



*Orientation day for new classics students at the University of Ghana, 2016.*

## STUDYING CLASSICS IN GHANA: SOME CHALLENGES

*Michael Kwadwo Okyere Asante* reflects on the hurdles many students south of the Sahara encounter in taking a Eurocentric degree course

Like most students in Ghana, I got into classics by chance, and having made the decision to take a major in the subject, encountered several challenges. Some of these challenges are still present today and are either internal (such as issues with the curriculum) or external (such as the misconceptions parents have about university education or the preconceived ideas students who are admitted to read classics bring with them to the course). Many of the challenges I have met in my own journey may be common to those of other Ghanaian classicists too.

### **My first contact with classics**

My grandma was one of the few women who served as caretakers of wards of parents who brought their children to study at the Nkwatia Presbyterian Senior Secondary School (my *alma mater*) and St Peter's Senior Secondary School. These students normally sat the Ordinary and Advanced level subjects, which included literature, history and, sometimes, Latin. In fact, up to the mid-1980s, there was some classical presence in the form of Greek and Latin languages in secondary school subjects. By the second half of the 1980s, however,

the Ordinary and Advanced level curricula were replaced by junior secondary and senior secondary school curricula. It was in 1996 that the final batch of students in the 'O'- and 'A'-level system wrote their final exams.

I was fortunate to find remnants of the literature and history textbooks that had been used by these students in our home. Later, I would learn that what I had read in some of these books were ancient mythology and Greek history. This, then, was my introduction to classics.

Years later, after completing my secondary school education, my dad

impressed on me to study business administration at university, but I had other plans. Instead of making business administration my first choice, I chose philosophy, English and sociology, and compensated him by adding economics. When my admission letter from the University of Ghana arrived in the mail box, I had been offered all my chosen courses except English. In place of English, I was offered classics.

My first reaction was one of confusion and curiosity, so I took an *Oxford Learners' Dictionary* and looked up the word 'classics'. If I recall very well, and to paraphrase, I read that classics is the study of the civilizations of Greece and Rome. It was my first time hearing the word or even learning that people studied ancient Greek and Roman civilizations as a discipline. But, given my interest in history and literature as a young student, I was at the same time intrigued to find out what the subject really entailed. This is the first challenge classics students and their parents face (and I mention parents here because they are the key influencers when it comes to students' choice of courses).

### **What is classics?**

For those who study in Ghana and other countries to the south of the Sahara, this question and the answer to it are both crucial. In Ghana, Greek and Latin ceased to be taught at secondary level with the abolition of the 'O' and 'A' levels in the late 1980s. Thus, whilst going through secondary education, a student has no contact with classics, Greek or Latin, and so no idea what they are. The advantage of other subjects, such as history, geography, economics, accounting, and religious studies, is that they are taught in secondary school. The lack of familiarity with classics, then, has a direct impact on how many students choose to read the subject at university level.

It is not that classics is not present in the classroom. Many secondary-school students read Ola

Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, for example, but are either unaware that it is an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* or aware but unclear as to the origin of Sophocles' play. I recently asked some first-year classics students in a tutorial in a lecture hall nearby whether they knew about Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, and they answered in the affirmative. When asked if they knew it was an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, their facial expressions were ones of confusion. There is another side to this illustration that may point to one problem with some of the classics curricula in the UK, for example, if not in Europe. I asked a similar question of a class of undergraduates in classics at a top UK university and none of the students knew about Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. This speaks of how detached we are from knowledge produced by other cultures and disciplines relevant to our own field.

Like me, most students who took classics at university in their first year did so because it was offered to them, not because they chose it. If a student or parent then made an attempt to check the meaning of 'classics' in a dictionary and found the definition 'the study of the cultures and civilizations of the ancient Greeks and Romans', more questions followed. Why study classics in an African university? What can one do with a classics degree?

### **Why study classics in an African university?**

Why should an African or a Ghanaian study the cultures and civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome? Why not rather study the cultures and civilizations of Africa? These are very important questions. Given the age of postcolonialism and pan-Africanism, these questions pose some of the greatest challenges to the study and teaching of a classics curriculum that is Eurocentric. While the importance of the cultural achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans cannot be discounted, the overemphasis on

and exaltation of their achievements over those of other civilizations introduce a great problem to teaching classics in the postcolonial age. And this draws us back to what classics means. If classics is all about Greece and Rome, where do we place Egypt, Iran, China, India, Mesopotamia, Persia, etc? I do not want to go into the details of the arguments surrounding the Africanization and/or decolonization of classics, but for those who study Eurocentric classics in African universities without reference to African civilizations and cultural achievements, this question will continue to remain a challenge.

