REFLECTIONS ON GHANA'S FILM HERITAGE: AN EXCLUSIVE CONVERSATION WITH ERNEST KOFI ABBEYQUAYE

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Introduction

This contribution features an exclusive, in-depth, conversation with Ernest Kofi Abbeyquaye, a pioneering figure in cinema and theater of Ghana. It marks the beginning of a series of four conversations with key figures and contemporaries of Abbeyquaye, aimed at unearthing richer insights and nuances of Ghana's indigenous film history, beyond what is typically presented in scholarly articles and books. The goal is to enhance understanding of African cinema, with a particular focus on Ghanaian filmmaking. The scope of this first conversation covers Abbeyquaye's personal experiences, reflections on major projects, and his perspectives on the arts in social transformation, thus offering a comprehensive view of his influence and legacy within the broader landscape of African cultural industries. This work contributes to a deeper appreciation of the artistic and cultural directions shaping contemporary African film, highlighting Abbeyquaye's significant contributions to the evolution of Ghanaian and African performing arts, at large.

This contribution begins with a biographical overview, highlighting key milestones in his career, followed by a section on methodological approach. The subsequent sections present a combination of a transcribed interview and thematic narration, and conclusion. This systematic structure aims to provide a well-rounded understanding of Abbeyquaye's contributions, influence and enduring legacy in the arts.

Biographical Background

As a trailblazer in both acting and directing, Ernest Kofi Abbeyquaye has played a vital role in shaping the narrative styles and thematic concerns that resonate within Ghanaian cultural productions. He began his career in 1960 as a student in the inaugural class of the Ghana Drama Studio. He graduated from the School of Performing Arts at University of Ghana, Legon, with a major in Drama and Theatre Arts and further pursued postgraduate film directing studies at the renowned National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield, United Kingdom. Upon returning to Ghana, he worked at the Ghana Films Industry Corporation (GFIC) and the National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI), now the Institute of Film and Television (IFT), University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC) in Accra. Abbeyquaye's influence extends beyond national borders, as

his involvement in regional and international festivals has helped elevate African cinema and theater on the global stage, fostering cross-cultural dialogues and collaborations. Throughout his career, Abbeyquaye has filmed extensively within Ghana and internationally, including projects in the US, UK, Israel, and across Africa. His films range from *A Mother's Revenge* (1994), *The Other Side of the Rich* (1992), *Confessions* (1993) to *Chronicles of Odumkrom: The Headmaster* (2015), a collaborative effort with his sons, Kojo Abbeyquaye and Tetteh Abbeyquaye, to produce films domestically in Ghana. *Chronicles of Odumkrom* was produced under his film company, Trumpet Africa Productions, LLC (www.trumpetafrica.com), a company dedicated to creating quality feature films and documentaries that celebrate and promote African culture through film, music, and other performing arts. Upcoming projects include the documentary *Fancy Dress* and a feature film titled *Wedding Blues*. Ernest is committed to continuing his work in film and enjoys mentoring younger artists and filmmakers (*Press Kit*, "Chronicles of Odumkrom: The Headmaster").

Methodology

At the request of Ernest Abbeyquaye, the conversation was held at his residence in Awutu Breku, a town located 63 kilometres from Accra in the Central Region of Ghana, on 11 February 2024. He had recently moved from Accra to his hometown to be closer to his community, as he explained, "to be nearer to his people while he prepares for, and awaits, his creator's call to the next world." I made thorough preparations for this trip, bringing along a high-definition video camera (Black Magic 4K) and various accessories to capture multiple angles, as well as advanced audio recording equipment, including

microphones and an audio mixer, to ensure high-quality sound (Hennessy 2020; Cohen 2016). The goal is for this conversation to serve as the foundation for a comprehensive documentary film project that explores the Ghanaian film industry, with a particular focus on the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) through the perspective of Abbeyquaye's artistic journey and creative philosophy.

