

History of Ghana: The Tragedy of One-time Military Ruler Ignatius Acheampong: Visionary and Kleptocrat

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“Beloved Ghana, born with a deep sense of pride, nurtured with unshakeable courage, has said goodbye forever to reaction, to timidity and hypocrisy in Government, and to the suppression of the interests and welfare of the people. Together we shall make Ghana great. Long live the revolution. Long live Ghana. May God bless us all.” - Colonel Ignatius Acheampong speaking at a Durbar of Chiefs in August 1972.

Ignatius Acheampong, the one-time military ruler of Ghana occupies an unenviable position in the political history of the first Black African nation to have been granted independence by a colonial power. Deposed first in a palace coup by his colleagues, who stripped him of his rank and honours, he was later executed by firing squad after a perfunctory trial held by junior members of the armed forces whose violent uprising was in many ways a reflection of the groundswell of public anger at the parlous state Ghana found itself during the 1970s. It was a state of affairs for which many of his countrymen blamed him. Acheampong was held responsible for the acute economic problems that beset the nation, including shortages of basic necessities, a debilitating brain drain and endemic corruption. It was a far cry from the heady days at the beginning of his leadership when he projected a spirit of optimism and a sense of purpose grounded on firm ideas about how to create the conditions by which Ghana could eventually become economically self-sufficient. It is this neglected aspect of Acheampong’s rule that requires recapitulation and reappraisal. For it reveals a man with a clear vision about how a post-colonial African nation could be transformed, but who was hindered not only by extraneous economic events such as the oil crisis of 1973, but primarily by an inability to properly select and synthesize the appropriate ideas that could have enabled him to achieve this objective. Examining the political career of Acheampong also necessarily reveals certain constant features that have continually bedevilled Africa states and impeded their development: the inter-ethnic rivalries, the ineffectual post-colonial structures of governance, as well as a pervasive inclination to submit to tyranny. A visionary who succumbed to the temptations inherent to the wielding of untrammelled power; the tragedy of Ignatius Acheampong encapsulates the tragedy of the African continent.

Ignatius Kutu Acheampong was born in 1931 in Trabuom, a town in the Ashanti Region of British-ruled Gold Coast which came to be known as the nation of Ghana after it secured its independence in 1957. Raised in the Roman Catholic faith, Acheampong worked, among other things, as a stenographer before enlisting as a private in the British colonial army in 1951. He received officer-training at Aldershot in England and was commissioned into the Ghana Army as a Second Lieutenant in 1959. He was a member of the contingent of Ghanaian troops who served as part of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in the Congo

in the early 1960s and later during the period of military rule that followed the overthrow of the government of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, and as a lieutenant colonel, Acheampong was appointed to serve as the Chairman for the Western Regional Committee of Administration. He was the Commanding Officer of the First Infantry Brigade at the time of the coup that led to the ousting of Dr. Kofi Busia on January 13th 1972.

Acheampong's bloodless coup brought about the suspension of the 1969 Constitution, the proscribing of political parties and political activity, as well as the detention of those whom he suspected of threatening his government, a junta which he called the National Redemption Council (NRC).

He consolidated his power and was quick to notify his countrymen and the world that his coming to power was nothing short of a revolution. Indeed, he would declare that "ours is a Revolution that must achieve the permanent transformation of our nation". He would from the start reveal a programme of national development which owed more than a passing reference to the ideology and nationalist sentiment of the Nkrumah era. He spoke of "the dignity of man, equal opportunities for all, (and) the equitable distribution of our resources."

It is useful however, to explain why a man who was not trained to manage a national economy and who came to power by force should be deserving of a serious examination as a political agent. Writing in 1976, Samuel Decalo in *Coups and Army Rule in Africa* saw "nothing unique about the abilities or characteristics of 'colonels in command cars' that should incline us to expect them to hurdle the universal obstacles in the road to ... political development."

Yet, some of those who pour scorn over the idea of a military leader with a vision may not persist with their objection where the regime led by Capitaine Thomas Sankara, the widely revered Marxist-Pan-Africanist leader of Burkina Faso is concerned. Fidel Castro, a paragon of the political left, seized power by force of arms on the island of Cuba. And despite the murderous nature of his right-wing regime, a sizable segment of Chilean society consider General Augusto Pinochet's overthrow of Salvador Allende to have saved his country from civil war, as well as preventing it becoming, from their perspective, a "pit of Marxist Misery".

The armed forces of certain nations have spearheaded ideological movements which its adherents have considered were either socially progressive in objectives or as defining the elemental conditions for propelling the national destiny. In Japan, for instance, the 'Imperial Way' faction or *Kodo-ha* contended with the 'Control Group' or *Tosei-ha* for influence in government during the 1930s, while in Bolivia, the 'Revolutionary Nationalism' championed by General Alfredo Ovando reflected a reformist belief on the part of many military officers who felt that the military was better placed than the politicians to arrest the underdevelopment of the nation.

From the vantage point of time, the idea of a military government is correctly viewed with abhorrence. And during an era of many military regimes, some military men spoke out against the trend including the Chilean martyr General Rene Schneider who at a General Staff meeting on July 23rd 1970 enunciated his doctrine of the political neutrality of the Chilean Armed Forces by saying:

The armed forces are not a road to political power nor an alternative to that power. They exist to guarantee the regular work of the political system and the

use of force for any other purpose than its defence constitute high treason.

