

In Memoriam¹
Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu

Felix K. Ameka

On 17 November, 2016, a huge tree fell in Boston, Mass, USA. The tap root of this tree was firmly planted in the same place some seventy-eight years earlier, on 27th April 1938. This tree was watered on both sides of the Atlantic and flourished and blossomed in Ghana for more than half a century. The sweet-scented flowers from this tree infected, sustained, soothed and nourished many of her students, colleagues and friends. This tree was a store of very vast knowledge, incredible energy and kind-heartedness. Her name was Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu.

Mary Esther, you were uprooted from this world too soon, and too quickly and you have left us, the Ghanaian and African Linguistics community, speechless. Your departure has created a void that cannot be filled.

I wish that I could tell you
I'm not ready to let you go.
But you've already departed,
And we are feeling so empty.
You have left us with
 unfinished business
 unfinished conversations
 unfulfilled immediate and long-term plans
 and above all memories
Memories of your captivating smile
Memories of your wise counsel
Memories of moments of sharing
Memories of

Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu was the most prolific and one of the foremost linguists in Ghana, a distinguished scholar and a world leading expert on the languages of West Africa, especially, the Volta Basin – The Kwa and Gur (Mabia) families of languages. When I last saw her in January 2016 (actually it was on January 28, 2016, when we went together to the Ephraim Amu Memorial Lecture, 2016, delivered by Prof. Kofi Anyidoho at the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences) we had put in motion plans for her to participate in the Annual Colloquium of African Languages and Linguistics (CALL) at Leiden University, where she would give a paper in a special session on Tone and intonation in African languages. Thereafter, she would go to Paris to the International Symposium on Niger-Congo reconstruction where she would talk about her proposals for the reconstruction of proto-Ghana-Togo Mountain languages. This travel was to happen after she had been in the USA. While she was in the US we were corresponding and finalising plans and then on July 14, I get this message from a Mary Esther in pain from a severe backache and feeling “slack” as she earlier characterised her state:

¹ This is a slightly edited version of an Obituary read on behalf of the author during the Commemoration ceremony of Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, on July 4, 2017, by James Essegbey, a former student and colleague.

Dear Felix,

I have to tell you that I won't make the meeting because I am about to start treatment for what is probably pancreatic cancer. Well, there it is.

Best

Mary Esther

I had hoped that things will improve. We kept communicating rather randomly. At the time, I was editor for some of her papers, one was published late last year shortly after her passing and two others will be published in the summer of 2017. One of the desk editors contacted her for some editorial matters on one of the papers, and as the editor wrote to me:

She [Mary Esther] was brave enough to give me a prompt answer to our comments on her GTM contribution, yet she clearly is not capable for the time being to deal with such matters and she proposed that we should try with your help and insight to get her essay into its final format.

This applied to the other papers as well. It saddens me that she is not here to see these papers that she so much wanted to see in print. Man proposes.

Mary Esther's scholarship is legendary; she has contributed to our knowledge of language sciences as applied to West African languages. She entered African Linguistics focusing on historical linguistics. For her Masters from University of Pennsylvania, she did a historical comparison of Twi and Ga. She incrementally expanded the languages, thus for her PhD (SOAS) she compared Ga and Dangme, the one subgroup that she has done most work on. Already in 1967, she extended her work to a group of the Ghana-Togo Mountain languages. And she later expanded to the Gur (Mabia) languages, especially Dagaare and Gurene (Farefare). She then came back to the Middle belt Guang languages. The culmination of her work especially in the last years has substantially contributed to the classification of Kwa languages, a project that was so dear to her and which we should ensure is brought out.

Mary Esther spent more than half a century in Ghana, and in those years, has tutored, mentored and trained scores of Ghanaians many of whom occupy leadership positions in academia and industry across the globe. I, for one, am lucky that I had her as a teacher in my final BA year and am highly indebted to her for sacrificing to offer a course on Comparative African linguistics to enable me have the full complement of courses for a Linguistics major degree. That is just how Mary Esther was, ever ready to help.

Mary Esther provided distinguished service to the University of Ghana and to various professional associations and beyond. She was the second person in the history of the University to become Full Professor in Linguistics at Legon and, for that matter in Ghana, she was the first Emerita Professor of Legon; She was the first Full Professorial Director of the Language Centre and before that was the Deputy Director of the Institute of African Studies.

Mary Esther has been a backbone and bedrock of several professional associations in Ghana and West Africa. She did not only contribute to the founding of some of these associations, she contributed her editorial skills and organisational acumen to their functioning. She was a founding member of the Linguistic Circle of Accra which was later transformed into the Linguistics Association of Ghana where she served as President (1989-1993; 1996-2000). She was and remained the Editor for the editions of *Papers in Ghanaian Linguistics* which were the Transactions of the Linguistic Circle of Accra and of the *Ghana Journal of Linguistics* –the journal of the Linguistics Association of Ghana, which she successfully made a free Open Access Online journal.

She was also a Founding Member, together with some of her colleagues such as the late Alan S. Duthie, of the West African Linguistics Society (WALS) which was founded at Legon in 1965 whose 30th Congress is being held at the University of Education, Winneba in early August 2017. She was the Treasurer for the Local Organising Committee for various Congresses of the Society held at Legon (e.g. 1990 and 2000) and was the Election Officer for the Society in the early 1980s as well as acting as Secretary-Treasurer managing the Secretariat of the Society which was then located in the Linguistics Department at Legon. She edited the two volumes of the *West African Language Data Sheets* which are the first collections of comparable synchronic data on West African languages - predating the online typological databases *The World Atlas of Linguistic Structures* (WALS) and *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Structures* (APICS).

