The Roles of Print and Non-Print Media and Promotional Associations in the Development of Ghanaian Written Literature

The study of individual texts may determine the skills of writers and provide insight into cultures. However, finished texts hardly yield any information about their gestation. By studying a literary text in relation to the conditions under which it was produced, readers increase their understanding of the creative process leading to the finished work. This statement holds true, even more, for the study of a body of works by diverse hands, a national or regional literature. Some of these major steps in tracing the growth of a national literature are the development of writing and publishing, the growth and expansion of education, favourable political and economic conditions, and organizations for artists.

In this study I will review the roles of literary and extra-literary factors in the development of Ghanaian written literature. It would seem that writing is entirely an individual act, manifesting achievement at the personal level. But, in fact, it takes a whole community to produce a writer. In celebrating the creativity of Fiawoo, Armah, Sutherland and Aidoo, we can at least give recognition to the nurseries that nurtured these talents. By studying its preparatory grounds, we can also show the variety and direction of contemporary Ghanaian literature. This approach will explain, for example, the dominance of religious works during the colonial era and the trend toward literary writing and the choice of secular subjects since independence.

An overview of the literary history of Ghana shows that the earliest writings on Ghana or related to the area were travel accounts by European traders and adventurers, and an occasional creative work such as Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688) which presented the black person as a ‘noble savage.’ However, by the end of the eighteenth century, much of Ghanaian writing was by liberated Ghanaian slaves, such as Sancho and Cugoano, and others, Amo, whose works came out of the context of anti-slavery campaigns and the commitment to establish the victim’s perspective on history.

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From a historical point of view, writing about Ghana from within Ghana began in the nineteenth century under the auspices of religious bodies and colonial officials, and following the wake of anti-colonial movements. More than any other group, the Christian missions provided the basis and impetus for Ghanaian literature. The Methodists, for instance, established a press at Cape Coast by 1851 and granted access to the Basel mission, until, in 1910, that mission acquired its own press. Very often these facilities were centralized, with the printing and distribution being organized from within the same establishment. They published mostly Bible translations and morally edifying works in indigenous languages; in more recent times they have published secular writing.

The missions also launched a number of periodicals which carried reports about Christian living and hygiene, and occasional translations of short stories from European languages. Examples are the Protestant Bremen mission’s Nutifafa na mi,1 the Catholic missions’s Mia Xolo,2 The Gold Coast Catholic Voice,3 and the Basel group’s The Christian People – which became The Christian Messenger in the 1950s and was printed in English, Twi, Ewe, and Ga editions. With their major involvement in developing writing, training readers and potential writers, and providing facilities for the production of books and establishing magazines, the Christian missions have made a lasting contribution to Ghanaian literature.

The colonial administration’s direct connection with the book industry came through such ventures as government presses and the Vernacular Literature Bureau (VLB). Individuals such as the Rev. W.T. Balme helped to produce a series of primers which sold over a quarter of a million copies across West Africa. The importance of this link can be appreciated when, for instance, we examine the history of Ghana Publishing Corporation (GPC), one of the major publishers of modern Ghanaian literature. The colonial administration imported a printing machine in 1874 for producing official documents. It was installed at Cape Coast but was moved to Christianborg Castle, Accra, a year later. The printing department increased in size and gained respect for quality products. Later, it was moved to new premises and named Victoriaborg Press, which became one of the printing departments of GPC.

The VLB was set up under the colonial government and reorganized as the Bureau of Ghana Languages (BGL) in 1951 under Nkrumah’s transitional administration to provide reading materials in local languages for mass-literacy programmes and adult education. During its early stages, BGL published mostly news-

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3 Founded 1926.