So while any endeavour aimed at explaining the virtues of a man who seized power from a constitutionally elected government may understandably be treated with suspicion, if not with outright contempt, it is worth reminding why military regimes were at one point in time thought of as being capable of forming a viable form of political administration. This rationale was based on the genuinely held belief that the military ethos of discipline, prompt execution of duties and strenuously inculcated nationalist sentiment all combined to provide the framework through which the decision-making process could be much quicker and the implementation of policies more efficient than under the often chaotic and fractious conditions of post-independence Africa's civilian governments.

Decisions would be made in the national interest by disciplined, highly-motivated and detribalised members of the armed forces. The sense that military governments could work in Africa also rested on the belief that democracy did not work in the artificially constructed nations where tribal sentiment often held sway. In contrast, the authoritarian culture of the military could, it was felt, harness the resources of the nation and efficiently mobilise the population. It was after all an authoritarian regime in Stalinist Russia which had succeeded in industrialising Russia within a generation.

The suitability and the ability of a military government involved in implementing national revival and indoctrinating a population could be seen in the administrations imposed by the Western Allies on conquered nations such as Germany and Japan. There, military governors such as US Army General Lucius Clay in Allied occupied Germany (later West Germany) and US Army General Douglas MacArthur in Japan were concerned with national reconstruction, running local economies, trying war criminals and re-tuning the minds of people who had been from the Allied perspective, "brainwashed" by the pernicious ideologies of Nazism and Emperor Worship. It could then stand to reason that a similar feat could be achieved in positively engineering post-colonial African societies. Thus, there were possibilities of military governance working in Africa, if the human and institutional elements were able to be merged with a central unifying idea.

Certainly, Acheampong's inaugural press conference given a few days after he seized power explicitly alluded to the idea that military rule, with the assistance of "certain eminent civilian advisers", was uniquely suited to stamping out what he described as "the malpractices which existed before the 1966 coup." He said:

In simple terms, we are almost like a nation at war, without an external enemy. The National Redemption Council (has) therefore decided to place the economy of Ghana on a war footing. We are soldiers, who know one way of dealing with crisis situations, and that is action. I want to assure the nation that we shall spare no effort and no sacrifice will be too great for us in this gigantic task of winning a great economic war.

But Acheampong's objective at the outset of his leadership went further than merely rescuing and stabilising a dysfunctional economy: it addressed the fundamental task of constructing the conditions in which Ghana could eventually become economically self-sufficient. A few months after taking power he assessed the situation thus:

Ghana is basically an agricultural country, but over the years we have been

relying on foreign aid as far as food is concerned. And not only that: we rely more on foreign assistance so far as raw materials (is concerned). So we have decided that we must be self-reliant in this respect. We must produce the food we eat; we must produce the raw materials we need for the factories.

That he tried to live up to his words is evidenced by the policies he sought to implement in the spheres of food production, the manufacture of cloth, the development of light industry, energy, infrastructure, as well as the economic empowerment of Ghanaians in relation to the multinational corporations based in the country. He was also mindful of the part to be played in melding these facets together by creating an educated and technically proficient workforce who would need to be sufficiently infused with a spirit of patriotism.

And what is more, Acheampong appeared to have been keenly conscious of a key obstacle purposely designed to keep the economies of the developing world in a persistent state of dependency: the creation of indebtedness. He therefore sought to renounce the debts accrued by the Busia government -which he claimed were incurred through "corruption"- and he also denounced the Bretton Woods organisations responsible for imposing debt on 'Third World' economies.

A recapitulation of the projects pursuant to creating the conditions for self-reliance is warranted. The irony of importing large quantities of food was evidently not lost on Acheampong or anyone who bothered to survey Ghana's abundant resources in quality agricultural land, as indeed was the absurdity of Ghanaians having to purchase imported canned fish of what was caught off Ghana's own shores. Acheampong's response, his green revolution dubbed "Operation Feed Yourself", proved a success. The Agricultural Development Bank, which had been created by the Nkrumah government, was encouraged to support the revolution and the government made sure that farming equipment was made duty free. It also set up a transport task force to move produce from farms to the regional centres. By the end of the year of his coming to power, Ghana had achieved food sufficiency and in 1973 and 1974, Ghana was a net exporter of rice.



Then there was the manufacturing of cloth; another essential indicator of national self-sufficiency. The Acheampong government set up a sister project to Operation Feed Yourself named the "Operation Feed Your Industries". This involved the Cotton Development Board supplying Ghana's textile industries with cotton. The result was that some industries began

the manufacture of items such as towels and underwear. This fed into the goal of developing light industry; a difficult task under Acheampong's policy of *Yentua* (the renunciation of foreign debt), which made capitalisation from overseas extremely difficult, but one nonetheless which claimed a measure of success through for instance, the maintenance of sugar factories at Asutware and Komenda as well as the Bonsa Tyre Factory which supplied tyres for road transport, farming and construction. Vehicle assembly plants were established and there were even indigenous creations of vehicles known as the Boafo and the Adom.