The study employed a semi-structured interview approach, which offered a flexible yet guided framework for exploring Abbeyquaye's perspectives (Pink 2013; Turner 2010). This format encouraged open-ended responses, allowing him to elaborate on his experiences and insights, while ensuring that essential topics were consistently covered throughout the conversation (Creswell 2014). The conversation was held in person, in his living room, a setting deliberately chosen to create a comfortable and private environment that would foster openness and facilitate in-depth data collection. The session lasted approximately three hours, providing ample opportunity for a thorough conversation without causing fatigue to the octogenarian.

Ethical considerations were of utmost importance throughout the process. Before the conversation, I provided Abbeyquaye with a thorough briefing on the purpose of the conversation and obtained his informed consent. He was notified of his voluntary participation and his right to withdraw at any point without facing any penalties. Additionally, I assured him that the data collected would be used exclusively for academic purposes (Creswell 2014).

During my conversation with Abbeyquaye, we explored the difficulties of balancing multiple roles as a director, producer, and writer, as well as his creative process. The transcripts of our recordings were first generated verbatim to maintain accuracy. The conversation is organized thematically under the following sub-headings: Abbeyquaye's Early Years in the Ghanaian Film Industry; Establishment, Early Activities and Contributions of GFIC; Post-Independence Growth and Challenges; Structural Organization and Internal Dynamics; Inception of Local Film Industry; Decline and Transformation; Developmental Milestones and Film Output; and Advice to Ghanaian Filmmakers and Current Project. Below is our conversation, in which he reflects on his experiences and shares insights about his projects.

Interview Transcript and Thematic Narrative

***Francis Gbormittah (FG)**:* Good afternoon, Mr. Abbeyquaye. It's an honour for joining you today.

Ernest Abbeyquaye (EA): Good afternoon, and thank you for coming.

Abbeyquaye's Early Years in the Ghanaian Film Industry

***FG**:* To start, could you tell me what initially drew you to the world of acting and filmmaking in the Ghanaian film industry?

EA: Well, my journey into acting began quite simply in the late 1970s. I've always had a passion for storytelling and performance. Growing up, I was captivated by the local theatre scene, which was very vibrant at the time. As a young man, I participated in school plays and community theatre, and that passion eventually led me to pursue formal training. Regarding the Ghanaian film industry, I was inspired by the emerging film scene at the time and decided to pursue theatre and then transitioned into film. When the opportunity arose to work in the budding film industry in Ghana, I seized it. Back then, it was about bringing our stories to life and sharing our culture with a wider audience. It's been a rewarding experience, watching the industry grow over the years.

***FG**:* That's fascinating and inspiring! Speaking of the early days, how would you describe the Ghanaian film industry during its formative years? What were some of the key challenges and opportunities you encountered?

EA: In the early days, the industry was quite fragile. We lacked proper infrastructure, funding was scarce, and the technology was quite basic, and we received minimal support from the government. Most of our films were shot on traditional formats, and distribution channels were limited. Despite these hurdles, there was immense creativity, resilience and passion among filmmakers, which kept the industry alive and gradually helped it develop. We saw opportunities in our rich stories, local languages, and cultural themes that audience could identify with both locally and internationally. The challenge was to get the industry recognised and to develop sustainable production practices. But these obstacles motivated us to innovate and work harder.

FG: You mentioned the importance of storytelling and cultural themes. Can you share with me how GFIC influenced the development of Ghanaian cinema during your early career?

EA: Absolutely. My association with Gold Coast Film Unit/GFIC began in 1961, when I was an actor with the Ghana Drama Studio. At the time, GFIC was actively seeking partnerships with artistic institutions, and they worked closely with the School of Performing Arts. GFIC recruited actors and trainees from there. That's how I started working with GFIC. During our training, we spent every long vacation, about three months, at GFIC, even before our official employment. By the time I became a full-time employee, I was already familiar with the GFIC's history and the people involved. Working with GFIC was a pivotal part of my career. It was the first formal institution dedicated to film production in Ghana. They provided some of the first formal platforms such as training and equipment for filmmakers in Ghana, like myself, to produce and showcase our work. It was a mixed experience, there were limitations, but also opportunities to learn and grow. The support from GFIC helped us to transpose indigenous folktales onto the screen, produce some of our

early films and set the foundation for future filmmakers. Many of us owe a lot to the infrastructure and support they offered during those formative years.

