

## A missing narrative of Ghana's graphic design history

Mark Okyere\* and Eric Anane-Antwi

University of Bern, Switzerland

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

\* [markfereris20@gmail.com](mailto:markfereris20@gmail.com)

DOI: [10.26254/med/6320](https://doi.org/10.26254/med/6320)

License: CC BY-ND 4.0

This paper aims to trace the career path of a retired Ghanaian design educator and postage stamp designer, Professor Frederick Tete Mate. The life and contributions of Mate provide a focal point to begin discussions with key figures in the graphic design history of Ghana. Not only has he been involved with philately, but also, he has to his credit works rendered in woodcuts, wood engravings, linocuts, scrapper boards and works printed with wax. Mate is also known for his illustrations based on Ghanaian social, cultural and political themes. Mate's contribution to design education began from 1965 when he started working as an assistant lecturer at the University of Science and Technology (UST) in Kumasi, and he witnessed how the Department of Design and General Art Studies (DGAS) started in 1972 with three sections: Foundation, Art History and Graphics. He worked hard in writing the first curriculum for the Book Industry programme starting in the 1980s in UST which later grew into a fully-fledged department called Publishing Studies by the 1990s. Using archival materials and primary sources, the research proceeds in three key thematic areas: client/commissioned works, legacy in academia and design advocacy. Six narrative interviews together with archival materials should provide a timeline for constructing Mate's version of Ghana's graphic design history.

Keywords: Ghana's design history, archives, design education

In 2018, after a series of conversations between my co-author, Mr. Eric Anane-Antwi, from the Department of Publishing Studies, KNUST and Mr. Gilbert Amegatcher, our mentor and a retired lecturer from the Department of Communication Design, KNUST in Ghana, we agreed to pursue research into graphic design history of Ghana since scholars in the field have not paid attention to this issue. Subsequently, Mr Amegatcher helped us to identify some key figures whose contributions could help us to build a body of knowledge about Ghanaian graphic design history. This paper focuses on the career path of Ghanaian design educator and postage stamp designer, Professor Frederick Tete Mate and his contributions to graphic design and design education in Ghana.

The issue that led to this study was that bibliographic sources on Ghana suggest that its graphic design history has not been investigated thoroughly by scholars (Owusu-Ansah and McFarland 1995). A possible reason for this could be what Teal Triggs points out:

‘Identifying a starting point for any graphic design history is problematic, and especially in cultures where oral-based traditions have been the basis of a system of communication.’ (Triggs 2011, 5).

Scholars that are familiar with the history of Ghana are aware that our ancestors made use of oral-based traditions until the arrival of the Europeans on the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana. As a result, we expected Triggs’ ideas to apply to much of Ghana’s graphic design history. The career path of our key figure, Frederick Tete Mate, however, offers rich documentation of his narrative, where he could provide documents (artefacts, certificates, letters, and curriculum vitae) to back his perspective in the course of the research. This paved a way for our paper to have a data-driven approach upon which future scholars may build on in subsequent investigations of Ghana’s graphic design histories as the scope of the field expands. Interestingly, there are parallels between Ghana and Canada, and since both countries were once British colonies, the problems that Brian Donnelly faced during the writing of his paper about *Locating Graphic Design History in Canada* provided some lessons for us during the writing of our paper, this particularly revolved around oral histories (Donnelly 2006, 286).

The late Victor Margolin’s work on *World History of Design* (Vol 1) served as a reference point for us to trace the kind of ephemera that were in use by Africans. Margolin noted that “Africans were involved with the transcription of oral languages, which included the creation of syllabaries, while African design was centred on a few newspapers and the occasional magazine” (Margolin 2015). Margolin’s view is also reported on by Owusu-Ansah and McFarland in their 1995 edition of their *Historical dictionary of Ghana*, in which not less than 20 newspapers were named. Some of the newspapers considered in their publication were *Gold Coast Times*, *Western Echo*, *Ashanti Pioneer*, *Gold Coast Aborigines*, *Gold Coast Chronicles*, *Gold Coast Echo*, *Gold Coast Express*, *Gold Coast Free Press*, *Gold Coast Independent*, *Gold Coast News*, *Gold Coast People*, *Gold Coast Spectator*, *Post*, *Spark*, *Spokesman*, *Star*, *West African Times*, *West African Morning Post*, *The New African* and *Daily Graphic*. Two of the papers—the *Gold Coast Times* which was first published in 1874, and *Western Echo* first published in November 1885—belonged to the late James Brew Hutton (1844–1915) who was an attorney, journalist, businessman, nationalist, and an active member of the Fante Confederacy movement (Owusu-Ansah and McFarland 1995, 65). Although contact was established with Professor David Owusu-Ansah to request for a sample of how newspapers in the Gold Coast looked like since there were no visuals of the newspapers captured in his historical dictionary, we were directed to write to Northwestern University librarians in the US to request for samples of the newspapers. We had to give up due to cost involved in getting access to archives from the US university in addition to the turnaround time for our request to be granted.