Acheampong tried to build upon Nkrumah's Volta Region Project by initiating the building of the Kpong Dam and mulled over resuscitating the Atomic Energy Commission. He also promoted the idea of economic empowerment through the acquisition by the Ghanaian state of 51 percent of shares in some multinational companies which were taken up by Ghanaian citizens.

Striving for self-reliance requires a workforce that is adequately educated and it was under the Acheampong government that the most far-reaching policy statement on the structure and objectives of pre-university education was made. The Dzobo Committee on Educational Reform recommended the implementation of the Junior Secondary School (JSS) concept through which young people could receive vocational training. The regime started with a pilot of ten schools which were called "the continuation school". Students were also mobilised to become involved in [community projects](#) such as the construction of [irrigation canals](#) and the harvesting of crops. And the objective of providing shelter for the masses was not neglected: Housing projects were boosted under the auspices of the State Housing Corporation, the Tema Development Corporation and certain regional development corporations which built over 2000 housing units annually. Home ownership was prioritised and organisations were encouraged to set up housing loan schemes for their staff as was done in regard to the Armed Forces and Civil Service. Finally, the regime, which trumpeted a slogan "One nation, One People, One Destiny", tried to foster an atmosphere of patriotic feeling by introducing the National Pledge.

But Acheampong knew that his goal of securing Ghana's economic emancipation could not be achieved while the nation was saddled with debt; debts which he alleged were "tainted with corruption". He defiantly issued a pledge not to pay for those debts that had been contracted in bad faith which he encapsulated in the Twi word *Yentua* i.e. "We will not pay". He based this on the rationale of *Kafo Didi* ("the debtor too must eat").

It was a high risk policy to defy the Western banks and corporations, as it would mean that Ghana would not be able to attract foreign investors. And self-sufficiency would have to be achieved by means which would be similar to the hugely resented austerity measures imposed by the Busia government. The deeply ingrained habit of preferring foreign-produced goods to those that came with the "Made in Ghana" label -derisively referred to as "Made in Here"- would have to be changed; something that William Raspberry, an African-American syndicated columnist of the *Washington Post* thought would require "major re-education and psychological readjustment". But Acheampong clearly believed that Ghanaians would have to accept any hardships attendant to such readjustment. His position was that Ghanaians, who he claimed were "living in false glory", had to wean themselves off their self-inflicted dependencies. Ghana had to stop importing items for its basic sustenance. Going without would, he calculated, breed an urge to provide for themselves, and in providing for themselves the resultant enforced self reliance would serve as a boost to national pride. In his words:

If someone is living in this false glory and you try to remove him, he will try to capitalise on any hardship ... There is no hardship as such. Ghanaians can do without corned-beef. They can do without sardines which we are subsidising.

There were some dividends. Apart from the aforementioned successes in food production and light manufacturing, Acheampong's regime managed to turn around a trade deficit of US\$56 million in 1971 to a trade surplus of US\$204 million in 1973. The slashing of imports clearly played a major role in reversing the foreign exchange deficit inherited from Busia. The use of military men in settling state accounts, albeit in crude fashion yielded success. Soldiers were sent on debt-collecting missions while armed with lists of those in arrears in payment of power supply and rates. More than 30% of the government's bad debts were cleared up under a "pay up or go to barracks" ultimatum. Those defaulters who were sent to the barracks were subjected to two hours of drills conducted under the gaze of a sergeant-major. The health of the economy was also aided by a clampdown on custom evasion and smuggling across Ghana's borders, most notably with that of the Ivory Coast.

But these gains were short-lived. The oil crisis brought about by the Arab embargo against those nations perceived as having supported the State of Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973 certainly played a part in disrupting Acheampong's brave new world.

Writing a special report for the *New York Times* in December 1973, Kathleen Teltsch's "Oil Crisis Could Halt Poor Nations Growth" explained how countries such as Ghana were likely to be confronted by a threefold loss. First, they would have to pay more for the petroleum products they needed for industry and agriculture. Secondly, the expected recession in the industrialised world would result in huge cutbacks on the prices they had been able to get for exported commodities such as cocoa. And thirdly, there would be an expected cut back in regard to developmental assistance to poorer countries.

As with other countries, the extraordinary increase in oil prices had a negative impact on economic growth for Ghana. Indeed, 1973 saw the beginning of a decade-long per capita decline in GDP at an average of 3%. Industrial output declined and the budget deficit increased. Acheampong's solution was to print more money leading to an inflationary rate of 116.4 percent by 1977. He also stubbornly refused to adjust the domestic price of petroleum products to reflect the increase in the world price of crude oil. Instead, he opted to absorb the increases in the price of crude oil through the mechanism of subsidies rather than passing the cost to the consumer. Additionally, the price of cocoa on which Ghana relied for foreign currency earnings remained as volatile as ever.

Acheampong may have felt trapped in a cul-de-sac. His stance on the non-payment of debts earned him the same level of derision the likes of the American conservative commentator William F. Buckley reserved for the Chilean leftist leader Salvador Allende. His syndicated column of April 1973, accused Acheampong of finding a groundless excuse for not paying his country's debts. And like Allende, Acheampong committed the cardinal sin of nationalising over half of Ghana's foreign-owned gold, diamond and timber operations. With undisguised contempt, Buckley wrote:

But suddenly things began to happen to Ghana. Credit dried up -completely. Forced to pay cash for its imports, Ghana's prices skyrocketed. In no time at all, Acheampong was crawling back to the creditors, suggesting a modification of his previous boisterous, carefree solution to his country's economic

problems, which was to steal from foreigners.