Establishment, Early Activities and Contributions of GFIC

FG: The history of the GFIC has been only briefly documented. What informed its establishment?

EA: GFIC, originally known as the Gold Coast Film Unit, was established in the early 1950s against the backdrop of Ghana's push towards independence. It all began during the colonial era with the British, who introduced film to their colonies. The Gold Coast (now Ghana) was among the first to experience this. The primary aim of the British was to use film as a means of communication to showcase the activities of the monarchy and demonstrate their supposed concern for the well-being of the people in the colonies. Essentially, they wanted to keep the colonies informed about the British rulers by distributing content from the British Council. This practice extended across various parts of West Africa under British colonial rule. I grew up watching news broadcasts, particularly from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which were shown in cinema houses before 1948. These cinemas were mostly privately owned. Although I'm not sure of the exact arrangement, the screenings typically began with short comedies or newsreels before the main film.

FG*:* What happened afterwards? Since the Gold Coast Film Unit "created" the GFIC, could you share its establishment history and work with me?

EA: As time went on, we learned that the British decided to train individuals in their colonies to make films. This decision followed a debate in the British Parliament, which eventually concluded that the time was right to begin such efforts. The next question was where to establish the initiative, and they ultimately chose the Gold Coast, viewing it as one of their prized colonies. To lead the project, they brought in Sean Graham, a film director and writer, who was tasked with overseeing the training process. Sean insisted on recruiting students from secondary schools. He began at Achimota School, where he selected six individuals, three Ghanaians and three Nigerians, with the hope that the Nigerians would return home and share their knowledge. I came to know the three Ghanaians quite well: Sam Aryeetey, R.O. Fenuku, and Bob Okanta.[1] These individuals later joined the Ministry of Information, where they helped establish the Photography Unit. The film training programme was officially set up under the name Gold Coast Film Unit, and it lasted for six months before production began. The training emphasised practical skills like editing and camerawork. Sean Graham worked closely with those he trained in the Gold Coast. Sam Aryeetey specialised in editing, while R.O. Fenuku focused on camerawork, forming the core of the

production team at the time. They produced a number of educational films designed to promote government initiatives, many of which are now considered classics in the history of Ghanaian cinema. This period marked Ghana's earliest formal engagement with filmmaking. Sean Graham also served as the scriptwriter for many of the educational films produced by the Unit. His mandate was clear: to create films and documentaries that would contribute to national development. Sean Graham was not originally permitted to make feature films. However, he succeeded in creating short films and stories that were relatable and easily understood by the Ghanaian audience. By 1952, he developed an interest in feature filmmaking, aiming to expand his short films into longer narratives. His first feature film was *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952), which did not sit well with the British authorities. As a result, he was reproached and recalled.

***FG**:* What are some of the films produced at the time and how were they exhibited?

EA: Notable titles include, *Mr. Mensah Builds a House* (1956), *Amenu's Child* (1951), *and Progress in Kojokrom* (1953). While these local productions were underway, newsreels from Britain continued to be shown in cinema houses. The Gold Coast Film Unit was integrated into the Ministry of Information. Once a film was completed, mobile cinema vans were used to transport and screen them from town to town. The arrival of these vans was usually announced in advance, and the screenings typically began with short comedies or commercials, a format that became the standard for local cinema. Accra had the highest concentration of privately owned cinema houses. According to my uncle, he saw his first film there in 1926, near the post office.

Post-Independence Growth and Challenges

FG: Very fascinating! What happened after Sean Graham's departure? The end of the experiment?

