

Cross-Cultural Ties between Ghana and Egypt: The Agency of the Egyptian Community in Accra, Ghana

Edmond Akwasi Agyeman* and Akwasi Kwarteng Amoako-Gyampah**

Abstract

Ghana is recognized as an important destination of international migrants. In spite of the socio-economic and political upheavals that the country experienced during the early post-independence era leading to the (forced) return of several of its migrant groups, some have still remained and formed permanent communities and integrated into the Ghanaian society. This paper focuses on the Egyptian diaspora in Ghana. It examines: (1) the type of cross-border and transnational ties that Egyptian migrants in Ghana have established between Ghana and Egypt; (2) how these ties generate cross-cultural relations between Ghana and Egypt; and (3) the extent to which these ties provide a privileged economic and political position to the Egyptian community in Ghana. The work is based on the socio-cultural transnationalism theory. A socio-historical method was adopted for the research and apart from the analysis of historical data, eight key informants were interviewed. The paper shows that due to high-profile intermarriages between Ghanaians and Egyptians, coupled with the 'Nkrumah factor', the Egyptian community in Ghana occupies a privileged economic and political position in Ghana.

Keywords *Egyptian migrants in Ghana, intermarriage, privilege, economic and political position.*

Introduction

The migration of persons, families and groups across the African continent has played a leading role not only in advancing the livelihood strategies of the different people who inhabit the continent, but also in the process of empire-building, state formation and the evolution of the present forms of nation-states (Agyeman and Setrana, 2014). Migration was also key in promoting the interaction amongst the different tribes and ethnic groups. It facilitated the building of social, political and economic relationships across the African continent. Such movements took different forms and occurred for varying reasons. These included large-scale movements owing to unfavourable

* Centre for African Studies, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

** Department of History Education, University of Education, Winneba & Research Associate, Department of History, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

climatic conditions; economically induced migrations such as people moving in search of new farmlands, hunting grounds, grazing land and for trade; as well as politically induced migration such as groups fleeing from wars or from tyrannical, wicked and atrocious leaders (Boahen et al, 1986).

Whereas many of these movements and socio-economic dynamics took place in the period before the development of modern African states, colonialism and events leading to the independence of African states led to the construction of new ties and political alliances between states across the African continent. For example, during the Ghanaian struggle for independence, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first President, was strongly backed by a pan-African ideology which enabled him to develop inter-state relations that permeated the ethnic, religious, racial and territorial boundaries that existed on the continent. This led him to develop stronger ties with the Maghreb countries which later constituted the Casablanca group that supported the establishment of a single African state (Badejo, 2008). It is within this context that this paper foregrounds the intersection between Ghana and Egypt, the pioneers in African independence. The shared political ideology between Kwame Nkrumah and the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser set the grounds for the construction of political ties between the two states during the period of the African independence struggle and in subsequent periods on the continent.

Additionally, Nkrumah's marriage to Madam Fathia, an Egyptian woman, during the late 1950s, and other high-profile marriages between Ghanaians and Egyptians contributed to solidifying these relations. This subsequently ignited migration movements between Ghana and Egypt, further intermarriages as well as trade and socio-cultural ties between the two countries. Today Egyptian migrants constitute one of the most significant North African communities in Ghana and, over the years, they have contributed to establishing various degrees of linkages such as trade, political ties and religious networks between Egypt and Ghana.

This paper focuses on the Egyptian diaspora in Ghana, examining, (1) the type of cross-border and transnational ties that Egyptian migrants in Ghana establish between Ghana and Egypt; (2) how these ties generate cross-cultural relations between Ghana and Egypt; and (3) the extent to which these ties provide a privileged economic and political position to the Egyptian community in Ghana.