There were already signs that Acheampong had capitulated in other areas including that related to the moral sphere. His indictment of the Busia government for what he termed its “hypocrisy” and the “huge fortunes” amassed abroad began to ring hollow as reports of nepotism and corruption within his military regime began to filter out.

There were allegations that Acheampong, in league with his Commissioner for Industry, was depositing foreign currency into a Nigerian bank. A report by the *New York Times* in July 1979, the month after his execution along with other senior officers who had served in his regime for “using their positions to amass wealth while in office and recklessly dissipating state funds to the detriment of the country”, described the seven years of military rule as “to have been among the most corrupt in modern-day Africa”. It was claimed that two-thirds of the licenses needed to deal in foreign exchange were issued through Acheampong’s office rather than the Bank of Ghana. He reportedly received a kick-back of at least 10 percent on major transactions.

Among the nepotistic appointments made by Acheampong were the appointment of a cousin of his as the head of the Ghana Supply Commission; this notwithstanding the man’s earlier dismissal for mishandling bank funds during a previous appointment. Another cousin was appointed head the Electricity and Sewerage Control Commissions, while an uncle, an Ashanti chieftain turned businessman, had been extended government credit to the tune of 7 million Cedis. The military kleptocracy at which Acheampong stood at the head permitted a culture of fraud and corruption which in the popular language of the day came to be known as *Kalabule*. The “big men” in power wielded power to acquire wealth and dispense patronage including those related to the rendering sexual favours. Thus the regime, if not Acheampong himself, who was rumoured to have many mistresses, received the nickname *Fa Woto Begye Golf* meaning “bring your backside for a golf”, a term inspired by the habit of government officials giving Volkswagen Golf cars to their concubines.

By the mid-1970s when Acheampong had dissolved the NRC and revamped the junta under the aegis of what was named the [Supreme Military Council](#) (SMC), he appeared to have run out of ideas about how to arrest the desperate economic situation which had engulfed the country. There were shortages of basic commodities in markets and stores, and smuggling was rife. Many educated Ghanaians fled abroad to secure employment particularly in Nigeria which was experiencing an economic upsurge owing to the increased revenues from the exploitation of crude oil. That his government could launch a national essay writing competition seeking suggestions as to how the economy improved only confirmed its level of incompetence. And Acheampong’s decision in 1977 to declare a “Week of National Repentance” from June 27th to July 3rd during which Ghanaians would repent before God and pray for the revival of the economy only confirmed the view that he had become out of touch with reality and even delusional.

The proposal by Acheampong of what he termed “Union Government” (UNIGOV) in October 1976 was his last major political initiative. This was a form of multilateral state governance that Acheampong envisaged would dispense with the acrimony and rancour that had accompanied multi-party politics in Ghana. He may have been impressed by the diarchy of military-civil rule as developed under the rule of his Egyptian contemporary, Anwar Sadat. There the mixed economy model allowed for a free market alongside a state monopoly of heavy industry with control over imports and the financial speculation market. Interestingly,

Acheampong's proposals did not attempt to include any elements of the methods by which Ghana's pre-colonial feudal-organised kingdoms operated. For instance, Colonel Richard Ratsimandrava, a short-lived military ruler of the Malagasy Republic, had as a Minister of the Interior pioneered a concept of governance based on the traditional system of *Fokon'olona* that aimed to unify the diverse political movements whose differences had led to outbreaks of violence.

But in this coming together of the "estates" of military, police and civilian components, most saw an attempt by Acheampong to preserve his power and avoid setting Ghana on a path to democratic civilian rule. UNIGOV, or *Nkabom Aban* was met with widespread opposition from professional associations such as the Ghana Bar Association (GBA) and student groups. In 1976, the GBA called on the Acheampong regime to take immediate steps to return the country to civilian rule. And the following year, the National Union of Ghana Students organized demonstrations at the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Coast and the University of Science and Technology to call for the resignation of General Acheampong. He refused and closed down each university on May 13th 1977.

Opposition to UNIGOV also came from Lt. General Akwasi Afrifa, the retired soldier who had handed power to Kofi Busia in 1969, and the man whom Acheampong had arrested and detained in January 1972 on the grounds that Afrifa had been plotting a counter-coup designed to restore Busia. In a letter dated December 18th 1977, Afrifa advised his former colleague that "the political forces militating against it are too strong." Acheampong went ahead with a referendum for UNIGOV on March 30th 1978. He secured a victory for the proposal with 55% of the claimed 1,983,678 votes cast (less than 24% of the registered voters), but the figures were almost certainly manipulated. Further, the margin of approval was far from the overwhelming endorsement envisaged by the regime.

