

# Flipping Prisms: Feminist Creative Synergy Amps Up in Accra

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Progressively over the last decade, feminist creative organising in Accra has taken shape through collectives and projects working to amplify visibility and provide affirming space for women and women's stories in public spheres. This rise in visibility and inclusive spaces has taken place through a myriad of cultural events, occurring throughout the city, that are led by women practitioners – independent and community writers, digital activists, academics, media journalists, artists and art programmers. This phenomenon is a departure from traditional organisers of culture, that is, national ministries, local councils, NGOs, foreign embassies and religious institutions.

As a womanist researcher, writer, teacher and multimedia producer born and raised in the United States, I have actively participated in multiple cultural spaces within Accra for the last nine years. As cofounder of ACCRA [dot] ALT, an independent arts network that provides space for African artists to showcase unconventional works and make connections and projects with artists across the continent and diaspora, increasing visibility and storytelling initiatives by women practitioners is principal to our mission. This impetus for us, and for many other cultural practitioners, arose out of a persistent battle for accurate information and sincere knowledge-sharing practices.

Culture is a longstanding battlefield. As it stands, African lives are often turned into narratives by non-African people from places outside of the continent, often by those who speak from privileged and prejudiced positions. Even within Accra, those with capital are capturing international attention as the makers of culture, and they are distorting the narrative and excluding those who have devoted their lives to building cultural spaces of inclusion.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, cultural and religious conservatism around women's public and creative expression is widespread across the country, being expressed in a continuing lack of mobility and flexibility for many women practitioners when carrying out their work, relative to men practitioners. There is also a persistent need for increased capacity-building and resource mobilisation

to sustain the work of women cultural workers. When it comes to women collaborating creatively, these are some of the central challenges feminists are facing head-on in Accra.

In response to this, more and more African artists, and women practitioners, in particular, are actively working to narrativise their own lives with fullness, integrity and freedom of being. Accra's feminist creative activism has also been propelled by resistance to the cultural and religious conservatism that women practitioners face. The momentum of creative energy has been building in gradual and exciting ways with multiple women in key positions of leadership. This is happening on small, localised scales throughout the city, often in silos. Through better connectivity of city and countrywide creative spaces, particularly through digital media and a sharing economy, a network of synergy can be expanded that has the capacity to help amplify the visibility of women and women's stories in the country. It is particularly through feminist cultural expressions that we see this concept activated.<sup>2</sup>

This essay will briefly explore a short history of feminist cultural production within Accra; situate some of the challenges facing women creatives and artists in the current context; and, finally, point to some possible strategies of solidarity that can amplify inclusive spaces where African women innovate cultures of possibility, joy and pleasure openly and publicly.

## **Speak Their Names: Tracing the Mark of Cultural Feminist Production in Accra**

Contemporary creative feminist practices in Ghana cannot be isolated from the work of women cultural producers from the 1950s onward. At that time, there was a groundswell of continental and national activism rooted in anti-colonial and imperial resistance to the West. This proceeded until Dr Kwame Nkrumah's presidential administration in 1957, and thereafter, such activism included the contributions of many women human rights defenders (Azikiwe, 2016).<sup>3</sup> This period embodied a cultural renaissance for the country, with the continent and diaspora looking to Ghana as a model of pan-African solidarity, organisation and creative expression. Artist and writer Maya Angelou, activist and writer Shirley Graham DuBois and photographer and activist Alice Windom (who captured images of Malcolm X's trip to Ghana in 1964) lived in the country for many years. Ghanaian feminists such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland were also producing radical writings and experimental

theatre about the intimate complexities of Ghanaian women's lives during the 1960s and 1970s.

Ghana has always had a very rich tradition of visual art and mixed-media arts. Women have been central to these practices, both as muses as well as unnamed generators of creative inspiration, particularly in the rural communities of northern Ghana. Between the 1960s and 1990s, the painting and sculpture department of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) produced a number of women artists who would often collaborate with one another. The artists included Charlotte Hagan (textile artist), Peace Enyonam Akosua Baku (freelance artist), Eva Juliet Campbell (painter), Olivia Aku Glime (textile artist), Vesta Adu-Gyamfi (ceramicist), Dorothy Asukonfu Abaitey (painter and textile artist), Esther Victoria Ulzen-Appiah (textile artist), Joyce Stuber (graphic artist), Dorothy Amenuke (sculptor) and Nana Afia Opoku-Asare (ceramic and textile artist) (Asante, 2009: 45).