Figure 1. Some newspapers in circulation in Ghana (Source: The authors, 2021)

Presently, some newspapers in circulation as shown in Figure 1 on Ghana's newsstand include *Ghanaian Times*, *Daily Guide*, *The New Crusading Guide*, *The Business Analyst*, *Daily Graphic*, *The Chronicle*, *The Mirror*, *Economy Times*, *The Hawk*, *The National Enquirer*, *The Spectator*, *P & P*, *The Daily Dispatch*, *The New Publisher*, *The Pioneer*, *The Inquisitor*, *Day Break*, *The Informer*, *Daily Analyst* and *Republic Press*. The list of newspapers certainly shows the variety of information being presented to the readership in Ghana, a historical trend we can say has continued from the Gold Coast era until today. The visual designs of today's newspapers suggest how readers of the various papers may be attracted by the headlines, imagery and feature stories written in those papers; hence, drawing them to a newsstand. A key figure who is worth mentioning in Adum is the late John Wallace Tsiboe (1904-1963) who was a wealthy merchant in Kumasi that established a press known as Abura Printing Works Limited (Owusu-Ansah and McFarland 1995, 226). Some of F. T. Mate's work, for example, the 1961 calendar for the Presbyterian Training College Akropong Akwapim, was printed by the press founded by Tsiboe.

In this paper, we ask: 1) Is it possible to construct a history of graphic design in Ghana? 2) If so, by what means and methods could a body of knowledge be created as a focal point for documenting Ghana's graphic design history? These questions provide a point of departure for our journey on this important historical research. Our paper does not attempt to include all that one may expect to read about Ghana's history and its connection with graphic design, but it focuses on key issues in Ghanaian graphic design that are revealed by career path of one of the oldest living design educators and postage stamp designers who was born in the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana.

This study makes use of a narrative approach involving six interviews and informal discussions with Professor Frederick Tete Mate. Additionally, his graphic artefacts and other documents in his library helped us to trace his career path from the time he was born until his present-day occupation as a retired design educator and postage stamp designer. Close readings, analysis, comparison and synthesis are employed to ensure that the information captured about him was accurate and consistent with other publications on Mate. Ethical issues that we encountered in the course of this research are addressed.

## 3. Findings

In 1929, Frederick Tete Mate was born at Odumasi-Krobo in the Eastern Region of the Gold Coast of present-day Ghana. He had his basic education at Bana Hill Boarding School in the same area and later enrolled in Akropong Teacher Training College where he learned to write in Calligraphy. From there, he entered the School of Art of the then College of Technology in Kumasi in 1955, where he studied a number of subjects including Graphic Design, Painting, Textiles, Pottery and Ceramics, Weaving, Sculpture, Book Binding, Anatomy for the Artist and English.

In his final year, he specialised in Graphic Design. Mate was a student of the late Professor Mawere Opoku, and some of his contemporaries were Okyere-Asifu, Ananga, Kejani, Addo Osafo, Blay Toffie who were all teachers, but now are deceased. Mate's field of specialisation were in Typography, Lettering, Printing, Wood Engraving, Wood Cut, Scraper Board, Lino cut and Printing with wax. The late Professor A. Akpo Teye was a senior colleague of Mate and he was a student under the tutelage of Professor Mawere. In 1957, as part of Mate's final year examination, he wrote, illustrated and printed the book titled *Kudeses Providence*. This book was a fictional story illustrating the proverb, **"Aboa bi beka wo a na ofiri wo ntoma mu"** (an insect will bite you only from within your cloth). That same year was when Ghana gained independence, and a national art exhibition was organised to commemorate the occasion. The University Printing Press (UPK) was at its initial stages in 1957.