Theoretical Framework and Method

The work is situated within the framework of migration and socio-cultural transnationalism literature (see Basch et al, 1994; Levitt, 1998; Portes et al, 1999). According to this line of thought, the activities of migrants across state borders create transnational kinship ties and identities that transcend national barriers. These ties vary from informal to formal ones, ranging from individual to collective linkages, including family, economic, political, religious and institutional connections. Through these ties, migrants are able to transfer and exchange vital resources, including cultural goods, knowledge, human and financial capital that affect origin and host societies (Basch et al, 1994; Levitt, 1998; Portes et al, 1999).

This study adopted a socio-historical approach, which was premised on the thesis that a combination of history and sociology provides a sense of complexity and change, sensitizing researchers to strategies that were prevalent in the past, while pointing to contemporary correlates. Beyond that, the sociological approach provides a theoretical lens for analyzing historical phenomena. Data for the study was generated through interviews of key informants, who were identified through the snowball sampling technique. A total of five key informants were interviewed in Accra between June and September, 2016. They included Egyptian community leaders, embassy staff and entrepreneurs living in Accra. Participants felt free and at ease to discuss their lived experiences and activities in Ghana. The study accessed archival materials housed at the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra, as well as newspapers and secondary literature to gain in-depth knowledge about Ghana-Egypt relations. This information was useful in understanding and analyzing the diplomatic context that shaped the cross-border and transnational ties between Egypt and Ghana and the experiences of Egyptian migrants in Ghana. It was unfortunate that a key target group was not interviewed. These were the children from marriages between Ghanaians and Egyptians who hold key political positions in Ghana. That was due to the interview period (2016) coinciding with an election year in Ghana and raising sensitive issues could potentially affect the identity sentiments of participants and eventually impact adversely on the research.

Trans-Saharan Migration and Relations between North and West Africa in Historical Perspective

The mention of trans-Saharan relations evokes several images and feelings – some of which are historical constructs. In some instances, the Sahara evokes the image of a desert – an arid land where human habitation and activity is less desirable. In other instances, it conjures the image of a vast sea of sand that separates the Mediterranean North African region from tropical Africa. Yet, in another sense, and probably the most popular, it evokes the image of commerce – the trans-Saharan trade that linked North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa (Austen, 2010). As a result of the trade relations between the northern part of Africa and the rest of tropical Africa, human mobility between states and across the Sahara became a regular occurrence, over a very long period. Indeed, historians date the beginning of the trans-Saharan trade to the 3rd and 4th centuries. Yet, its traffic became significant from the 7th century and reached its peak between the 14th and 17th centuries (Boahen et al, 1986). These trade relations across the Sahara provided sub-Saharan Africa with its earliest and most significant contact with the outside world before Europeans arrived on the Atlantic coast of West Africa in the 15th century (see Austen, 2010). Falola (2000: 25) aptly observed that, “trade was, perhaps, the most important form of relations between pre-colonial African states”.

The reason for the emergence of the trans-Saharan trade have been extensively documented (Boahen et al, 1986). One lesser-known fact is that merchants from North Africa, in the initial stages of the trade, rarely made any contact nor built any relations beyond the cities south of the Sahara. Austen (2010) has argued that the perceived dangers associated with travel beyond the desert, the lack of a more sophisticated mode of transportation as well as the lack of cultural skills to traverse such new environments, hindered such enterprise.

Nonetheless, in later centuries, it seemed that with the involvement and active participation of the Mande and Dyula traders, who had acquired the cultural skills to mediate the cultural relations of both the North African traders and their neighbouring sub-Saharan Africans, the trans-Saharan trade extended into the savannah and forest areas further south. Thus, as Austen (2010: 41) states, “the task of connecting the end points of the caravans with savannah and forest zone sources of export goods thus became the specialty of

indigenous Sudanic traders.” These Sudanic merchants would develop into professional entrepreneurs, developing unique communities close to commercial centres of the Sahel and beyond and would eventually become not only exporters of tropical African products across the Sahara to the north, but also the transmission belt of the culture of the Northern Africans to most people of sub-Saharan Africa. The vital role of trade is underscored by Falola (2000: 26), who asserts that, “the requirements of trade, such as currencies, languages of communication, trade routes, markets and professional traders served to promote interactions among states.”