With successive military regimes, the food and fuel crisis, and the structural adjustment programmes which began in 1979 and lasted until the mid-1990s, support for the culture industry was not sustained in the way it had been during President Kwame Nkrumah's administration (1957-1966). During the 1980s and 1990s, as funding evaporated from the state, many creative artists left the country, and the creative arts came to be understood only in terms of profit: tourism or entertainment (Neely, 2010). Beginning in the late 1990s, the private sector gave sponsorships often to media houses and event promoters with large-scale audiences, making huge profits.<sup>4</sup> Those creatives and artists who were invested in creating social change through their work were left without financial support, relying on family or communal support. In the absence of family support, it has since become a regular practice for many creatives to approach foreign embassies for grants.<sup>5</sup> Because Ghana lacks a viable infrastructure to support the cultural and arts industries, practitioners tend to work in silos.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these obstacles, women cultural workers have been working in different small-scale contexts at varying times and with varying levels of frequency. This is particularly true of the last decade where much work has been done in creating and publicly expressing different perspectives and new ideas about women's creativity, sexuality, choice and bodily rights. These expressions are also characterised by a fierce feminine solidarity and

a sharing economy. For example, in January 2017, the actress, writer and producer Akosua Hanson and theatre founders, Elisabeth Efua Sutherland and Emelia Asiedu, of the Accra Theatre Workshop, collaborated in launching Hanson's new feminist theatre group, Drama Queens. In February, Hanson joined blogger and activist Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah for The Love Fest event, also featuring Jessica Horn (of The Love Mic), in an evening of readings and poetry to "claim our rights to sexual pleasure, the full recognition of our selves outside of heteronormative, patriarchal restrictions in our society. We also shared how we came to discover what 'good sex' is".<sup>7</sup> Collaborative events such as these have enabled an increase in the visibility of women's creative expressions and an unveiling of a multiplicity of women's stories within public space.<sup>8</sup> These feminist readings and performances create opportunities for deep truth-telling about the consequences of rape, sexual abuse, violence against women, depression and anxiety, sex and sexuality, body shaming and gender conformity.

Feminists like Nana Darkoa have been pioneers in writing and digital media activism, shifting thinking about feminism, gender, sex, sexuality and violence against women, through her blogging site *Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women*, co-founded with blogger Abena Gyekye. On the genesis of *Adventures*, Nana Darkoa shares: "There are very few safe spaces where African women can discuss, interrogate and learn about their own sexuality. The world in which we currently live tries to control women by circumscribing our sexuality, on one hand, and commercialising our sexuality on the other. Yet there are no spaces for women to learn about their own bodies, and how to derive sexual pleasure for themselves".<sup>9</sup> Nana Darkoa also founded "Fab Fem", a gathering for feminists to meet regularly and have frank and non-judgemental conversations about their life experiences. Similarly, feminist writers such as Nana Nyarko Boateng, Kuukua Dzigbordi Yomekpe, Rita Nketiah and Famia Nkansa as well as Poetra Asantewaa (poet and designer) and Crystal Tetteh (poet, musician and performance artist) produce work along these veins of rerouting the historical and bodily memories of women towards joy, passion, pleasure and creativity.

Indeed, feminist voices are active on digital platforms, using the medium to challenge harmful and limited representations of women and to resound the complex and nuanced narratives of other women, particularly pushing back on social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook. Websites such

as *Asaase Yaa Mma*, with the tagline “Modernising Indigenous Feminism”, disrupt notions of traditional culture and history by foregrounding women’s experiences, priorities, desires and capacities.<sup>10</sup> The blog’s creator Obaa Boni and editor BxShola theorise the specificity of Ghanaian feminism by suggesting:

Ghanaian feminism (“Ghaminism”) is a digital movement aimed at liberating Ghanaians from constricting gender oppression as part of a greater global movement for equity... Ghaminism [is] for everyone, with an emphasis on women, gender-non-binary, androgynous, and transgender persons. Ghaminism, like the greater global feminism, will also make room for men. Ensuring that it attacks the burden that patriarchy imposes on all persons. (Boni and BxShola, n.d.)