In 1961, Mate re-entered the College of Art in Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) for a 2-year Diploma in Fine Art (DFA), and in 1963-1964, he pursued a postgraduate diploma in Art Education. In 1965, he was employed as an assistant lecturer at UST, the following year, he gained the status of a lecturer, and was responsible for teaching Traditional Studies, what is also known as Cultural Studies, aimed at all Foundation students. As a lecturer, he made arrangements to learn about the industrial side of printing with some presses such as Tema Press and Akan Press. A Letterpress and Kord 64 offset machines were purchased for the Design Department. Mate minded this equipment for a short period in addition to lecturing before a technician was employed.

Mate applied for a sabbatical leave and used the period for further studies at the London College of Printing where he majored in Printing Techniques and Management in Packaging through the Leverhulme Award (Liverpool University Award). Upon Mate's return to UST, he taught Calligraphy, Typography, and Industrial Processes.

In 1972, the Department of Design and General Art Studies (DGAS) was started and it had three sections: Foundation, Art History and Graphics. Between 1965 to 1982, Mate participated in postage stamp competitions, produced approximately 200 postage stamp designs and had 21 of his stamp designs accepted, printed and issued (Dogbe 2003, 21). He withdrew from the competition after 1982 because he did not want to compete with his students. In 1984, Mate wrote the syllabus for the programme, Book Industry. It was accepted and approved by the Academic Board after seed money had been received from the UNESCO. In 1984, the Design Press under DGAS was established. In 1987, Mate's first students from the Book Industry programme

In 1988, Mate attended the eighth World Book Fair in New Delhi, and the following year Mate retired. Mate stayed on contract basis until 1995 when the Book Industry had gained departmental status and was renamed as Publishing Studies in 1994. In 2003, art historian and sculptor, Dr B. K. Dogbe published a paper which focused on the impact of postage stamp designs in Ghana. The paper was entitled, *Postage stamps of Ghana designed by F. T. Mate from 1966 to 1982: Impact on Philatelic Art in Ghana*. Currently, Mate lives in Adentan in the Greater Accra Region with his wife and grandchildren since 1995.

#### 4. Mate Designs



Figure 2. The stamp (1968). Colour print on paper. 1.2 x 1.2 inches.  
(Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)

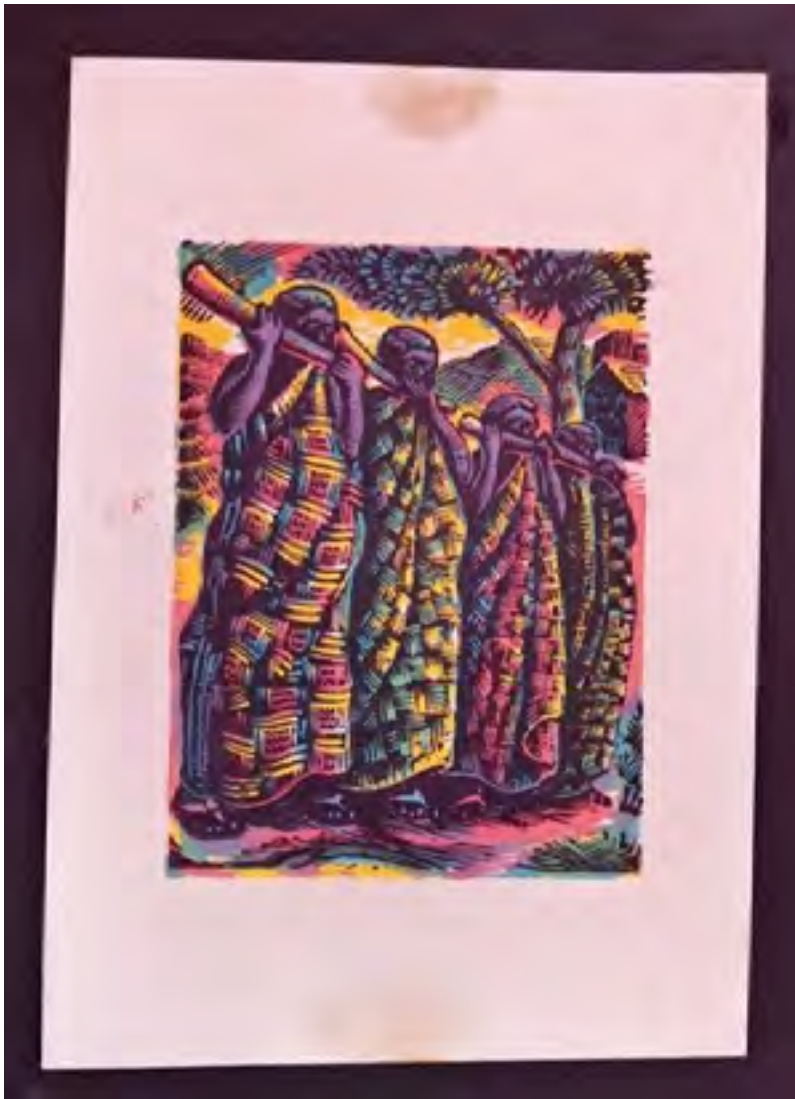
While the stamp's imagery in Figure 2, a linguist staff, which is the rod used by "the spokesman of the court to whom all statements to and from the chief are addressed" and it is used "As a sign of his office, the linguist bears a staff which has a proverbial symbol at the top (Amenuke et al. 1991, 152). In this stamp design, we see three heads on top of it "*Tikoro nko agyina*" (three human heads carved together), a stool with the symbol "*Nyansa po*" (wisdom knot) with the UN logo atop suggests a symbol of authority; and these symbols were carefully selected to communicate the idea that "one head cannot go into counsel, and that it is improper for one person to take decisions for a whole society" (Amenuke et al. 1991, 153). By using these symbols in the design, Mate was saying that United Nations Day in Ghana in 1968 should reflect how different views ought to be considered during meetings of Ghanaian chiefs and elders. Mate based his ideas on the UN General Assemblies in which various views are heard, and then after synthesizing those views, a conclusion is reached on a topic or an issue.