It was the final straw for those of his colleagues who could see only a wall in front of them. On July 5th, a palace coup initiated by several senior military commanders forced Acheampong to resign. At the beginning of May 1979, the new Supreme Military Council, by virtue of the Armed Forces (Miscellaneous Provisions) Decree, stripped him of his rank, all honours he had acquired during his tenure in office, as well as his entitlement to retirement benefits. After specifying that Acheampong would be subject to a sentence not exceeding 5 years imprisonment without the option of a fine if he entered "any military barracks, camp, establishment or installation", the decree went on to set out a exhaustive list of economic, administrative and other forms of personal misconduct "against the state and the people of Ghana".

The decree also confined him to Trabuom, his home village.

Although his successor Lt. General Frederick Akuffo made arrangements for a return to civilian rule, the continuing economic malaise and discontent felt in all parts of Ghanaian society came to a head in the early part of June 1979 when an uprising by junior ranks of the armed forces seized power. A new leader named Jerry Rawlings, a half-Scottish air force flight lieutenant who had been sprung from a prison cell where he had been ensconced since leading an abortive coup a few weeks earlier, was installed as the leader of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The AFRC immediately made clear its intention to hold to account those it considered responsible for Ghana's economic woes and proceeded with what it described as a 'House Cleaning' operation. Acheampong and a number of other high-ranking military officials including two former Heads of State, Lt. General Akuffo and Lt. General [Akwasi Afrifa](#), were apprehended and placed in detention.

During his detention, Acheampong was interrogated about his activities while in power. Then on Wednesday, June 13th he was allowed to give a press conference in Accra. The reason for this, a spokesman for the AFRC explained, was not to afford Acheampong the “opportunity to exonerate himself from the allegations made against him”, rather, it was to openly demonstrate to all, particularly to former high-placed government officials, that Acheampong in his statements to his interrogators had been “persistently shifting blame away from himself to other people” in a bid to “save his own skin”. The AFRC’s statement ended on an ominous note:

The Council wishes to assure the public that Mr. Acheampong’s professed support for the objectives of the revolution will not deter the Council pursuing relentlessly, its stated aim of punishing severely, the selfish pillage of the nation’s wealth by past regimes.

Acheampong was treated to a last dinner of *fufu* brought to him by his 25-year-old daughter Elizabeth. His last words to her were “Tell everybody I was a good man and pray for me.” The next morning, Acheampong and E.K. Utuka, the major general who had served as the Commander of the Border Guards, were driven to an Anglican Church situated in Camp Burma, the seat of power for successive Ghanaian military governments. Both men prayed for a short period before being taken to the firing range in Teshie that was to serve as the place of execution. Captain Budu Koomson who had been charged with transporting both men recalled Acheampong’s quiet demeanour in contrast to Utuka who kept repeating that he had not received a trial.

What Acheampong’s final thoughts were as he contemplated his life coming to an end are anyone’s guess. But his mind doubtlessly at some point then or at some other time after the AFRC takeover must have tread back to the contents of the letter written to him by Afrifa in December 1977. In it, Afrifa had warned Acheampong about “the vengeance that is about to be unleashed on us.” He had been concerned about the growing public revulsion at the conduct of the military and the threats from Nkrumaists to exact revenge after a return to civilian government. At one point Afrifa wrote: “In order to discourage the military from staging coups in the future, how about if they line all of us up and shoot us one by one?”

Afrifa, along with [Akuffo](#) and four others, would be executed ten days later.

When the car arrived at the range, the execution stakes were still being prepared, so Koomson drove them to the nearby military academy and returned when the site was ready. Acheampong waved his ever present white handkerchief at the onlooking crowd. He took off his watch and handed it to a soldier. Koomson then placed a hood over his head and saluted him one final time before the firing squad took aim and obeyed the command to “fire”.

What then is the legacy of this former military Head of State whose mortal remains lay in a makeshift wooden coffin for over two decades at a cemetery reserved for common criminals? Today, the discourse on Acheampong among his countrymen often recalls a corrupt and incompetent leader who inexorably manoeuvred his country to disaster. The man whose time in power brought about the entrenchment of *Kalabule* culture and economic atrophy. His execution is also alternately remembered as a case of just retribution for the magnitude of his failings as a leader on the one hand, or as a gross injustice perpetrated by those infused with a mob mentality on the other.

Those who assert that Acheampong paid the price for the commission of treason by virtue of his supplanting a democratically elected government point to the Ghanaian Criminal Code of 1960 which expressly made the overthrow of a constitutionally elected government a criminal offence subject to capital punishment. Furthermore, the establishment by Acheampong of the NRC and the SMC facilitated the creation of 'illegal' regimes through which participants were incriminated by virtue of the Armed Forces Act of 1962, as well as the Superior Order Rule attendant to the Armed Forces regulation. Major Kofi Boakye-Gyan, the spokesman for the AFRC, insisted at the National Reconciliation Hearings in the early 2000s that this had been brought to the attention of his colleagues after consulting figures such as Colonel Peter Ageko, the head of the Armed Forces Legal Services Directorate; Justice Mills Odoi, the Advocate-General of the Armed Forces; and Justice Austin Amisah, an eminent jurist.

Others are not convinced, pointing out that Acheampong and other senior officers were not properly tried given the absence of any semblance of natural justice. There are also allegations that the executions were tribally motivated; that Akan officers, most notably the former Heads of State Acheampong, Afrifa and Akuffo were specifically targeted. Others dispute this by pointing out that the executed came from different ethnic backgrounds.