This national feminism is aligned with global feminist movements, pursuing unity through the inclusion of women and other marginalised groups to address common structures of inequality and oppression. Another notable space is Nana Ama Agyeman’s *Unfiltered* podcast, where this unapologetically feminist radio presenter speaks her mind on a range of issues. She is also a presenter on The Breakfast Show of a leading radio station. Together, these digital platforms are expanding concepts around pleasure, bodily rights, choice, consent, gender and sexuality, and violence against women.<sup>11</sup>

Visual artists such as Maku Azu, Fatric Bewong, Zohra Opoku, Adjo Kisser, Marigold Akuffo-Addo, Yvette Nsiah and Kenturah Davis, and digital artists Sena Ahadji, Awo Tsegah and Nyahan Tachie-Menson are realising self-reflective works, centring the stories of African women and transgressing gender assumptions through various forms of mixed media, humour, surprise, erotic play and environmental design.<sup>12</sup> Filmmaker Anita Anofu has documented Ghana’s heyday film industry (1950s-1970s) over a number of years and is working to preserve and restore the country’s historical archives. Nana Oforiatta Ayim’s work as founder of ANO Institute of Contemporary Arts aims to correct erasures by recentring the narratives of historic women culture-producers. These include Ghana’s first woman photographer, Felicia Abban, who at one point was President Nkrumah’s official photographer.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of capacity building and mentorship for women artists and cultural producers, Kinna Likimani of Mbassem Foundation has been training feminist writers, alongside The Writers Project, led by women writers such as Mamle Kabu. Bibie Brew, the musician who took Paris by storm, moved

back to Ghana ten years ago to start the New Morning Cafe, a theatre and music performance company. The company mentors young artists, particularly women, in intensive weekly classes in performance etiquette, vocal coaching, script development, costume and set design. The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF), headquartered in Accra, has also partnered with Mbassem Foundation and Golden Baobab, an NGO founded by Deborah Ahenkorah and devoted to the promotion of African children's literature, to host classes in fiction writing and forums for writing development. Faustina Nyaama Nsoh, a painter and textile artist from Northern Ghana, who was trained by her grandmother, is now keeping this tradition alive by training other women through the Sirigu Women Organisation for Pottery and Art (SWOPA). Music and digital artist KEYZUZ provides in-depth training sessions to women musicians through her BeatPhreaks programme.

There are also a number of women in leadership positions in arts management at institutions in Accra that provide crucial space for artists and creatives – particularly women practitioners – to carry out workshop projects, receive generous readings and showcase their work to the public. Adwoa Amoah, co-director of the Foundation for Contemporary Art Ghana (FCA), Odile Tevie, director of Nubuke Foundation, Akwele Suma-Glory, director of the Women's Arts Institute Africa (WAI-Africa), Gifty Anti (producer and presenter of GTV's *StandPoint* and founder, Girls in Need Foundation) and Mardey Ohui Ofoe, executive director of the Foundation for Female Photojournalists are five examples of women-led institutions which have demonstrated capacity to support the work of women artists and cultural workers through mentorship, advocacy and financial investment. Women's organising in this context is also concerned with providing spaces of transparency, public awareness and accountability, platforms of visibility for creative expression and critical analysis between and about women. This contributes to the forward growth of communities through conversations on the intersections of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, class and colonisation, identity and representation, history and culture.<sup>14</sup> This visibility in physical event spaces and through digital media provides different examples of women's creative expression that are shifting perceptions and attitudes.

Creative entrepreneurs Dedo Azu (Tea Baa), Franka Andoh (Cuppa Cappuccino) and Stefania Manfreda (Elle Lokko) have multi-functional venues within Accra, which host different cultural events such as book readings, swaps

and discussions; jewellery-making sessions; live poetry, DJ and music lounges; and fashion design and body care boutiques featuring women artisans. Since space is such a critical issue for the visibility of creative women's organising, these venues provide opportunities for women to express themselves, share their work, unwind and connect with others, and make a living from their craft. There are also women practitioners who are committed to women's self-care and developing systems of sustainability and wells of creative action for women living and working in Ghana. Wellness experts in yoga, meditation and environmentalism work in this way, such as Yvette Tetteh, Olivia Asiedu-Ntow and Efua Uhuru (yoga, reiki and sexual health practitioner). Another such practitioner is Dr Sharita, a naturopath who has devoted her life to making communities healthier, particularly with the establishment of the annual African Culture and Wellness Festival.