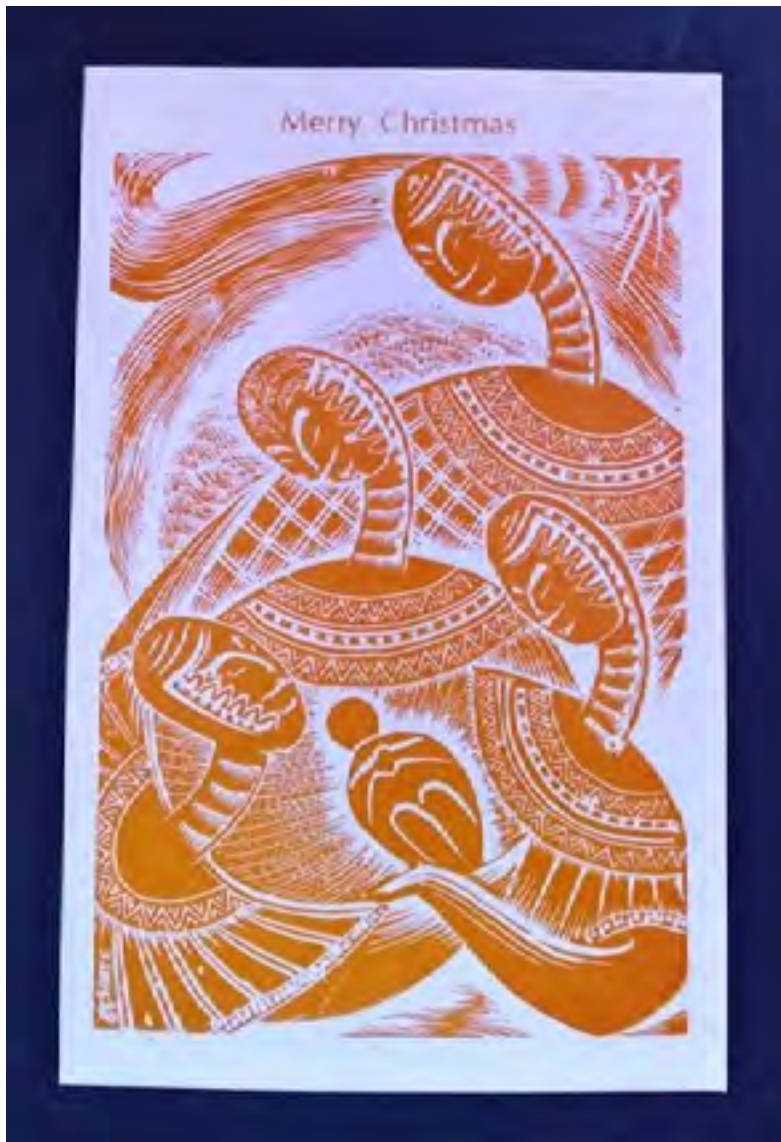
Figure 3. A fishing village scene in wood engraving (1961-64). 5 x 4 inches. (Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)

Similarly, the scene in his artefact in Figure 3 shows how fishermen work hard to bring their fish to the shore through a collective effort. One person cannot operate a boat manually, hence, there is strength in unity during activities that involve more than one person such as fishing in a canoe. This cooperation ultimately ensures that there is food on the table for all of those whose occupation depends on their fishing.