EA: Following Sean Graham's departure, Terry Bishop took over and began recruiting more people to train within the Film Unit. The Unit continued to grow and evolve. In 1957, when Dr. Kwame Nkrumah came into power, he recognised the influence of film and its potential as a political and cultural transformation tool. The government established the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) in 1962, signifying a move towards a more structured, national film industry. However, due to the government's focus on political priorities, there was limited financial investment in the film sector. As a result, the GFIC largely continued with its usual productions. Terry Bishop also ventured into feature filmmaking, but to avoid controversy, he collaborated with the School of Performing Arts (SPA) [at the University of Ghana], formerly part of the Institute of African Studies (IAS), which included departments of drama, dance, and music. This collaboration allowed him to play it safe, while still advancing

cinematic efforts in the country. He produced a film adaptation of *Hamlet* [William Shakespeare's play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, titled, *Hamile* (1964), also known as *The Tongo Hamlet* and *Hamlet*] by Terry Bishop, which was performed by SPA. The film was accepted and submitted to various film festivals, including the Edinburgh Film Festival. Shortly afterward, he was recalled. From then on, the operations were managed entirely by Ghanaians. The first person appointed as General Manager of GFIC was Amppiah Koffie, followed by Sam Aryeetey, who served as the Managing Director.

FG: What, in your estimation, led to the collapse of GFIC?

EA: GFIC faced a major setback when it was made part of the civil service. This significantly hindered creativity, as the organisation had to wait for government budget allocations before producing films, and even then, the funds were limited. As a result, their output was mostly restricted to newsreels, documentaries, and promotional films. If you study the history of GFIC, you will notice that the production of feature films was very rare. No government during my time ever allocated funds specifically for feature filmmaking. Just two people were enough to produce the newsreels and short films. However, over time, more individuals were recruited into the organisation. Many of them began by learning editing and camera work, so most staff members initially served as editors or camera operators before trained directors eventually joined, namely, Joe Daniels, Tom Ribeiro, and Ato Yanney. It was only after the coup in 1966 that we were recruited as assistant directors. Following the recruitment of directors, writers were also brought on board. On the surface, this appeared to signal the development of the film industry. However, as I mentioned earlier, because GFIC had been integrated into the civil service, there was a rigid hierarchy. People had to wait in line behind those who were already there in order to get promoted. This wasn't openly discussed, but it created an undercurrent of stagnation. Despite this, the directors were eager to create meaningful work. In fact, the senior directors were passionate about making feature films, but instead, they were assigned to produce newsreels.

Structural Organization and Internal Dynamics

FG: Please tell me about the Structure of the GFIC. Did it contribute to its collapse?

EA: The structure of GFIC posed several problems. It was set up strictly as a Civil Service institution, with a rigid hierarchy that included the Managing Director, Executive Producer, Producers, Head of Technical Directors, and an administrative division. Promotions were based solely on the length of service in the industry, not on merit or qualification. Let me share a little secret: Mr. Sam Aryeetey and Mr. R.O. Fenuku were recruited on the same day. Both were expected to report at the same time, but Aryeetey arrived 30 minutes earlier than

Fenuku. That small time difference determined who would become Managing Director first, so Aryeetey assumed the role. When Aryeetey eventually left, Fenuku succeeded him. Many of us preferred Fenuku; he had been a cameraman, and you could clearly see his work on the field. We often worked alongside him, and he had a very different, constructive temperament compared to that of Aryeetey. In most film industries, career progression is based on expertise and contribution. In such a system, even while Aryeetey was Managing Director, someone like Fenuku, as a skilled cameraman, could have earned more and wouldn't have needed to take instructions on trivial administrative matters. But unfortunately, GFIC didn't function that way.

FG: What other organisational or structural and training issues can you ascribe to the collapse of GFIC?

