

Curfew's Children

A memoir about childhood and coming of age in Ghana



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL UNIVERSITY

PhD Dissertation in Communications

University of Canberra

Faculty of Arts and Design

September 2013

Written by

Kabu Okai-Davies

Curfew's Children

A memoir about childhood and coming of age in Ghana

PhD Creative Dissertation

&

**Exegesis: Oral tradition and Auto/Biographical narration
in Ghanaian identity.**

Doctor of Philosophy in (Creative Writing) Communications

By Kabu Okai-Davies

BPhil (Honours), UC; Master of Creative Writing, UC; Master of Studies, ANU

Supervisors:

Dr Adam Dickerson

Prof. Jen Webb

University of Canberra

ACT, Australia

Table of Contents:

Declaration	xi
Dedication	xiii
<i>Curfew's Children</i> , an Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Chronicle of a Curfew Foretold	5
Chapter 2: The Dream within a Womb	21
Chapter 3: The Last of the Professional Polygamists	29
Chapter 4: The Life and Times of the Man called Ezekiel	39
Chapter 5: A Woman called Auntie Teacher – A Tribute to My Mother	49
Chapter 6: The History of the Okai-Davies Family	69
Chapter 7: A Name that Symbolises Money	79
Chapter 8: Second Chance at Love: Enter the Rev. Nii Commey Okai-Tetteh	83
Chapter 9: England in My Dreams	91
Chapter 10: A Place Called St. John's Preparatory Primary School	107
Chapter 11: Growing up a St. John's Boy	125
Chapter 12: Auntie Akua and my Kente Cloth	141
Chapter 13: How Art Saved My Life	147
Chapter 14: The Memory Pillow and the Education of a Storyteller	159
Chapter 15: Beyond St. John's – From Ayalolo to Adabraka	171
Chapter 16: Father Figure to a Forsaken Son	187
Chapter 17: The School that Made Me Who I Am	203

Exegesis: Exegetical Component - Front Page	209
Introduction	211
Section 1: Structure and overview	217
Section 2: Transcending the Past, Embracing the future:	
Orality and Literacy in Ghana	223
Section 3: Reading Walter J. Ong:	
Orality and Literacy in the Ghanaian context	251
Section 4: Categories and forms of Oral Tradition in the Ghanaian context	271
Section 5: Oratory in Ghana	285
Section 6: The Context of Oral Tradition	295
Section 7: Orality and Ghanaian identity	305
Section 8: Writing <i>Curfew's Children</i> : Transferring the oral into text	317
Section 9: Conclusion: Oral tradition, autobiography and Ghanaian identity	327
Bibliography	349
Interviews	361
Picture Credits – Family History	363
Pictures Credits – Ghana’s History	367
Pictures with captions – Sequence 1- 19	369

Dedication

To the memory of my Mother, my wife and children, and all my wonderful teachers, mentors and those who have showed me the way.

Acknowledgements

This work is the result of many years of dreaming. However it could not have been completed without the help and support of my teachers at the University of Canberra. I would like to thank Dr Greg Battye for believing in me as a writer from the beginning, Dr Mary Walsh for her unflagging faith in her Honours students, Digby Woolf for his inspirational words of encouragement. I would like to thank John Clancy - for his mentorship - and Joo Inn Chew for their earlier edits and suggestions; to Kiya Murmur for her work as proof reader, Dr Linda Li for her support during her thesis writing workshops and to Katie Poidomani whose final edits were invaluable towards the completion of this thesis.

Finally, thanks to my two supervisors; Dr Adam Dickerson for his scholarly insights, guidance, persistence and well-measured suggestions as my supervisor and Professor Jen Webb, for her patience in carefully going over each page with me, for her understanding of my temperament as a writer and her nurturing spirit as a teacher.

Curfew's Children, an Introduction

The narrative of *Curfew's Children* was born out of my need to capture in text the chronicle of my growing up during a time of turbulence and upheaval that yet was a time of solitude and deep reflection as well. It is therefore a post-colonial story about coming of age in Ghana and my personal evolution from childhood into boyhood, and then into the early teenage years, set against the background of my family's and country's history. This act of narrative positioning of the individual against the larger story of the family and the nation links the past, present and future, and is hence a bridging of the gap between orality and literacy. It is an African story, told with the intent to transpose what is told orally into a textual context, acknowledging the fact that if the story of my family and the mythology of my life are to have relevance for the future, and especially for my children, our collective stories must make the transition from orality to literacy. Hence I write, knowing very well that this is a story that was once told to me and by me orally, and that now I tell by writing.

Since our forefathers did not know the art of writing our knowledge of early Ga - *Ghanaian* - history before the Europeans arrived we learnt from oral tradition handed down in stories from father to son. Like the oral traditions of other areas these stories are altered and added to in the telling; so historians have to be very careful when using them to help find out about the past.¹

The African narrative in its oral tradition can no longer endure if a collective effort is not made to transpose it into the frame of literacy. The technology of writing

¹ John Kofi Fynn, *A Junior History of Ghana*, Institute of African Studies, Legon, Longman, 1975, P. 22

undergirds the entire corpus of the creation of civil societies and the renaissance of human cultures towards development and social transformation. The idea of African modernity will be less relevant if it is not linked to the collective effort of our societies to capture in text the parables of a continent, those told and those yet to be told. The collective myths, stories and narratives of a people in a post-colonial society can only survive if transposed into text. The writings of individual African writers will not be enough to bridge the gulf of African history, from its traditional pre-colonial realm of oral storytelling to the verbal narration of history and the globalised world to now; when written, visual and electronic media will constitute the new practices of human communication in countries such as Ghana.

The idea of literacy must become embedded within the cultural framework of society in order for it to become relevant for the twenty-first century. I write this story knowing that my story is not just mine, but that of my mother and the many other voices and lives that shaped my perception of myself as I grew up and came of age in Ghana. By writing about my life, I am writing about my family and my country as well.

Ghana is the backdrop for the creation of a family story in which I find myself, both as chronicler and as a central character. My life in this context is my literature.

I chose the title *Curfew's Children* as a metaphor of an imposed darkness over Ghana and within African history. It is a figurative device to symbolise the sense of a gap in Africa's relationship to the technology of text and the democracy of knowledge as

phenomena for social development and collective self-transformation. This is the underlying reason for the evolution of my creative practice as a writer and, through the study of theories of orality and literacy offered by Walter J. Ong, I am able to embed my work within a larger theoretical context that allows my creative practice to unfold in the dual narrative space of orality and text based storytelling.

In my creative practice I rely extensively on the process of remembering all that I heard from my mother while growing up, and on the visualisation method, recalling what I have observed in my life while coming of age and during recent research trips to Ghana to verify many segments of this narrative. It is an engagement with the past in an effort to forge a new future and continue the existence of both my story and my family.

The creative process of life writing never occurs in a vacuum; neither is it without a point of view. In this case my objective for this narrative is to relive the past through the prism of the blank page and use written words as a link between the distant past, the present and the future. I write this story located from a distance as far as Australia, looking back to the experiences and the lives of people in Ghana, in order to provide the creative sense of objective detachment to tell this story as a metaphor of the larger story of Ghana's history. Hence my autobiography forms a link with the history of Ghana, not just as part of its oral tradition and how the story of Ghana's history was told to me as I grew up, but how it unfolded before me as I came of age. So I write this story as a memorial of things past and at the same time as a vision for things yet to come.

Curfew's Children is therefore a creative life-writing dissertation about my coming of age in Ghana, with the objective of giving life to the past and to represent the voices that were part of my life, growing up in Ghana.