But it is worth noting that the army has been the centre of ethnic tensions which have only reflected the fears and grievances related to tribal affiliations in the wider society. And with the advent of the military into politics in 1966 there is much evidence of how ethically motivated manoeuvrings were undertaken. This has often centred on the rivalry between the Akan (including the Ashanti) and Ewe ethnic groups, the latter of which, together with the Ga) dominated Ghana's army at the time of independence. When Colonel Emmanuel Kotoka, an Ewe, led the coup which overthrew Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, there followed a junta with a preponderance of Ewes. But this began to lessen after Kotoka's assassination the following year during an [abortive coup](#) led by the subalterns Samuel Arthur and Moses Yeboah. The death of Kotoka and two other soldiers of Ewe ethnicity raised tensions between Ewe and Akan soldiers because of the preponderance of Akan military personnel who took part in the putsch and the fact that three of the four fatalities during the operation were Ewe.

If there is any truth to Samuel E. Finer's maxim that "military leadership always tries to control the political product of any successor regime they establish", then this was clearly exhibited by the manner in which Afrifa did all that he could to smoothen the path of his fellow-Ashanti Kofi Busia in the run-up to the 1969 elections during which time he arranged the removal of Ewe policemen from areas where it was felt they could threaten Busia's campaign. At the same time, he arranged for Akan army officers to replace Ewe ones stationed at strategic army commands. This policy of ethnic manipulation continued during Busia's time in office when Lt. Colonel Ignatius Acheampong, an Ashanti, was deployed to a series of strategically important positions of commands, the last from which he launched his coup. Busia's purges, it should be noted, extended to positions in the civil service where mass dismissals disproportionately affected Ewes and Gas.

Although Ewe domination of the military had been largely eroded by the time of Acheampong's putsch (only one Ewe was in a senior army position at the end of 1971), his action received critical support from two army majors of Ewe origin, namely Anthony Selormey and Kodzo Agbo. But both men were removed from the NRC by Acheampong who apparently succumbed to the perennial Akan fear regarding Ewe aspirations to political hegemony. It meant in effect that he was perpetuating the sort of marginalisation that had

been practised by Afrifa and Busia. Indeed, Acheampong had accused Busia of increasing ethnic factionalism in the Ghanaian Army which if unchecked, he believed, would mirror the tragic consequences of the Hausa-Igbo rivalry in the Nigerian Army:

I watched the seed of tribal conflict being slowly sown by the actions of the Busia regime and with the blood of millions of our Nigerian brothers to warn us. I acted to nip the threat in the bud.

This is the context in which those who brandish the argument that the half-Ewe Rawlings was the instrument of Ewe vengeance when Acheampong and his Akan kinsmen were executed have to contend with. In any case the executions, which would have been extended but for international protests including an oil embargo imposed by the Nigerian military regime, met with a good deal of public approval. The crowds at the execution sites had jeered at the prisoners and encouraged the executioners by yelling “Action! Action! Finish them all!” Away from the baying-for-blood, proletarian crowds, the executions were endorsed by a range of media and public organisations. For instance, the June 24th editorial of the *Catholic Standard*, which was entitled “The Great Lesson”, approved of the first round of executions which included Acheampong by noting that it was “a means of instilling discipline and justice” in the country.

The lessons to learn from the tragedy of General Ignatius Acheampong invite not only an analysis of historical ethnic rivalries in the Ghanaian military and society, they also warrant an appraisal of the nature and objectives of African leadership, the forms of governance that are chosen, as well as the reaction of people to the manner in which they are governed.

An appraisal of any leader including a military ruler such as Ignatius Acheampong has to necessarily scrutinise the ideas which informed the man. Acheampong was not an intellectual by any stretch of the imagination. But his words after he came to power and his initial policies did present a tangible vision of what he perceived Ghana should become.

Several of his military-ruler contemporaries such Colonel Mathieu Kerekou in Dahomey (later Benin) and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam of Ethiopia led regimes which were explicitly Marxist-Leninist in orientation. But Acheampong’s regime did not project itself as one which adhered to a specific ideological format. It is claimed that he once described himself as a “socialist”. And some have gone as far as to label him as an Nkrumaist. Acheampong appears to have been greatly influenced by Nkrumah although there are clear distinctions in the means each man attempted to utilise in order to make Ghana a self-reliant nation. Although the words that he uttered in the Twi language such as *Yentua* and *Kafo Didi* became popularised short-handed expressions of the major planks of his policies, he never prescribed a overarching ideological concept such as *Ujamaa*, the socialist-orientated programme of Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere. He also did not promote any socio-cultural policies such as the varieties of *Authenticite* as were attempted by Francois Tombalbaye in Chad and Mobutu Sese Seko in Congo (Zaire).

Nonetheless, from his early policies, Acheampong clearly led a government which operated within an economy that was centrally planned and had a free market. There is little evidence that he had any grounding in the disciplines of political economy and political science. He would therefore have been dependent on those “eminent” civilian advisers to whom he referred during his first press conference after seizing power. This lack of intellectual preparation for governing a country put Acheampong, as was the case with most

of the military leaders who came to power on the African continent at a serious disadvantage. At the same time, it is also important to note that even those leaders who held far greater levels of academic training and who had definable ideological approaches, such as Nkrumah and Nyerere ultimately did not ultimately succeed in their objectives.