Migrants, mostly merchants, formed communities in ancient Ghana, Gao, Mali, Djenné, Bona and Timbuctu and these migrant communities which were often referred to as ‘stranger communities’ integrated well into their host communities. Skinner (1963) notes that migrants, predominantly merchants, actively involved themselves in both local and foreign trade and they became the economic force that ensured that almost the entire West African sub-region was linked together as a common economic unit. He further notes that, because of their wide exposure and their ability to understand and speak more than one language, their host communities relied on them to act as interpreters to visitors as well as travellers to and from the host community. Additionally, because of their vast exposure to other cultures they became cultural bearers, introducing their host communities to new cultural traits. Historians have established the impact of the trans-Saharan trade on the development of African kingdoms. The trade provided the impetus for the rise and development of ancient kingdoms such as Ghana, Mali and Songhay. These kingdoms primarily benefited from the trans-Saharan trade to rise into prominence. The trade was also essential for the spread of ideas, goods and institutions among African kingdoms. The spread of languages such as Hausa and Swahili across the continent as well as the spread of the Arabic civilisation to most parts of Africa was essentially the result of the trans-Atlantic trade.

With the arrival of Europeans on the West Coast of Africa, the direction of the trans-Saharan trade shifted towards the Atlantic Ocean, so that by the 18th century, the trans-Saharan trade had declined considerably. As European colonisation made inroads on the African continent, the migration pattern of Africans was also reconfigured (Skinner, 1963). It similarly altered the nature of relationships that existed between migrants and their host communities. As new urban centres emerged and as Europeans established plantations and commercial ventures along the West African coast, new opportunities were created and the number of immigrants to these new entrepôts increased

substantially. As Skinner (1963) observed: “African migrants who were later to settle as strangers flocked to these centres from far and wide, drawn and pushed by forces introduced by Europeans. For example, Yoruba, Togolese, Ewe, Dahomeyans, Mossi, and Songhay migrated to the former Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast...” (Skinner, 1963: 309). These new migrants followed pre-European migrant traditions and established their own permanent quarters under their elected chiefs and headsmen. This pattern of migration across sub-Saharan Africa, encouraged by the colonial political economy, continued throughout the colonial period, so that by the time colonial rule ended, several permanent migrant communities in most West African cities had been established. These migrants were politically and economically integrated into their host communities and served as the bridge between their host communities and their original nations. Yet, relations between migrants and their host communities were not always cordial (Skinner, 1963).

Economic pressures often pitched migrants against local populations as migrants were often accused by local populations of helping to perpetuate the exploitative tendencies of Europeans by accepting low wages and serving as middlemen between the Europeans and the locals (Akyeampong, 2006). Also, the migrants’ involvement in local politics, particularly, during the struggle for independence, often created tensions between migrant communities and nationalist leaders, resulting in some migrants being deported soon after independence. A clear case was the deportation of several migrants in Ghana in the 1950s and also in the Ivory Coast in more recent times (Agyeman and Setrana, 2014).

As most African countries gained independence in the 20th century, new dynamics emerged not only in the pattern of migration in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in the relationship between migrants, migrant communities and their host communities.