EA: To provide skilled training to staff, later on, as I mentioned earlier, directors were recruited and given proper training. Those already in the system had undergone six months of training, while others learned on the job, which is a valid method in filmmaking. However, those who received formal classroom training tended to carry a certain pride. Directors who were trained at film institutions, often for longer than six months, expected some form of recognition. But because of the GFIC's structure, they had to start at the bottom and slowly climb the ladder, leading to tension and dissatisfaction. These trained directors wanted to produce feature films, as they had been taught scriptwriting and directing. However, they were not given such opportunities. Misunderstandings and issues of seniority caused several setbacks. For instance, there was a case where someone was promoted to Producer over a Director simply because they had been with the company longer. That individual was even moved from another department into the directorial department and made its head, again, due to seniority. This sparked major conflict. Despite these challenges, I must commend the men at GFIC during that time; they managed to hold things together. But as a Director, I had my share of frustrations. I graduated from one of the best film schools in the world with a Master's degree in directing, yet I was assigned to development projects in the Volta Region, covering topics like palm oil production. These kinds of projects could take a whole year. For someone trained to make real films, it was incredibly disheartening. Promotion was another issue. I couldn't move forward because someone ahead of me had not yet been promoted. We were all essentially stuck, marking time. Writers were the last to be recruited, people like Dawson, Dadson, and a woman whose name I forget. Many of them eventually left. GFIC trained them well, they were university graduates sent to the U.S. to study scriptwriting. But when they returned, their scripts weren't produced. They felt sidelined and disillusioned. As a result, most of them left, some returned to the U.S. and found jobs, others moved to Canada, and a few joined different institutions in Ghana. One even became a Public Relations Director.

Inception of Local Film Industry

FG: What events and film productions can you say marked the inception of the local film industry?

EA: When discussing the development of the Ghanaian film industry, we've moved past the era of Sam Aryeetey and his contemporaries. The GFIC marked a significant shift. Many more people were recruited, the first sound studio south of the Sahara in Africa was built. This studio was used by both Ghanaians and foreign filmmakers, though only a few scenes were actually shot there. At that point, GFIC had become a full-fledged industry. It included professionals trained both on the job and abroad, in countries such as Russia, Poland, America, Britain, and even France. With trained directors and writers now part of the corporation, we had everything we needed to make films. The first film to be completely produced by GFIC with an entirely African crew, without the involvement of foreign directors like Sean Graham or Terry Bishop, was *No Tears for Ananse* (1968). It was directed by Sam Aryeetey, who was then the Managing Director and had a background in film editing. Although things looked promising, the frustrations among directors remained, something I mentioned earlier. By that time, the first and second cohorts of directors had been recruited. However, we were still primarily producing newsreels, which was considered a core responsibility. Everything happening in Ghana had to be documented. It was seen as a constitutional, moral, and professional obligation. We were constantly following the Head of State, attending ministerial events, answering calls from District Chief Executives (DCEs), and even covering festivals hosted by paramount chiefs. We were filming all of this on 35mm colour stock. While this provided valuable practical experience, as directors, we were eager to make narrative or feature films. Eventually, a few opportunities came. Ato Yanney was assigned an educational film titled, *Market Day*, and asked to adapt it into a story format. Tom Ribeiro was given *Genesis Chapter X* (1977), and Joe Daniels also received a project. These films, however, were produced years apart. Then came a film called, *Doing Their Thing* (1971), directed by Bernard Odidja, the Head of Editing. Due to his seniority, he was given the opportunity over others, which confused many directors. They couldn't understand why an editor was chosen to direct a feature film. Similarly, the film *I Told You So* (1970) was also directed by an editor, who had seniority over all the directors. That's simply how the system worked.

FG: Was there any significant breakthrough or turning point?

EA: Eventually, the directors began getting their own opportunities to direct. However, what could truly be considered the "Golden Era" for Ghanaian directors didn't arrive until the advent of digital technology. Before that, one of the biggest challenges in producing feature films was the high cost and limited availability of film stock. Often, the

resources to make feature films came from leftover material from large documentary projects. But once we transitioned to digital and began using videotapes, those barriers were removed. At that point, every director was asked to submit a script and direct a film. Yet, even then, the system maintained its emphasis on seniority. We're looking at the period from the 1970s to the 1980s. It began with a seniority-based system, first Joe Daniels, followed by Tom Ribeiro, then Kofi Yirenkyi, Ernest Abbeyquaye, and others in that order. That was the structure we followed for some time. Eventually, a decision was made to involve the public in developing the film culture. We advertised in newspapers and on the radio, so those who were around in the late 1980s to the 1990s might remember the call for people to submit scripts for production. When we received these scripts, they were often very basic outlines. Fortunately, by that time, National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) had trained several directors. We employed them, including Yaw Boakye, Kenny Macauley, and others, and assigned them these outlines, some of which had been further developed by writers at the GFIC. These young directors then produced the films, marking the beginning of an era in which we started producing a significant number of feature films.