Over the last seven years, ACCRA [dot] ALT has featured more than fifty women artists and cultural producers from Ghana and beyond, many of whom identify as feminist. Josephine Kuuire debuted a digital art project last March of distorted self-portraits interrogating her internal life, social relationships, and the struggle to resist gender-conforming expectations of religion and tradition. Musician, visual artist and designer Jojo Abot created an exhibition called Na Ma Vo (Let Me Be Free) that looked at the power of the goddess within, spiritual connection and sister synergy as a frequency to restore balance to the world. Ayesha Haruna Attah, with writer Ayi Kwei Armah, led a conversation about translating a set of Kimet texts and their project of creating a new system of alternative African languages built on indigenous codes and symbols. Selassie Djameh, a feminist filmmaker, screened two films, one depicting the fluctuating relationship between sisters and another celebrating her menstrual cycle. Awuor N'yango shared the "Library of Silence", an exhibition of audiovisual imagery that looks at filling the gaps in global knowledge systems by reconfiguring history into herstory (women's cultures of experience). Exchange with African women artists and cultural producers from other countries is also important for growth, and we have hosted Priscilla Azaglo (Ghana/USA), Lhola Amira (South Africa), Afua Taylor (USA), Lindiwe Matshikiza (South Africa), Noluthando Lobese (South Africa), Dean Hutton (South Africa), Alberta Whittle (South Africa), Tawiah (Ghana/UK), Welela Kindred (France), Yinka Esi Graves (Ghana/Spain), Malaika Aminata (USA), Yaba Blay (Ghana/USA),

Lisa Harris (USA), Autumn Knight (USA), Lyric L (Nigeria/UK), Kampire Bahana (Uganda), Darlene Komukama (Uganda), Shanett Dean (USA), Maimouna Jallow (Kenya), Akwaeke Emezi (Nigeria/Trinidad), Rachel Perkins (Australia) and Paula Akugizibwe (Rwanda), among many others, to share their work and creative process.<sup>15</sup>

## **Beads of Synergy: Opening Spaces Up**

The sisters were sprawled about, some spread out on colorful straw mats and throw pillows, others lounging in chairs. The vibe was easy, liquid and electric. Here gathered women musicians, digital media specialists, graphic designers and illustrators, theatre artists, sports and wellness experts, art journalists, documentarians and photographers. Thirty African women creatives from six countries, in Accra for a convening on how to use arts, cultural production and sports as tools for social change and transformative justice. The three-day forum was sponsored by AWDF.

On the first day of the convening, we began with a fun exercise: choosing beads and baubles and stringing together each chosen one into a piece of jewellery – a necklace, earrings, a ring or bracelet. Many of us wore the jewellery throughout our time together. It reminded me that we are building a new universe, one bead at a time. We strung those beads to make a form where we can exist in freedom, peace and security. We linked our forms together into this constellation of being that binds us. The wire holding the beads together is our electricity, our inclusion, our synergy of connection.

I realised that this was the first time I had been together with other women creatives to purposefully discuss linking our individual work into a cohesive transformer to challenge patriarchal injustice and assert sincere narratives about African women's lives. We had worked on this, yes, on a project basis – but not as a constellation of persistent synergy. We left with a plan to help document the work of African women creatives, to boost our practices of citations and to develop databases that could be shared, listing practitioners across various sectors for easier networking and connection. We are able to support each other – individually and collectively – if we are aware of each other's initiatives, challenges, needs and visions. We increase our impact through greater outreach; we can share resources better through an inclusive and integrated network that is visible and can be sincerely felt. By building strategy and increasing access to an evolving and creative African feminist

ecosystem, we also increase visibility. Citations build visibility. Visibility is necessary in the making of history.

In December 2016, the AWDF launched the Young Feminists Gathering (YFG), a monthly meet-up for women between the ages of 18 and 35 who live or work in, or are visiting Ghana. The group is a space of solidarity, creativity and knowledge-sharing engineered by the young staff members at AWDF to stimulate alignment with other women in the region. YFG is the place where young women can gather together to engage women's rights with resource experts, practice African feminism and activate creative projects. As a result of the online promotion of this space, sisters from Zimbabwe and the DRC have contacted the group about sharing strategy, models, information and other resources so that the gathering can be replicated in these countries.