The Egyptian Diaspora Community in Ghana

The Egyptian community in Ghana, along with the Lebanese, constitute what is generally referred to as Ghana’s Arab community. This group of nearly one million migrants in Ghana, occupies a central position in Ghana’s economic and political structure. Whereas the Egyptian migration to Ghana started during the 1950s, that of the Lebanese started a century earlier (Akyeampong, 2006). The earliest Egyptian settlers in Ghana were mainly diplomatic administrative staff. However, from the late 1950s Egyptian women who were married to

Ghanaian men, settled in Ghana. Those women included Roubay Sinare, wife of the late army general, Alhaji Said Senare, Megwa Cata, the wife of another army general and most notably Fathia Nkrumah, the wife of Ghana's first President, Kwame Nkrumah. There were, indeed, curious amorous relationships between Ghanaian military professionals and Egyptian women and between Ghanaian political elite and Egyptians. That was, in part, due to the training programmes and educational opportunities offered to Ghanaians by the Egyptian government, as well as the prevailing Pan-African political ideology of the time (CCT5).¹

In subsequent years, other Egyptian migrants arrived in Ghana to establish their businesses. The current Egyptian community in Ghana remains very small, numbering between 200 and 800. They have settled mainly in Accra and Kumasi.

In spite of its small size, the Egyptian community in Ghana, like the Lebanese, controls large-scale family businesses and constitutes what Akyeampong describes as "a formidable entrepreneurial class" (Akyeampong, 2006: 308). Some notable companies controlled by Egyptian migrants include *Rafi Aluminium*, *Elsewedy Electric* which is the lead supplier of electrometers and cables in Ghana as well as *Mantrac* which is the sole company authorized to supply CAT caterpillars (construction equipment) and spare parts to Ghana.

In addition, children of the Egyptian migrants and some of the migrants themselves have become formidable political leaders in Ghana. Three prominent cases include Samia Nkrumah, daughter of Kwame Nkrumah who was leader of her father's Convention People's Party and Member of Parliament for the Jomoro constituency between 2012 and 2016; Alhaji Said Senare, the second vice-chairman of the National Democratic Congress, who also served as Ghana's ambassador to Egypt and later to Saudi Arabia; and Dr Medhat Khalil, chairman of Rafi Aluminium and patron of the Egyptian community in Ghana; Dr Khalil is also the Malawian ambassador to Ghana.

During the study, it was evident that the Egyptian community in Ghana constitutes a privileged group and unlike other immigrant groups, the level of interaction between them and members of the Ghanaian community is quite intense. The study deduced that this is largely the result of the (high-profile)

¹ CCT5: CCT was the coding technique that was adopted in order to protect the anonymity of our informants. CCT1, CCT2, CCT3, CCT4 and CCT5, thus, refers to the first, second, third, fourth and fifth informant respectively.

intermarriages that have occurred between Ghanaians and Egyptians since the 1950s.

Intermarriage and Cross-Cultural and Kinship Ties between Ghanaians and Egyptians

Among the non-West African migrants in Ghana, Egyptians have increasingly developed conjugal ties with Ghanaians. Akyeampong (2006) observed that Lebanese migrants who have lived in Ghana for more than a century have managed to keep their cultural heritage and ethnic/racial identity intact by strictly prohibiting mixed marriages between members of their group and those of the host society. Research on some West African migrants in Ghana also report a similar practice. A case in point pertains to the Gao and Zabrama people from Mali and Niger who observe a similar exogamous marriage prohibition rule between Ghanaians and members of their community (Gamado, 2016). This practice has succeeded in creating some degree of distance between these groups and members of the host society, across generations.

However, unlike the Lebanese, Gao and Zabrama, the Egyptian diaspora in Ghana has developed strong cross-cultural ties with Ghanaians. This is manifested in intermarriages and the resultant development of kinship relations, the establishment of the Coptic Orthodox Churches and Islamic centres in Ghana led by Egyptian scholars, the development of Egyptian businesses, and the popularity of the Egyptian smock, even among non-Ghanaian Muslims in Ghana. These practices were also confirmed during the interviews with the key informants. One of them said: “There are no borders between Egyptians and Ghanaians; there are no short ways in the interrelations” (CCT1).²