FG: Given all these commendable efforts, one might have expected that the groundwork for a strong launch of the Ghanaian film industry was well in place. However, what are we to make of the recent complaints regarding the poor quality of films produced in Ghana?

EA: The current complaints about most films lacking coherent storylines and proper structure began with the introduction of VHS [Video Home Service tapes]. This technology, originally intended for home use, to record personal moments like children growing up, became accessible to the public, and Ghanaians began using it to tell stories. The GFIC was a structured authority and initially refused to screen some of these VHS films in its theatres because of their poor quality. However, the creators of these films had political backing, and we were instructed to screen them despite our reservations. Some private producers approached GFIC for assistance in producing films, but insisted on shooting on VHS or Super VHS [or SVHS], rather than the professional Betacam format we used. This led to situations where films were being made based on nothing more than a single A4 sheet of script. Ghana didn't have a strong culture of taking films to rural communities regularly, except through mobile cinema vans that visited once every three months. Still, as humans, we are naturally drawn to images. When these mobile cinemas showcased even the most basic footage, people walking or moving on screen, audiences were captivated. If you study the history of cinema, you'll find that even in the Western world, it began similarly. People enjoyed seeing local faces and relatable stories on screen, even if the productions weren't technically polished. And, of course, the filmmakers were making money.

Decline and Transformation

FG: What specific event or confluence of events ultimately led to GFIC's irreversible collapse, thereby affecting the Ghanaian film industry as a whole?

EA: What ultimately damaged the Ghanaian film industry was the sale of GFIC under the "build, operate, and transfer" arrangement. The Malaysians who were brought in were supposedly coming to help establish a television station. Internally, we were told they were bringing funds, equipment, and expertise to help produce more films. At the time, I held a senior position, and I wanted to use this opportunity to apologise to Ghanaian film professionals. The workers were preparing to strike, and I spoke to them. Victor Anti was then the Acting Managing Director. I encouraged the workers to welcome the Malaysians, arguing that, even internationally, film studios were aligning with television stations. I told them that with a television station, we'd have a platform to broadcast our films as well as take them to the theatres. I had met with the Malaysians and discussed plans to produce one feature film a week for the television station, and I conveyed that to the workers, which helped calm them. I vividly remember turning to Victor Anti and urging him to ensure GFIC remained united, not divided, during the transition. Victor assured me that such a division would never happen. However, within a year, it became clear that the Malaysians were not interested in filmmaking. Their first move was to marginalise the film personnel, placing them under the television hierarchy. I worked with them for a year and eventually took voluntary retirement. From that point, film production ceased. Over time, the equipment was sold, and film studios were converted into television studios. The focus shifted entirely to television production. The Malaysians capitalised on the situation, broadcasting films GFIC had produced over the past four years to gain viewership. Meanwhile, the film industry deteriorated. This created a vacuum, which allowed the rise of "Kumawood," a mushrooming local film industry in Kumasi, characterised by low-budget productions often using minimal scripts, sometimes just a single A4 sheet. Today, some trained filmmakers from NAFTI and elsewhere have moved to Kumasi to develop a local film industry under the Kumawood brand. The industry lacked regulatory oversight, allowing substandard films to flood the market, further diluting Ghana's filmmaking reputation.

FG: Would you like to elaborate further on the issue of limited regulatory authority within Ghana's film industry?