But having a greater level of intellectual curiosity could have enabled Acheampong to have performed better in managing the economy as well as in positively re-shaping the Ghanaian psyche. He was born a Roman Catholic but almost certainly did not have the inclination or the ability to extract any of the substantive body of knowledge from the rich intellectual heritage of Catholicism which could have served as a resource in enhancing his understanding of economics, as well as serving as a reservoir of ideas on how to mobilise labour. An understanding of the works of Catholic scholars such as Heinrich Pesch might have provided a clearer vision on how to construct a “third way” of approaching economics that was neither capitalist nor socialist. A familiarity with Catholic social teaching and an appreciation of its universalism may also have given him concrete ideas ranging from how to foster national unity to translating Cistercian values on work ethic to the Ghanaian masses.

In fact, it is clear that by the time he had assumed office, Acheampong was no longer a practicing Catholic, and instead was heavily influenced by a succession of charismatic Christian churches. This factor severely limited Acheampong during his time in power and actually contributed to his downfall. He was a member of the Nazirite Healing Church, a mystical circle at Korle Gonno, Accra, at the time he led the coup which overthrew the Busia government. He also belonged at some point to an organisation named the Mystery of Mysteries Research Society.

It meant that Acheampong was captive to his spiritual psyche, one based on superstition and of taking solace and inspiration from the advice of charismatic leaders who prayed for him and saw visions for him. This background did not allow for a consistent pattern of rational thinking and reasoned decision-making, albeit that it did supply him with resolve and courage at some critical moments. For instance, an officer who was on duty in the operations room at the Ministry of Defence when Acheampong’s coup was underway in the early hours of January 13th told the Ghanaian Christian theologian John S. Pobee that he remembered Acheampong bursting into a room looking as if he were possessed and then telling the officer: “With effect from today, I have taken over the administration of this country. I have support, both spiritually and in men.”

Acheampong took his immersion in the spiritual vagaries of his religion when he set aside the days between June 27th and July 3rd a Week of National Repentance. This was one of Acheampong’s greatest errors of judgement. It earned him a great deal of derision from his countrymen who correctly interpreted as an attempt by Acheampong to lay the blame of the nation’s economic woes on the ‘sinfulness’ of the mass of people and divert the attention from the true culprits: the military regime headed by Acheampong.

By 1977, it was clear that the idealism of 1972 was a thing of the unrevivable past. But the subsequent degeneration and the dysfunctionality of his regime only make Acheampong’s lost vision all the more poignant and relevant today given the prevalence today of weak and dependent economies in sub-Saharan Africa.

The cause of this state of affairs does not rest solely with the quality of African leaders and their governments which have been generally incompetent, as well as lacking in both

courage and imagination. A great deal of it is caused by the prevailing global economic and financial arrangements put in place by the Western powers which serve to create a permanent state of indebtedness among developing nations. The economic powers of the West have also consistently worked towards stifling the development of local manufacturing industries in the developing world which would serve as unwanted competition. The sanctions imposed by the US Treasury Department on several East African nations who sought to reject the importation of *Mitumba* (imported used clothing) so as to develop their local cotton growing sector and cloth-making industries serves as a contemporary example. Furthermore, it can be strongly argued that those powers who possessed colonies only gave them an illusory independence because it was less expensive maintaining them in the sort of neo-colonial relationship that has persisted after “independence” was granted than bearing the cost of maintaining them when ruling them.

Acheampong’s renunciation of some, and not all debts, accrued by the Busia government provided one of the few instances where an African leader challenged, albeit unsuccessfully, debts which were unnecessarily foisted on a developing economy. It is tempting to believe that Acheampong may have been thinking as an orthodox Catholic who recalled the Church’s teaching of the sinfulness of usury. Yet, even if he (or his “eminent ” civilian advisers) were merely using their commonsense, his reaction was a precedent of great relevance given the contemporary state of understanding of the way the IMF and the World Bank function. For the modus operandi of the Bretton Woods institutions has been to create debt among nations; debt of course being a vital feature of the capitalist system. If this assessment of Acheampong is correct, then he had a greater level of insight into this issue than even the learned Julius Nyerere.

Nyerere was shrewd enough to ward off every attempt by the CIA to overthrow his government and he had the courage to persist with his uncompromising policy of giving a home to a multitude of Africa liberation movements, most of which were political left and perceived as “anti-Western” at the height of the Cold War, but he was very trusting of the Bretton Woods institutions with which he worked closely to bring his intended socialist paradise to fruition. The IMF and World Bank were amenable to what was termed “development economics” during an era when many Western states were ruled by left-of-centre political parties and when their economies were run according to Keynesian principles. But under *Ujamaa* the Tanzanian economy faltered: self-sufficiency in food production declined and debt increased. And while Nyerere admitted to mistakes, (the war successfully prosecuted against Uganda during the rule of Idi Amin did not help matters) the time he spent ruminating during his retirement enabled him, finally, to understand the mechanism causing the perpetual state of indebtedness that plagued developing nations; a phenomenon which was clearly extended to European nations such as Greece. While it would be presumptuous to anoint Ignatius Acheampong as a soothsayer of sorts, the veracity of his stance in regard to the accrual of tainted debts should be acknowledged in spite of his later incompetent management of the economy.