Intermarriage between Ghanaians and Egyptians has been a prominent feature since the 1950s. This practice appears to be the key behind the establishment of close ties between members of the two communities. In 1957 when Kwame Nkrumah married his Egyptian wife, this relationship lent itself to several interpretations. Recently, Ray (2015) argued that Nkrumah’s marriage to Madam Fathia created panic among Western leaders who viewed it as grounds for a political alliance between Ghana and Egypt. In fact, Western

² CCT1: Informant 1.

scholars, such as Scott Thompson (1969: 49), viewed it as a politically motivated 'bizarre' marriage:

In December 1957, Nkrumah married an Egyptian Coptic woman, one of the more bizarre alliances caused by his foreign policy [...] The marriage was to be a continuous embarrassment to Nkrumah, and to his colleagues. He seldom paid any attention to her. At the time of writing, it was reported she was suing Nkrumah for divorce.

In fact, while the political circumstances at the time opened the window for intensive interaction between leaders and citizens of Ghana and Egypt who combined roles to help African counties to gain independence, evidence from this study further shows that the affective relationships that developed at the time might have triggered the close political ties between Nkrumah and Nasser after the 1950s and not the *vice versa*.

The role of Ghanaian students studying in Egypt was key in this process of affective interaction. Over the years, Egypt has served as one of the principal destinations of Ghanaian overseas students. A good number of Ghanaian Islamic scholars attained university education in Egypt and it was during the period of their schooling in that country that some of them met their Egyptian partners. This practice was confirmed during this researcher's interaction with leaders of the Egyptian community in Accra. According to their patron, it was Alhaji Said Senare who had advised his friend, Kwame Nkrumah, to marry Madam Fathia after Senare had forged an affective relationship with an Egyptian woman while studying in Egypt:

While Senare was studying in Egypt at Hazard University, he met his Egyptian wife. Senare married the Egyptian (woman) and introduced Fathia to Nkrumah (CCT5).³

As mentioned earlier, both Senare and Nkrumah relocated their wives to Ghana and these high-profile marriages set the precedent for further marriages and intensive kinship ties between Ghanaians and Egyptians. Another key informant observed:

The effect of Nkrumah's marriage with Madam Fathia is that many Ghanaians and Egyptians started having mixed marriages. Some Ghanaian students returned from Egypt with wives, diplomatic representatives and other Egyptians came to Ghana and started having

³ CCT5: Informant 5.

*Ghanaian wives. They did so not just to imitate Nkrumah, but due to intensive relations (CCT2).*⁴

This social phenomenon was not the preserve of Ghanaian males who went to Egypt to seek wives. Egyptians in Ghana also sought Ghanaian wives. Moreover, there are many intermarriages between Ghanaians and Egyptians within the Muslim community in Ghana. Some of the Egyptian community leaders interviewed for this study, are also married to Ghanaians. A striking case is the patron of the community, who had been living in Ghana for 33 years, at the time of the interview and is married to a Ghanaian woman and they have children. He is the owner of one of the largest aluminium firms in West Africa and is also the current ambassador of the Republic of Malawi to Ghana. This man represents a perfect example of instances where the lives of Ghanaians and Egyptians intersect. During the interview, it was evident that he used part of the premises of his company building as the Embassy of Malawi. Apart from being an entrepreneur and ambassador, he is also a professor and a lawyer who holds a doctoral degree. He asserted that he had achieved everything he had aspired to, after migrating to Ghana. Although the circumstances leading to his appointment as Malawian ambassador to Ghana were not discussed during the interview, this study surmises that Ghana's ties with Egypt and Malawi during the African independence struggle in the 1950s and the role of Nkrumah opened such an opportunity for him. Malawi's first President, Hastings Kamuzu Banda, who studied and practiced medicine in the United Kingdom, settled and practiced his medical profession in Ghana after he left Europe. During the time he was in Ghana (then the Gold Coast) he was active in Ghana's independence movement before he finally moved to his home country Malawi to lead his people to achieve independence.