EA: Lack of regulatory authority in Ghana's film industry is a critical issue. GFIC, being a civil service institution, never had the mandate to regulate film production. Even though they produced many well-known films, they lacked the authority to control or oversee what others were producing. So, when people in Kumasi began producing their own films, GFIC had no power to intervene or stop them from

exhibiting substandard work. The only institution that could have exercised such authority was the Ministry of Information, but being a political body, it did not effectively regulate the industry. In contrast, Nigeria, who once came to Ghana to learn about filmmaking, quickly established a National Film Authority [NFA] to oversee and regulate the sector. I was present when some of the Nigerians came to learn. I was a producer at the time, and they consulted me directly. From the outset, they organised their industry with structured bodies such as the Directors' Guild, Sound Engineers' Guild, Editors' Guild, and Producers' Guild. In Nigeria, you couldn't just wake up and produce a film. One had to undergo training, apprenticeship, and gain qualifications before being accepted into the industry. Unfortunately, Ghana lacked such structures. Though efforts like Ghana Academy of Film and Television Arts [GAFTA] were made, they didn't have the legal power to regulate the industry. It took a long time for Ghana's National Film Authority [NFA] to be established, and even then, its powers were limited. While some responsibilities were defined for the Authority, it still lacked the mandate to, for instance, determine who is qualified to produce a film. In Nigeria, however, there was a clear structure from the beginning. They had trained scriptwriters, and those familiar with the Nigerian film story would know that many lecturers in English and Literature from the universities were involved in training scriptwriters. Eventually, many left academia because the film industry paid more. Most of the early Nigerian actors I knew were university graduates. While a degree doesn't automatically make someone a great actor, I personally know the benefits of formal training. I studied acting and drama for more than four years, and then pursued film training for an additional three years, on top of my earlier experience with GFIC.

Developmental Milestones and Film Output

FG: Looking back, what do you think have been some of the major milestones for Ghanaian cinema?

EA: There have been quite a few. The introduction of local language films such as those in Twi, Ga, and Ewe, made cinema more accessible and relatable. The rise of home-grown actors and directors, and the international recognition of some of our films are all breakthroughs. Additionally, the advent of digital technology revolutionised filmmaking and made it more affordable and accessible, which is very encouraging. Each of these developments has helped shape a more vibrant and diverse industry. The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of limited feature film production, primarily due to resource constraints and the emphasis on newsreels and documentaries. Nevertheless, some efforts were made to produce narrative films, often through government contracts. However, the industry remained hampered by structural issues, including lack of regulation and support.

FG: In your view, how has technology impacted the filmmaking process in Ghana over the years?

EA: Technology has been transformative. When I started, we relied heavily on traditional film stock, which was expensive and cumbersome. Today, digital cameras, editing software, and online distribution platforms have democratised filmmaking. Young filmmakers no longer need large budgets to produce quality work. They can shoot on smartphones, edit with accessible software, and reach audiences worldwide via the internet. This technological shift has opened up opportunities for more stories to be told and more voices to be heard.

FG: That's a positive development. What do you see as the current state of the Ghanaian film industry? Are there areas that need improvement or support?

EA: The industry is more vibrant than ever, but there's still work to do. Funding remains a big challenge; many talented filmmakers struggle to secure resources for production. Distribution is another issue, getting films into cinemas or onto streaming platforms can be difficult. Additionally, we need more structured training programmes and industry standards to professionalise the craft further. Support from the government and private sector would go a long way in addressing these gaps.

Advice to Ghanaian Filmmakers and Current Project

FG: As a veteran in the industry, what advice would you give to upcoming filmmakers in Ghana today who aspire to make a mark?

EA: My advice to them is to stay true to their vision, be persistent, and continuously learn. The industry has grown, but there's still room for innovation. They should embrace available technology and learn the craft thoroughly to tell compelling stories that reflect our culture and experiences. They should build networks and collaborate with others. Filmmaking is a collective effort. Most importantly, they should be patient and dedicated, because success may not come overnight, but perseverance will pay off. And they should never forget the power of storytelling to inspire, educate, and entertain.

