diverse wildlife and natural resources. The region's rainy and dry seasons are the periodicities of life in northern Ghana, showing the region's challenges and rhythms and how they influence agricultural practices and day-to-day activities. These details suggest that the region's environment is a primary factor in determining cultural identity and livelihood and that there is a strong connection to the land and its seasons.

Again, besides introducing the geography of the setting, the narrator sheds light on the tourist potential within the enclave. First is the Larabanga mosque, believed to be the oldest mosque in West Africa and it has a rich history attached to it. It is worth noting that the Larabanga mosques appear on almost all tourist bills in Ghana. Just like the omission of traditional beliefs in religious discussions in Ghana, any discussion on tourism in the Northern region cannot be complete without duly acknowledging the Larabanga mosque. Through narrative description, space becomes a medium through which belonging, memory and national identity are constructed.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the representation of Ghana in the autobiography of H. E. John Dramani Mahama. The analysis has shown that *My First Coup d'etat* not only narrates the personal histories of the author and his father, but also offers a sustained account of Ghana's political, social, cultural and geographical evolution from precolonial times to the present. Social developments and historical experiences that shape the fabric of Ghanaian society are brought to the fore. Culturally, the narrative represents Ghanaians as a people who revere customary practices and acknowledge spiritual forces, while geographically it highlights the country's landscapes and tourism potential,

particularly in the northern regions. Politically, *MFCD* functions as a condensed historical narrative, tracing Ghana's trajectory from the era of Askia Dawud through colonialism, military rule and the contemporary democratic period. Mahama's account provides historical antecedents for present and future developments, revealing a cautious outlook shaped by the nation's political instability between 1966 and 1981 and an ambivalent optimism about Ghana's democratic future.

The study further demonstrates that Mahama's autobiography serves as a bridge between Ghana's complex past and its present, illuminating the socio-political turbulence of the postcolonial period and its lasting consequences for national development. The emphasis on customary traditions, spiritual beliefs, and geography underscores the importance of cultural and spiritual foundations in understanding Ghanaian values and identity. Mahama's attention to the heritage and tourism potential of northern Ghana also suggests that cultural preservation is closely tied to economic development. Politically, the narrative reflects Ghana's ongoing effort to balance democratic governance with the legacy of military intervention, a tension that has shaped both national consciousness and leadership practice in the post-coup era.

While *My First Coup d'etat* offers a rich and layered account of Ghana's political and cultural history, it is important to recognise the inherent limitations of autobiographical narratives. As a personal and retrospective form of writing, autobiography is shaped by memory, selective emphasis and the author's positionality within historical and political processes. Mahama's narrative, therefore, does not present a definitive or exhaustive account of Ghanaian history but rather a particular perspective through which national experiences are interpreted and given meaning. Future research might extend this study by comparing political autobiographies across different African contexts, incorporating oral histories, archival materials or examining how readers engage with such narratives as sources of national memory. Such approaches would further illuminate the role of political life writing in shaping postcolonial identities and historical consciousness.

This article contributes to African Studies by demonstrating how political autobiography can function as a national narrative that archives political history, socio-cultural values, and spatial identity, thereby expanding critical approaches to postcolonial African life writing beyond personal memoir and political commentary. In this sense, *My First Coup d'etat* emerges as a significant text in the construction of Ghanaian national identity, offering both a reflective and cautionary account of the country's political evolution while

serving as a guide for future generations committed to preserving cultural heritage and sustaining democratic stability.

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