There is an excitement rippling through Accra right now. You can feel it in the air. More and more cultural spots are opening up in the city – often innovated by artists and creatives who are visioning a different kind of city where new possibilities can emerge. By building new prisms of solidarity, respect, acknowledgement, visibility and love, the challenges that feminist creatives and artists experience can shift. By connecting localised creative spaces, feminists can amplify routes towards reflection, planning, retooling, and plugging forward. It is because of this sizzling energy and artists coming together to make these events happen that new women are being propelled to join the fold.

## Endnotes

- 1 Also at issue are Western embassies that dominate the cultural landscape and own these narratives in some way. However, they also provide space, exposure, and sometimes funding for women creatives to host their work. This can be a problematic encounter.
- 2 For the purposes of this paper, “feminism” is defined as the consciousness and practices among African women that enable respect, recognition and solidarity within cultural and creative spaces. This essay interrogates women's organising as sites and practices of cultural production within the realm of creative artistic expression, particularly writing, poetry, music, visual art, photography and film, digital media arts and the performing arts.
- 3 In 1960, the Conference of the Women of Africa and African Descent (CWAAD) led to the consolidation of the Convention People's Party (CPP), Ghana Women's League and the National Federation of Ghana Women into a centralised women's movement. Journalist Mabel Ellen Dove Danquah was quite active in writing

- about Ghana's independence, pan-African solidarity and women's contributions to this development.
- 4 Large-scale businesses such as breweries and alcohol companies, telecommunication firms and banks regularly sponsor cultural events. Increasingly now, Christian churches are also sponsoring once-secular events.
  - 5 The foreign embassies that actively support the cultural sector in Accra include Alliance Française, Institut Français, Goethe-Institut and the Netherlands Embassy.
  - 6 There is a national cultural policy but it is not enforced, which demonstrates a massive lack of understanding of how culture can shift the development of the country.
  - 7 Interview with Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, Accra, 18 February 2017.
  - 8 Musicians Jojo Abot, Meche Korreect, Azizaa, Suga and Wiyaala have individually created powerful music that resists easy categorisation and relies on historical concepts of women as mystics, warriors, visionaries and repositories of knowledge and healing.
  - 9 Interview with Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, Accra, 18 February 2017.
  - 10 See Assase Yaa Mma: Modernized Indigenous Feminism, <https://ghanafeminism.com>.
  - 11 Other digital media platforms by Ghanaian feminists include [www.nyamewaa.com](http://www.nyamewaa.com), @SorayaSpeaks and @KinnaReads (Twitter) and <https://mindofmalaka.com>. Girls Girls Accra is a space – online and physical – devoted to networking for women in the creative and art industries.
  - 12 *Presence in Absence* is a project by Adjo Kisser in collaboration with FCA Ghana to create a directory of women artists living and working in Ghana, covering their CVs, biographical data, artist statements and portfolios. The project began by documenting the work of Zohra Opoku, Adwoa Amoah, Betty Acquah, Patric Bewong and Dorothy Amenuke.
  - 13 ANO shares space in the same compound with Stefania Manfreda's mixed design, performance space and body-care boutique, Elle Lokko. This year, ANO launches an award for Ghanaian women artists to receive professional mentorship training from an established black woman artist and residency opportunities with international museums and galleries ([www.anoghana.org](http://www.anoghana.org)).
  - 14 There are a number of women practitioners documenting and archiving cultural spaces in Accra, the country and continent. Cultural experts in architecture, urban planning, anthropology, community development and art journalism include Mae-ling Lokko, Namata Serumaga-Musisi, Latifah Idriss, Victoria Okoye, Jacqueline Nsiah, Shari Ankomah-Graham, Chanelle Frazier, Rita Isionam Garglo and Billie McTernan.
  - 15 We have been able to provide space for public processing of what it means to be an African woman today and discuss issues of migration, memory, transatlantic enslaved trade, hair and beauty politics, sisterhood, autonomy, queer identity, mental health, language and translation, bodily rights, metaphysicality and pan-Africanism.

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