FG: That's truly inspiring. Before we conclude, is there a particular project or moment in your career that you cherish the most?

EA: There are many, but I'd say my most cherished moments are the times when I saw audiences respond emotionally to my work, whether they were moved, inspired, or simply entertained. One project that stands out is *Chronicles of Odumkrom: The Headmaster* (2015), which tackles social issues around power, sovereignty, and the concept of participatory citizenship in Ghana, using local daily life and drama.

Seeing it spark conversations and awareness meant a lot to me. It reminds me of the responsibility and privilege we have as filmmakers to contribute positively to our communities. My upcoming projects include a documentary called *Fancy Dress* and a feature film titled *Wedding Blues*. I am dedicated to furthering my work in the film industry and to mentoring emerging artists and filmmakers.

FG: Thank you so much for sharing your insights, Mr. Abbeyquaye. Your journey and experiences are truly invaluable for aspiring filmmakers and industry enthusiasts alike. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

EA: It's been a pleasure to reflect on our industry's journey. Just to encourage young filmmakers to keep pushing forward. Our industry is evolving, and every contribution counts. We're building a legacy for future generations. I hope the future of Ghanaian cinema continues to flourish, and more stories from Ghana will reach the world.

Some Thoughts on the Conversation

The conversation with Ernest Abbeyquaye offers a compelling insight into the rich heritage of resilience, creativity, and cultural pride that has shaped the development of cinema in Ghana. Abbeyquaye draws attention to the industry's modest beginnings, characterized by limited resources, but driven by a passionate commitment to real storytelling rooted in local languages, traditions, and shared realities. He recounted his own experiences and interventions in the film industry in Ghana. Abbeyquaye points to significant milestones, such as the founding of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation [GFIC], which laid the groundwork for film production in the country, and highlights the transformative influence of technological advancements, particularly digital media, that have democratized both the production and distribution of films.

It was revealed that the GFIC originated from colonial efforts (after the Gold Coast Film Unit concept) aimed at using film for education and propaganda, evolving after independence into a national institution with the goal of cultivating a self-sustaining film industry. Its early successes included training skilled professionals and developing infrastructure, but progress was hindered by bureaucratic obstacles, lack of merit-based advancement, and insufficient support for feature-length films. External factors, like Malaysian investments, further destabilized the industry, contributing to its decline and the emergence of alternative local cinemas, such as Kumawood. Unlike Nigeria, Ghana has lacked a strong regulatory framework, which continues to impede industry growth.

Throughout the conversation, Abbeyquaye emphasizes the crucial role of cinema in preserving Ghanaian cultural identity and fostering national pride, despite economic and infrastructural challenges. His insights stress that resilience and innovation are essential for sustaining and expanding the cinema in Ghana amid socio-economic barriers.

Ghana's experience illustrates that storytelling rooted in local languages and cultural prudence can forge a distinctive cinematic identity that appeals to both domestic and international audiences. The industry's adaptability, embracing new technologies and digital platforms, offers promising avenues for increasing visibility, expanding access, and promoting cultural exchange.

Furthermore, the interview emphasises that cinema can serve as a powerful tool for social cohesion, political commentary, and cultural affirmation, enabling Ghanaian and broader African narratives to move beyond stereotypes and Western portrayals. Future scholarly research may explore the transformative potential of digital platforms, streaming services, and social media in reshaping distribution models, audience engagement, and economic sustainability within African cinemas. Comparative studies across different African nations could reveal common challenges and innovative solutions, promoting regional collaboration and knowledge sharing. Additional research into the role of indigenous languages, storytelling techniques in Ghanaian and African cinema can deepen understanding of how film reflects and influences societal values. Long-term investigations into policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, and educational initiatives are also vital to identifying strategic pathways for building resilient and vibrant future film industry in Ghana.

Notes

1. The three Nigerians selected have been identified as R.F. Otigba, F. Fajemeson and Alhaji Auna. See *The Republic of Ghana celebrates the Centenary of World Cinema: Sept. 18 – Sept. 25, 1995*. p. 2.

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