Acheampong’s initiative to create UNIGOV, albeit a misbegotten one, also raises an enduring question about the ways in which African states have chosen to govern themselves in the aftermath of their independence. These states have slavishly followed the systems prescribed by the colonial powers that had previously ruled their territories or have subsequently adopted the American model. Often, these ostensibly democratic systems have been tainted by corruption and despotic rulers. They have often appeared to be unworkable.

It is an issue which has not been retained in the consciousness of Ghana's political leaders since the time of Acheampong, although Brigadier Joseph Nunoo-Mensah, a short-term member of the military government established after the second coming of Flt. Lt. Jerry Rawlings had cause to say the following in March of 1982: "We have had party politics brought down to us from Europe. We have worked with it for twenty five years. It has been disastrous. The people are disillusioned. They are disenchanted. They've lost faith in the system, and I don't believe they will go back to that system again".

Rawlings, of course, went on to transform himself into a civilian leader and a system based on the liberal democratic tradition remains. But although Acheampong's attempt to adopt UNIGOV was largely seen as a cover for his objective of holding onto power, the rationale which he proffered for the adoption of a different sort of governing system still resonates. The "divisions, tribalism, victimisation and various forms of social evil brought by party politics" persist and the idea of UNIGOV ought not to be condemned to the proverbial 'trash can of history', at least in the sense of Ghanaian and other African nations thinking of developing institutions of governance that are tailor-made to their cultural and historical circumstances.

Another issue which the Acheampong years of military rule raises is that of the reaction of the people to those who govern them. A foreign observer based in Ghana in the late 1970s spoke of its people as perpetually throwing up their hands "as though accepting that they will always be victims." The inaction of people was not one of "patience" but one of "apathy". This fatalism that leads to the acceptance of tyranny was expounded upon by Elizabeth Amoah, an academic who wrote:

Whatever has been ordained as part of a man's nkrabea is believed to have a specific time ordained for it. This belief influences greatly how man goes about his daily activities. Man finds from his group that he should not rush to do things, for it is believed whatever is bound to happen will come true in the time appointed for it.

The Akan concept of predestination has been argued by some including Pobee to have enabled tyranny and oppression to have gone unchecked during long periods of Ghanaian history. The saying *Onyame asem*, meaning "it is God's business", encapsulates this mentality. It is a mentality aided by the influence of the charismatic churches to which he belonged which was firmly inculcated into Acheampong's belief system. His favourite song at the time that he led the coup which brought him to power in 1972, was titled *Afedia wura beba*, which literally means "the owner of the trap will come." Thus, as Pobee put it:

In God's own appointed time a man is raised to subdue the oppressor of the nation. Meanwhile the masses do practically nothing or, at the best they will complain behind closed doors, to await the appointed time.

It is worth noting that Acheampong was not a bloodthirsty tyrant in the mould of a Mengistu. He never resorted to murdering colleagues who he may have perceived as threats to his position. And those who were convicted of plotting to overthrow his regime and sentenced to death had their sentences commuted. Nonetheless, he ruled as a dictator ruled by exercising a good deal of arbitrary authority including when it came to dealing with opposition and dissent which was channelled through the media. In their book entitled *Press Freedom and Communication in Africa*, Festus Eribo and William Jong-Ebot describe

Acheampong as having “restored the authoritarian method of press control” after the overthrow of the Busia government. For instance, his military regime issued a decree indemnifying the state-owned press against libel suits by opposition figures who alleged that they had been defamed by state-owned media outlets. In March 1973, his government revived the Newspaper Licensing Decree and the Rumour Decree to tighten control of Ghana’s media institutions and in the course of imposing a regime of [official censorship in the media](#); he arrested and detained editors and journalists.

The Acheampong regime was of course challenged by various professional and student groups and in doing so displayed a great amount of courage. But the overall tendency of African societies to live under intolerable circumstances created by military regimes, as well as dictatorial and unresponsive civilian governments is a tangible one.

After the execution of Acheampong and his military colleagues, the *Times of Zambia* editorialised that “The fact must remain startling clear that the situation in Ghana is symptomatic of a rottenness that is slowly eating away at the very vitals of African independence.” Yet, the description of “rottenness” is a suitable one to apply to the condition of many nations in sub-Saharan Africa. Though there might have been a diminution of bloody coups, civil wars, retributive executions of the pillars of an ancient regime and famine, the scourge of bad governance continues and with it the resultant widespread poverty and lack of true independence from outside powers.

The legacy of Ignatius Acheampong must not only be to draw lessons from his failings as a leader, but to also draw some inspiration from what he attempted to achieve at the beginning of his ill-fated rule. In his announced “guiding principle” he called on all Ghanaians to “look inward to themselves, to their resources; human as well as material, for defining the way of life, the system of government, the social and cultural practices, and the general economic policy to be pursued for national development and survival.”

His words remain a blueprint for any African country that seriously envisages building a strong and progressive nation.

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