*Figure 4. The horn blowers (1961-64) in wood engraving and Linocut on paper. 3 x 4 inches. (Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)*

The horn players in Figure 4 also cooperate since they perform as a group. The imagery depicts a performance at a traditional occasion when these musicians are called upon to play at a special event. For these events, the horn players are decorated in their colourful kente cloth. For example, during festivals in Ghana, some chiefs require that skillfully trained horn blowers perform before they deliver their main message to the audience present. These musicians are heralds in Ghanaian culture. At university graduation ceremonies, for example, at the KNUST, these horn blowers are invited and given a slot on the programme outline and usually they will perform before the Vice Chancellor or Chancellor gives a speech.



*Figure 5. The Christmas card in wood engraving on paper (1961-64). 5 x 7 inches. (Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)*

Figure 5 is an example of an abstract Christmas card, depicting four women who are gazing at the newly born child. A copy of this card was presented to Dr. Joyce Aryee, then Education Secretary during the PNDC era. Christmas in Ghana is important because it is a time for workers to take a break from work and to spend time with their families in the villages or in the urban areas, or with loved ones. The design may represent a newly born child or the newly born Christ child or both. The style suggests the artistic impression of Mate in abstract and how he chose to represent the concept of Christmas using figures that indigenous people could easily relate to. The design also shows how the various places where Mate lived in his formative years provided a way of visual expression either in abstract or in realistic compositions. Though Mate's formal art education during his training as a teacher in Akropong Teacher Training College, was influenced by the Basel Society Mission, and then subsequently, his post-secondary education at then Kumasi College of Technology, present-day Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), his artefacts reflected his ability to render works that portray issues and themes of interest to the Ghanaian society.





Figure 6. *The woman washing* (1961-64). Linocut. 4.1 x 6 inches. (Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)

In Figure 6, the woman washing depicts activities that are expected of women. Women are expected to wash their dirty clothes to ensure that they are clean and well-groomed at all times. Through these household chores, the children of women are able to learn how to wash and also pick up certain grooming behaviours from their parents. Where a child is under the care of a single parent, and in this instance, let us say a father who performs the role of a mother due to a divorce, separation or death of a spouse, this role may be portrayed by the parent taking care of the child.



Figure 7. Ananse and the woman (1961-64). Linocut. 10 x 13 inches. (Source: Courtesy of F. T. Mate, 2020)

The scene as shown in Figure 7 depicts Ananse (a spider) wielding a cutlass with one of its legs. Kwaku Ananse is a popular folklore told by storytellers to children when they gather to sit by the fire side at night in the villages. In this artefact, we see that Ananse is ready to fight with the woman in the forest holding the items in the air. The scene gives readers a glimpse of a typical Ghanaian forest where there are pathways for pedestrians. Different plants and trees are to be found in the forest in addition to wild animals that may harm those who go into the forest without protection. This shows the rich vegetation in Ghana's landscape found in certain parts of the country.

## 5. Summary

Three aspects have emerged in Mate career path: clients and commissioned works, legacy in academia and design advocacy. Clients and commissioned works of Mate suggest the various techniques in which he used to render his works for both small and large clients. His legacy in academia has stood the test of time from the beginnings of the Book Industry as a Section under the DGAS which subsequently was renamed as Department of Publishing Studies of which my co-author is an academic in the Department. His role in design advocacy through the recommendation from the Ghana Book Development Council (GBDC) enabled him to take on a role as a consultant to the UNESCO which benefited from seed money given to UST of present-day KNUST to start the programme on Book Industry.

A number of factors gave momentum to the development of Ghana's graphic design history:

First, the newspaper industry served as a source of information for the general public about events taking place across the then Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) (Owusu-Ansah and McFarland 1995). Second, the development of education in Ghana, including the introduction of formal art education at Achimota School (Agyarkoh 2017, 70), led some trained teachers, including Mate, to turn their attention to graphic design.

Indeed, three generations have witnessed these developments, which started from the generation of the late Professor Mawere Opoku who taught the Akpo Teyes and Mates. Then the generation of the late Professor Akpo Teye and Professor Mate who tutored some of those in current academic positions such as Mr. Jaybona Appiah and Professor Daniel Ohene-Adu. They have also handed over the mandate to current senior lecturers, such as Associate Professor Eric Francis Eshun, Dr. Edward Appiah, Mr. Adam Rahman, Dr. George Kushiator, and new lecturers in the persons of Messrs Benjamin Prempeh and John Opuni Amankwa who are all at posts in KNUST.