The Ghanaian concept of kinship is very broad and when two people marry, it is perceived as entire families, communities and ethnic groups marrying. As a result, Egyptian migrants in Ghana are perceived in many circles as kinsmen rather than foreigners. The appointment in 2012 of Alhaji Said Senare, whose mother is an Egyptian, as Ghana's ambassador to Egypt symbolically represents this relationship. In doing so, Ghana was in fact sending her son to represent her in his mother's land. The choice of Samia Nkrumah as leader of her father's political party also demonstrates the level of acceptance that she has gained within the Ghanaian society. As a matrilineal society, the Akan

⁴ CCT2: Informant 2.

which constitutes, by far, the largest ethnic group in Ghana, and to which Nkrumah belonged, children do not normally inherit from their father's lineage. .

The cross-cultural exchanges between Ghanaians and Egyptians are evident in several other practices, including culinary practices, tastes and the manner of dressing. Ghanaian local dishes such as *fufu*, *kenkey* and *banku* have also become staple foods for many Egyptians living in Ghana. This was confirmed in the following interview:

The Egyptians that came here managed to live the way Ghanaians live, even though they kept their identity (CCT2)⁵.

The adoption of Ghanaian local dishes by the Egyptians migrants could also be attributed to the intermarriages. However, this does not mean that the Egyptians have abandoned their ways. The lifestyle of the Egyptian migrants and their children born with Ghanaian spouses manifests a close knit between Ghanaian and Egyptian cultures. This is evident in name-giving, way of dressing, religious practices and social relations. For example, during a number of public appearances, Alhaji Said Senare sometimes wears the Egyptian smock to showcase this cross-cultural identity.

Conclusion

This paper examined the transnational ties between Ghana and Egypt which have been forged due to migration. In tracing the instances where North and West Africa intersect, the paper examined the kinship, political and economic ties that have developed between Ghana and Egypt since the 1950s. While the political circumstances at the time dictated the instances leading to such relationships, these connections have been perpetuated by the Egyptian community living in Ghana. In an attempt to situate where transnational kinship ties connect Ghana and Egypt, this study found that the impact of high-profile intermarriages between Ghanaians and Egyptians were at the bedrock of such relationships.

Whereas the existing literature on migrants' transnationalism is largely drawn from research based on migration experiences between the United States and South America or Asia (Iredale et al, 2003; Portes et al, 1999) and between Europe and Africa (Mazzucato, 2010) this paper shows that there is a strong

⁵ CCT2: Informant 2.

transnational tie between North and West Africa as a result of the activity of migrants.

Ghana has been able to maintain long-term political, trade, cultural and social relations with Egypt because the Egyptian citizens who settled in Ghana many years ago have developed and used several forms of transnational networks to connect the two countries. The Egyptian migrants in Ghana are able run their businesses and trade through the transnational networks they have established between their host and origin countries. This practice has proven to be common elsewhere, as the case among Bangladeshi migrants in Japan illustrated (Rahman and Lian, 2010).

The high rate of intermarriage between the Egyptians and Ghanaians has given the former the leverage in developing a degree of economic and political power in Ghana. The informal and formal family and kinship ties (husband, wife, son, daughter, in-laws, parents, grandparents) which have developed between Ghanaians and Egyptians have had a rippling effect on the way members of the two communities and nations perceive one another. As kinsmen, these ties constitute an important resource to leverage political relationships. More so, these ties are buried in lasting relationships (the burial of Madam Fathia in Ghana symbolically represents this) and they have become important elements for the formation of a mnemonic community, that is, a community with memory of a common history, which continues to influence a great deal of Ghana-Egypt relations.

This study recommends that any discourse on migrant integration in Ghana should not overlook the complexity of transnational relations, kinship and socio-cultural ties that develop between migrants and the host society, which nurture and perpetuate long-term coexistence. The literature would be enriched by future studies that drill down more deeply to explore the construction of the Ghanaian-Egyptian identity among the second generation, that is, the children from these mixed marriages.

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