### **What can one do with a classics degree?**

Teaching is one of the least lucrative careers in Ghana and it is with teaching that classics is primarily associated – but very few students want to be teachers. Some of our graduates have gone on to work in accounting and auditing, media and communication, law and legislation, journalism, marketing and sales, publishing, insurance, aviation and public relations. Aside from the challenge this question poses, the assumption that a first degree makes one a professional further weakens the retention of students in classics. For example, there is a mistaken assumption that to become an accountant or lawyer a first degree in business administration or law must be taken. This is not to say that reading accounting or law at undergraduate level cannot place a student at an advantage for further training. Besides, there are certain professional jobs, including some in clinical psychology and social work, that do require those who aspire to them to study their specialized subjects from undergraduate level. Even then, a psychology major does not automatically become a clinical psychologist; they require further training. Of course, undergraduate disciplines such as engineering do not fall in this category and certain roles may require degrees in specific disciplines.

But the assumption that one must study the subject of one's future profession as a first degree persists, despite the fact that top Ghanaian firms (including auditing and banking organizations) still conduct aptitude tests and interviews for first-degree holders, regardless of their disciplines. Isn't it worrying that, while employers and firms embrace the idea that a first degree provides students with a broad-based training by developing their critical thinking and analytical skills and preparing them to be problem-solvers wherever they go, the behaviour of university students and administrators indicates otherwise? If it were not so, why would the supposed 'marketability' of courses place one discipline over another? This is exemplified by events of 1978. That year, the UK Ministry of Overseas Development decided to terminate the supplementation of its citizens teaching what were termed 'non-developmental' subjects. Classics was put in the category of 'non-developmental' subjects, and this continues to be the view held by many in Ghana.

The question of what one can do with a classics degree must still be answered in order to correct these long-held erroneous assumptions.

### **Feeling alone**

I was one of just two students of classics in my final year of undergraduate studies. The other student combined classics and psychology, and so, in most of my classes, I was the only student. Having no colleagues, so to speak, I felt alone in the discipline. This is similar to the kind of lonely experience one has as the only Black student in a classics programme at a foreign institution.

Classics students who decide to proceed to the final year and later pursue a Masters degree in Ghana experience another form of loneliness. Many people (including their families) cannot understand why they would choose classics over, say, political science or economics. I recall that it took me two or more years of lying to my

## ***'The question of what one can do with a classics degree must still be answered.'***

parents to pursue my interest in classics; I kept telling them I was reading economics. The backlash from my colleagues at my hall of residence and from some of my friends when I made the decision to major in classics was enough to make me think of giving up. Unfortunately, not many students are able to withstand this pressure from friends and family, and, even when they have a great interest in classics, they decide not to pursue it.

### **Greek and Latin**

My final year of undergraduate study was the first time I was introduced to Greek and Latin. Given the abolishment of the 'O'- and 'A'-level systems, and unlike the UK and other countries where students have the opportunity to study Greek and Latin in primary and secondary school, classics students in Ghana get their first opportunity to study the ancient languages only from their third year. Nonetheless, for several decades, the languages were not offered because students didn't normally pursue classics beyond the second year. Even those who did considered the study of the languages a difficult endeavour and a waste of their time.

While it would have been ideal to begin language instruction from the first year, it is impractical and counter-productive. Because students come into the programme already wanting out, to confront them in their first year with Greek and Latin would lead to the collapse of the programme. Yet, for those who take the language modules and think of pursuing advanced studies in classics, there is a further hurdle – that is, they will have to compete with students from

other countries who have spent years studying Greek and Latin for the limited number of funded PhD spaces. And because admissions committees of foreign classics departments place so much emphasis on applicants' prior training in Greek and Latin, either any motivation left to pursue classics at advanced level wears off or one spends years trying to find a 'welcoming' postgraduate programme in classics. It is not my place to determine what classics postgraduate admissions committees should do, but if they were to consider the challenges that students from my region go through just to pursue classics, the discipline's outlook may improve further.

Consider, for example, that recently one of our best students, who by all standards possesses the intellectual rigour and capacity for graduate study, applied to do a PhD in a classics department in the US and did not gain admission. While admissions committees will not admit it, the deficiency in Greek and Latin prevents many such students from pursuing classics at advanced levels, even when their academic records, recommendations, essays and extracurricular activities show that they have the potential to excel, and that they only differ from other admitted applicants by virtue of not having had the opportunity to study the ancient languages. Notwithstanding, I have to mention the classics departments at Stellenbosch University and the University of St Andrews for showing the way in this regard. I believe that there are other classics departments doing their best to make classics more diverse and inclusive for students from underrepresented groups.

What I have shared here is not representative of all the challenges associated with studying classics in Ghana, nevertheless addressing them is very important to developing the field here, and probably elsewhere, too, for I believe that similar challenges are endured in other countries such as Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda and South Africa.