Lecturers in other graphic design departments across the country may be contacted for their narratives to be included in future publications on the subject. Additionally, those in other careers related to the discipline of graphic design in Ghana and in the diasporas may be identified and contacted so as to document their contributions to the field as well.

Women trained as graphic designers may be featured and some of them who benefited from the tutelage of Mate are in the person of Mrs. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, an alumnus of the College of Art who worked on the thesis *The Changing Fashion of the Ghanaian Woman* in June 1972. She later became one of the former first ladies of the Republic of Ghana, the wife of the late president Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings. Indeed, from her sense of fashion reflected as in her way of dressing, it is not surprising that archival records at the College of Art indicates her preference to write a thesis related to fashion. A case study of her career path may provide readers with her justification for moving in that direction.

Another figure is the late Dr. Mrs. Joyce Janet Stuber (1951–2021) former Dean of the College of Art and retired senior lecturer at the Department of Communication Design who contributed to the field of Packaging Design. Others include Ms. Bertha A. Ayim and Dr. Ralitsa D. Debrah, both lecturers at the Department of Communication Design, KNUST. Their contributions in addition to other women graphic designers in the various Graphic Design or Communication Design departments across the country may be documented into a biographic survey of accomplished graphic designers of Ghana.

This paper has given us a focal point for documenting Ghana's graphic design history based on the perspective of Professor Frederick Tete Mate. Future researchers in the capacities as academic-historians, practitioner-historians, and design historians as suggested by Teal Triggs (Triggs 2011, 4) should be included in the body of knowledge of Ghana's graphic design history. They should meet with various stakeholders like designers (including those mentioned in this conference proceedings), clients, regulators, professional communities, users/people and the members of the society as noted by graphic design researcher, Karel van der Waarde so that different viewpoints may be documented towards preserving the legacies of these individuals as way of expanding the scope on the missing narratives of Ghana's graphic design histories (van der Waarde 2018, 356–7).

- Agyarkoh, Eric. 2017. Art, science, and technology of outdoor advertising in Ghana. *Communication Design* 5, no.1-2: 61-89.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20557132.2017.1398950>
- Amenuke, Sylvanus Kwami, Buckner Komla Dogbe, Franc Dofzidenu Kwaku Asare, Robert K. Ayiku, and Alice Baffoe. 1991. *General Knowledge in Art for Senior Secondary Schools*. Accra: Ministry of Education.
- Dogbe, Buckner Komla. 2003. Postage stamps of Ghana designed by F. T. Mate from 1965 to 1982: Impact on Philatelic Art in Ghana. *Image. (Journal of the College of Art)* 1, no. 7: 17-32.
- Donnelly, Brian. 2006. Locating graphic design history in Canada. *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 4: 283-294.
- Margolin, Victor. 2015. *World history of design, Vol 1*, London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Owusu-Ansah, David and McFarland, Daniel Miles. 1995. *Historical dictionary of Ghana*. Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press.
- Triggs, Teal. 2011. Graphic design history: Past, present, and future. *Design Issues* 27, no. 1 (Winter): 3-6.
- van der Waarde, Karel. 2018. "Professional reflection and visual arguments for patients: Is graphic design really a critical practice?" In *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture, and Design*, edited by Chris Brisbin and Myra Thiessen, 350-368. Routledge.

### About the Author:

Mark Okyere is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School of the Arts and Humanities, University of Bern, Switzerland. His research interests are in ethnography, graphic design practice and design history.

Eric Anane-Antwi is a lecturer in Book Development and Illustration at KNUST, Kumasi, Ghana. He studied at the Royal Danish Academy and KNUST. His research interests are book design concepts, typography with emphasis on indigenous picto-ideography and development illustration.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank Mr Gilbert Amegatcher for his guidance throughout the development of this paper and Professor Frederick Tete Mate for his cooperation and interest in the subject. We are also grateful to Professor Karel van der Waarde for the continuous encouraging words, Ria van Zyl, Dr. Emily King, Professors Aaris Sherin and Leslie Atzmon for their critical comments on earlier versions of the abstract prior to submission. We would like to express our sincere thanks to Mr. Jordan Turvey and Professor Leslie Atzmon for proofreading the final version of the paper.