She was a Co-Coordinator of the decade long Trondheim-Legon Linguistics NUFU Project initiated by her close collaborator Lars Hellan. She was the unfailing and meticulous Editor of the proceedings of the colloquia of the project - the *Studies in the Languages of the Volta Basin Series*.

In all these roles, her utmost concern was for quality publications to be produced based on sound research and for knowledge so produced to be widely shared and made available. She was for many years the Editor of the publications of the Institute of African Studies including *Research Review*, and can be described as the Editor par excellence for the University of Ghana. She was the Editor-in Chief of the Legon Readers Project. She served different terms on the Publications Committee of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences as well. As a prominent Fellow of the Academy once remarked: When Mary Esther edits your work, you know the result is impeccable.

Mary Esther is *E Pluribus Una* “one in many” – a *unica* – a *prima inter pares* among researchers in Ghana (and elsewhere) who through her scholarship and publications shows us that language is the key to understanding the human condition and as such that languages are of “strategic importance” (Sapir 1949) to the humanities, the social and cognitive sciences. Her research has been interdisciplinary in approach. Her countless journal articles and book chapters reflect the breadth and depth of her interests and cover the core areas of linguistics such as phonology and syntax as well as socio-historical linguistics, literary stylistics and ethno-linguistics.

Her publications are always informative and instructive as well as thought-provoking. Her research has a lot of social relevance. To give one example, Mary Esther’s work on the Portuguese language on the Gold Coast suggests a different source for the word **galamsey** which has been discussed in social and other media very recently. She writes in her 2012 article (p. 21):²

A final word on what seems to be a relatively new Portuguese word in Ghanaian languages, *galamsey* for ‘illegal gold winning’. The Brazilian word for an independent gold winner is *galimpeiro*, from a word of the Algarve region of southern Portugal, *galampear*, meaning ‘rob, plunder’. It is possible that this is a survival from the nineteenth century, but I know of no record of it before the middle of the twentieth. Probably it has arrived more recently, possibly with Ghanaians returning from Portuguese-speaking southern Africa.

² Kropp Dakubu, Mary Esther. 2012a. The Portuguese language on the Gold Coast, 1471-1807. *Ghana journal of linguistics* 1(1). 15-33

I wonder how many of us realise that the Ga word **kɔmi** 'kenkey' "was presumably adapted from the Portuguese verb *comer* 'eat' in the context 'something to eat'." Kropp Dakubu 2012b: 65.³

Mary Esther published several books including grammars e.g. *The Dangme language*; dictionaries of Gã and Gurenɛ; I know she has a manuscript of Dangme dictionary. I once asked her why she hadn't written a grammar of Gã. Her response: "I know too much about its history and so I hope a native speaker linguist would do that one day". I believe she would be feeling grateful and satisfied to know that one of her former students and research assistants, Dr Akua Campbell, has produced a comprehensive modern grammar of Gã. In addition, she has several books concerning socio-historical and cultural linguistics including some in French *Parlons Gã* and *Parlons Gurenɛ (Farefare)*. Her 1981 book *One Voice: the linguistic culture of an Accra lineage*. (Leiden: African Studies Center. pp. 474) won the 1985 Ghana Book Award. Her much acclaimed *Korle meets the sea* is a masterpiece in urban sociolinguistics.

It is ironic that Mary Esther has become more renowned for her work in sociolinguistics while, as she admits herself in her Inaugural Lecture (*Language and Community* 1989), in the mid 60s of the last century when sociolinguistics was emerging as a discipline she looked on it with some disdain. Her writings on multilingualism, language policy, language in education and on minority languages, language endangerment and documentation are very inspiring. She has served on UNESCO-Ghana 's project on the preservation of languages (1999) and was an Observer for Association of African Universities at UNESCO/NEIDA Seminar on Minority Languages in Education and Workshop on Mother Tongue Education, Lagos, Nigeria (August 1989). She remains to date the one linguistics researcher in Ghana who was awarded a grant from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) to document a secret women's language in Ghana's middle belt.

The indefatigable, energetic and curious Mary Esther was working on two challenging projects in the area of Historical Linguistics and Historiography of African Linguistics just before she was taken ill. The first is an extensive study on the origins of 18th century transcriptions of Gã and Akan (especially Protten's), the interpretations of these transcriptions, and their application to the study of diachronic processes in these languages. The second is a collaborative project on the Reconstruction of Kwa, a sub-set of Niger-Congo languages. The outcomes of these would enhance our understanding of the historical classification of Kwa languages as well as of the early records on Gã and Akan.

One thing that many do not know about Mary Esther is that she also published four children's books which many children have enjoyed tremendously. They are *The Jumping Contest, Big or Little Esi?*, both published by Afram Publishers in 2007 and *Lizzie Who Liked Oranges* (Sedco, 1989) as well as *The Yellow Balloon*. (Adwinsa Publications, 1984).

We have been deprived of a knowledgeable, caring, helpful, kind, illustrious teacher, mentor, colleague, collaborator and more.

The enormous contribution of Mary Esther to Ghanaian and West African linguistics is recognized worldwide. Just two days ago, an Editor of *Afrika und Übersee* asked me in an email: "Are you planning to organize a sort of memory volume in recognition of her linguistic and Ghanaian engagement?" I hope we will, for now

³ Kropp Dakubu, Mary Esther. 2012b. The Portuguese language on the Gold Coast, 1471-1807: Addenda. *Ghana journal of linguistics* 1(2). 65-66

We miss her intensely.
Because she's not there to care for us.
Because she's not there to teach us.
Because she's not there to counsel us.
Because she's not there to challenge us
Because she's not there to argue with.
Because she's not there to share a drink.
Because she's not there to laugh with.
Because she's not there to edit our work
Because she's not there to share a meal
Because she's not there ...

Fare thee well; MEKD,

“Your absence will be noticed. Because your place will be empty” (1 Samuel 20: 18)